

The Roots and Branches of SoMoS **Program Essay by Lisa Kraus**

Like Australian aborigines who believe that the well-being of the natural world depends on their repeatedly walking the paths through their homelands, choreographer Merián Soto connects to the wild areas surrounding us through movement. She has spent years now presenting performances around Fairmount Park and parks further afield that bear witness to their beauty and fragility. Through her branch dancing practice, she has developed a way of performing that encourages viewers to slow down, observe closely and feel their own kinship with nature, other bodies and the forces acting on them.

Now she is filling a vast Philadelphia parking lot with *SoMoS* and its domed tents splashed with projected images of nature, sounds recorded through the seasons, and dancers moving in slow motion balancing branches. It's the culmination of a long path that began on the beaches and in the rainforests of Puerto Rico.

Soto grew up in Bayamón and Playa Cerro Gordo, climbing trees, wandering up creeks and running on rocks on the beach. It was an imaginative space for her, an orientation to the feel of the earth under her feet and the mobility and weight of her own body.

Study in New York with kinetic awareness pioneer Elaine Summers gave her tools to research the inner life of the body: its sensations, rhythms and storylines. Also, as a young dancer, she tapped into a deep well of energetic power through learning the Afro-Caribbean form of bomba. Holding the two approaches—traditional forms like bomba and son along with improvisational somatic practice—has made Soto a unique artistic explorer. Almost thirty years ago, she made a dance, *Escalio* (1983), in collaboration with visual artist Pepón Osorio and dancer Patti Bradshaw in the early days of their collective Pepatián. She describes it as being all about the earth. So the threads that are woven together in *SoMoS* go way back.

Constructing rich theatrical environments has been an ongoing aspect of Soto's work. The studio-set of *La Maquina del Tiempo* (2004) with its dripping "rainwater" evoked a long slow afternoon for dancing. The films of Irene Sosa in *Prequel(a): Deconstruction of a Passion for Salsa* (2002) brought the palm trees and beaches of Puerto Rico into the performance space. In that solo, Soto danced salsa on a wooden platform sprinkled with sand, the scratchy sound amplifying her every rhythmic step.

Following these works, Soto began to reverse the trend of bringing the natural world into the theater by taking her movement practice out into the woods. One reason had to do with aging.

Growing older as a dancer requires shifts in physical practice. Soto had burst on the New York scene as a compelling livewire of a performer and had always seen her own dancing as being about channeling energy. But on turning 50 she began to see the potential power in drawing energy inward rather than projecting it out. Doing more with less energy.

With a sabbatical from her teaching position at Temple University and time to explore what she calls her "anti-aging project," she headed into the woods. She says she went into Fairmount Park

by the Wissahickon Creek to clear her mind and become centered. When she picked up a branch and began to dance with it, there was an immediate energetic connection, as though she was completing a circuit

Branches offer a feedback loop of touch and sensory awareness. Their weight, their shapes, the ways they react to a dancer's movements and the possibilities they offer for hanging or balancing are all features that Soto is excited to respond to through improvisation. And Soto feels that working with branches brings her and her dancers to an all-important state of full presence. That means being fully here. Now.

Bringing a larger group of dancers into her practice resulted in many versions of the branch dances. She initiated the *One Year Wissahickon Park Project* (2007-8), which animated select locations in the park during each season over the course of a full year. And with several other iterations, this work began to make its way back into theaters. Soto's *States of Gravity & Light* (2006-7) and *Postcards from the Woods* (2009) represented a new kind of performance/installation with projected video in saturated colors showing details of woods, water and sky. The works have a mesmerizing effect, just as the outdoor performances do, but within a completely constructed space.

With *SoMoS* Merián Soto takes an expansive outdoor space and creates indoor spaces within it in the form of three large tents. Again using video and adding sound recordings reflecting the seasons, she re-introduces nature into this paved-over place. *SoMoS* is a field of possibilities, a slow-moving carnival-like installation, where audience members can wander, as in the woods, and frame it as they choose, moving in close and further away, improvising their own experience..

What might audience members see? The slowