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THE MATTER WITH MATTER
AN INTERVIEW WITH **BOSCO SODI**

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Mexican American artist Bosco Sodi is as much driven by imperfections in the process making part of his work, as he is appreciative of the clean context in which they reappear as artworks. Creating these concentrated crusts of earth and matter, that as canvases were originally laid out on the floor of one of his studios; (close to the Hudson River in New York, the small port of Puerto Escondido in Oaxaca, Mexico; the original artists' quarter in Barcelona and central Berlin), and then upturned for exhibition. From where Sodi methodically prepares all of the raw elements that mother earth can muster, to create works that are entirely other worldly. Fanatical about the process involved in applying aesthetic skins to man-made canvas and volcanic rock, Sodi's accelerated annotations have us quarrel over the details of the physical strength of one material over another. Before he introduces further truths, of the point

at which a rock can be burned in order to immortalize it as an artwork, and how he allows his coloured pigments, glue and dust, to physically infestate his canvases in order the critical cracks that come become the point of no return. The juncture at which his congealed canvases move from being studio fixtures, to the celestial backdrop for other sculptural works in a space that comes to resemble outer space.

Sodi sees aesthetics as entirely process based, as his works become an adventure in conceiving and constructing an idea, in order, by applying very rudimentary elements, (earth, glue, pigment and paint), he can transform his manifestations into material artworks. All of which is subject to as much of his own calculated intervention, and it is available to chance. As Sodi explains that in the process of preparing and producing a work, over the course of days, weeks and months, he believes

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Bosco Sodi, Yugen, 2016, Installation View, Courtesy the artist and BlainSouthern, Photo :Peter Mallet

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Bosco Sodi, Yugen, 2016, Installation View, Courtesy the artist and BlainSouthern, Image Courtesy:Peter Mallet



actioned processes initiate art. Describing his working method as a 'happening' almost, akin to the work of American Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock, (coined by academic Allan Kaprow). Like Pollock in his heyday, Sodi wrestles with his canvases as these pigmented platforms that he slips and slides over in order to colour and cover them entirely in his crude concoctions of powder and paint; as the incident and accidents of a man in a concentrated state. And like Pollock before him Sodi works horizontally, whereby his compositional vision of the work is decided flat, as the artist is always above the work, applying multiple materials and matter onto a movable fabric floor. And that considered and equally uncontrolled encounter leads to these encrusted canvases becoming altered entirely by his lifting the

works from their horizontal to one of vertical and more visual.

Explaining how the frame takes his weight, in order he can stretch across the fixed fabric, in a painterly process akin to French actionist/artist Yves Klein's for his Anthropométrie works of the late 1950's. For which Klein applied his international Klein blue to the bodies of three naked women, who were then invited to wrestle over the canvas; in order the figures became Klein's 'living brushes'. Which as a procedure, or mode of application, becomes central to how Sodi operates over his much larger billboard sized canvases. Interestingly Klein's cannon of coloured pigments appear also to mirror something of the fabulous intensity of Sodi's works. Characteristically recalling Klein's sponge relief canvases, or

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relief éponge blue 1960, and of his collaboration with Swiss painter and sculptor Jean Tinguely, to create kinetic sculptures and intensely coloured canvases. And as with Klein, Sodi effectively manages to retain the original power of paint before it becomes liquid, and thus intensifying the works chromatic quality. Leading to a whole constellation of colours that appear and disappear in the light like minerals cultivated from the earth's surface.

Thus the physicality of Sodi's works has associations to the performative, as well as the energy and exercise of American Abstract Expressionism. As scale and circumstance appear to give his works greater intensity and deliberate integrity. Culminating in his becoming a living part of his works for the duration of their

process based production. Applying two approaches to his practice; working off-site, collecting rocks, dried volcanic magma, and other earthly detritus as dust, in order to ferment the anatomical and atmospheric into his artworks, (for which he talks of many months and not days to produce clay and rock based works of substance and scale that are calculated modifications of the earth's matter); and his creating studio based works for which he introduces as much of what is outside as what is intrinsic to the materials already. Creating canvases and sculptures that manage to contain the unruly energy of earth as these object based artworks. Defining his paintings as sculptural objects, as much as the coloured rocks that are intelligently placed, in order to create his current meditative installation.

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Bosco Sodi, *Yugen*, 2016, *Installation View*,
Courtesy the artist and BlainSouthern,
Photo: Peter Mallet

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Contextually although the works appear empty, whereby representation and reason are removed entirely; Sodi verbally refurbishes them with his own physical and performative contribution as narrative. Explaining the transformative act of gathering together raw materials as the basis for his works, and of the process and collective action of all those involved in the making of the works, as the enduring alchemy of the artwork; and thereafter they become fitting fossils to the original 'happening'. And given to watching Sebastian Hoffman's accompanying film to the making of 'Clay Cubes' in Casa Wabi, Oaxaca, Mexico, provided a rational for how these materials, the man-power, and the geography, really matter to the works' evolution and consequential resolution in space. As works notable

for their altered state and not entirely about their final state.

INTERVIEW

Rajesh Punj: *Regarding the drawings or the works on paper, how do you explain them?*

Bosco Sodi: You have the master of lacquer who prepares the lacquer; a red and a white varnish.

RP: *It appears to be incredibly strong paper.*

BS: It is a very strong paper. For the lacquer master (in Japan), it takes him seven months to prepare. He applies one layer, allows it to dry and then continues until there are possibly ten layers.

RP: *Process serving paper.*

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Bosco Sodi, Yugen, 2016, Installation View, Courtesy the artist and BlainSouthern, Photo: Peter Mallet

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Yes everything happens that way, and as I was saying I do everything by hand and by myself. Adding layers and layers of matter as pigment, which in this case is black pigment and sawdust.

BS: Yes, yes then he (the lacquer master) sent the paper to me in New York, from where I made the works. I like the concept of this millenarian tradition of Japan, and I intervene on top of that (with the coloured pigments). I also did some paper works for my show in Japan last year (at Scai the Bathhouse, Tokyo), in which I showed lacquer boards, 'big ones', and I made a series of interventions upon boards. Just by touch when you see the boards, they are so beautiful. It initially becomes very difficult to make an intervention upon them because they are so so beautiful. You really don't want to touch them and introduce something new.

RP: *Can we recap on what we were discussing previously; of your works elemental energy and physical*

presence in space. And of their belonging to the environment while being entirely alien of it. In that sense are you borrowing from earth or looking to space when you make a body of works like Yūgen, (for your current show at Blain Southern, London)?

BS: Yes everything happens that way, and as I was saying I do everything by hand and by myself. Adding layers and layers of matter as pigment, which in this case is black pigment and sawdust. I apply layers very physically in the way of the abstract expressionists, because it involves rolling, dropping and touching the canvas; which becomes a very physical exchange of my energy with the work. And then when the first crack appears I stop completely. So essentially there are two processes,



my process and then the organic one; the one that I don't control and let go of entirely.

RP: So their cracking is the point of no return for you?

BS: When I see the first big crack I stop. I feel if I continue after that, of intervening upon the natural process then I am playing god. That's why I am always really surprised when I take the canvases up off of the floor and see what has happened, and the works take on a life of their own.

RP: And crucially when you bring the works up, (resurrect them almost), does a lot of the pigment and sawdust fall away?

BS: No, it becomes a very dry surface before I move them. Saying that sometimes I like to play with the gravity of the works, and so I lift them up whilst I am making them in order to see them upright, and of the feeling

of gravity on the painting. Then I immediately put it flat again, and in that moment I try and understand the work in two states.

RP: And of your new volcanic rock sculptures that have been created over millennia. How do you explain your intervention upon those?

BS: The concept of the coloured rocks is of a common object like a rock that have these extraordinary forms, cultivated by thousands of years of the weather and earth's elements combine; as organic forms that are overlooked. So I take these amazing fossils that I choose by myself from inside a volcano, that I cover and glaze in order to transform them into beautiful objects of desire. Becoming precious objects that have a feeling about them of something that shouldn't exist, like a meteorite or a mineral; and to make this transformation of the common object

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into a piece of art. Which follows my path of always dealing with organic forms, and of allowing for accidents to shape what exists already with my beautification of the original materials.

RP: So have you taken an interest in geology? How far have you gone to understand the materials you have to handle?

BS: No, no, I am very focused on the process. These rock works came about because I was doing these ceramic decanters for a brand of tequila in Mexico, and they asked me to do one hundred of them. So I decided to do all of them completely differently. I never wanted to do a whole series that looked entirely the same, and when I was there in the glazing factory for a while, we went for a visit to a volcano, and I said 'it would be amazing to glaze these rocks', and the guy there said 'no,

no, it's impossible, it's crazy, utterly impossible, they would blow (up)'. So we contacted a geologist and asked him, and he said 'no, no, they will not blow (up), maybe they will crack, but they will not blow (up). And then just to kiln them would cost half a million dollars. So I said 'I will get insurance for you'. And I asked my gallery at the time, which was five years ago, to get insurance to allow us to glaze the rocks. And the outcome was these amazing red rocks. And that is what I really love about being an artist, is of the transformative process of going to find the rocks, and not knowing if they will blow or not blow, and of the factory becoming involved in the project.

RP: What is interesting is that you have talked previously of your employing ninety/hundred men to assist you in going out and collecting new materials/rocks. So everything becomes a social exercise, and not

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just about your desire to create a work.

BS: It really is like a 'happening' in a way; when I go to choose rocks, I take all of the guys from the ceramics factory, and they are happy to leave the factory for the day and pile into a truck; all of us outside. And we grab some beers and buy some fried chicken, and we go and choose the rocks like we are choosing truffles with a hog. Choosing one and if you don't like it putting it back exactly as it was, as respect for nature. And it becomes like 'rock hunting', by which you have the grass up to your knees holding a machete. Sometimes you can pick up a rock and there are three snakes there, so it does become a whole process and a happening in a way, in which many many people are involved.

RP: *And you have already talked of your recording everything in terms of the production of your works.*

Whereby the process as you have already stressed is as fundamental to the transformation of the object into an artwork, as the work existing as art thereafter. So for you registering/recording that progress appears a vital exercise in itself.

BS: When I engage in a new process I always like to record everything as it happens. Sadly in one case that I mentioned before we lost everything, which can never be replaced. My colleague Sebastian Hoffman could not find the recordings for one work on his hard-drive at all.

RP: *So it very important for you to acknowledge the process by film.*

BS: Yes it is very important to see the processes involved in the making of the individual works. I mean to say when with the video of the making of the clay cubes you witness the intensity with which we make the cubes in context, or of how the lacquer master creates the paper and boards. There is an overwhelming complexity to the way things happen in order to allow us to arrive at a work of art.

RP: *It is really interesting, your considering the performative element, as we have already discussed, and of how the work exists as a consequence of everything physical and ephemeral that happens.*

BS: My process is in a way very performance, as I mentioned already. We have a video of the making of the cubes and of the red and blue paintings and as documentation are very beautiful. For me I appreciate them a great deal.

RP: *Thus by your actions you immerse yourself entirely in your work.*

BS: Completely, and also I don't remember too much about the detail of what I do, especially with the paintings. I will see the recordings later and think that doesn't show everything, it appears almost 'wrong'. Whereby I am in a trance (possibly not because it sounds mystical),

but a point of concentration and an exchange of energy with the work and everything else. That is so precise that you lose a record of what you have done.

RP: *And you have talked already about 'chance' as a fundamental element to how you make work.*

BS: It is important to embrace the accident and let chance play its part in the work. To have as little control as possible, to allow for uniqueness. And the only way to have uniqueness is from no control, otherwise it becomes entirely about process. For me procedure is standard and always has the same outcome.

RP: *So you consciously determine some of the variables, whilst allowing for things to happen of their own accord.*

BS: Exactly, obviously I decide on the size of the canvas and the colours I will use, but the process of making it is so random, it feels so right. I never know exactly what is going to be the outcome even of the colour. I know it is going to be reddish, (if I am concentrating on a red colour pigment), but then I find yellow and I add a little of that.

RP: *But it proves interesting when considering the differing scale of your works, of how you determine which size of canvas to work with, within a given space? Because it almost seems to me you could take the pigments and the dust and keep going, to cover the walls entirely.*

BS: Yes, yes, that is a very nice feeling. When I arrive at the studio I always have twenty canvases ready, and then depending on the feeling, the sawdust that I find, depending on the pigments; I work on four or five canvases at a time.

RP: *Of varying sizes?*

BS: Sometimes different sizes, sometimes the same size, depending on what I want to do. Because then if I do one and another one, they can be completely different. And sometimes when I want to work for me I can do



three at a time, otherwise they may not be done in the same way.

RP: *And that is interesting, of the canvases being entirely unique and of their visual DNA being determined by more natural processes.*

BS: Yes they are completely unique. I am also a big believer in the idea of 'uniqueness', of non-control, and of how that makes everything entirely original. Which is about the temporarily of life. So I love when people see the work and feel that same temporarily and of an organicness.

RP: *Based in New York you have already mentioned Abstract Expressionism as significant to how you work, but were their other influences? I think of Land Art, and of artists such as Robert Smithson, Donald Judd for his off-site works, and Richard Serra? Historically were site-specific works always as interesting for you as that which was inside?*



BS: I have always been influenced by a lot of things. The Abstract Expressionists and Colourists, (Willem) de Kooning, (Mark) Rothko and Robert Motherwell. I have a painting on exhibition that someone said to me, looks like a Rothko, which is funny because my work goes against what Rothko was thinking at the time. Of his interest in the flatness of the painting and of colour as emotive, and my work is about matter. Yet for all the differences it is still a big compliment for me. And of course I also have an interest in land artists and formalist artists like Antoni Tàpies, and the Catalan school.

RP: *But you must have many influences because you have studios in different locations, and you have moved several times in your life.*

BS: Yes, because for each studio I like to prepare the space. There is a very nice book Zen in the Art of Archery which is a very beautiful book that artist (Amedeo) Modigliani

gave to (Wassily) Kandinsky's wife, and then Kandinsky's wife gave to (Antoni) Tàpies. It is a very small book about a German philosopher Eugen Herrigel, who goes to live in Japan in the 1920's, and he wants to learn one of the disciplines of Zen. Of which there are three principles; flower arranging, (Kyudo) archery, and of the wooden sword. So he decides to learn archery. For the first year that his master teaches him, he just pulls at the string. One year for two hours at a time, and the guy struggles and becomes disappointed that he is not throwing arrows. The whole book is about how the oriental is much more focused on the process, and of the journey over the outcome. Here we are much more looking for the outcome, and we want results very quick. So the book is about that, and towards the end it has a very detailed discussion between the master and the student. Whereby the master takes him to the place where he can throw the arrows and they stand in the dark, and he (the master)

begins to throw the arrows without light; and all of them hit the target. And the student asks 'how did you do that?', and the master replies 'I am not thinking about it, I am following a process and that brings me results.' So I am heavily influenced by the wabi-sabi, (Japanese philosophy). Of the uniqueness of the process and of my wish to follow a good process. At the end the out-come should be good, and even if it isn't you are likely to learn from the process, and from the associated accidents along the way.

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Bosco Sodi, Yugen, 2016, Installation View, Courtesy the artist and BlainSouthern, Photo: Peter Mallet

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Bosco Sodi, Untitled (detail), 2016, Courtesy the artist and BlainSouthern, Photo: Peter Mallet

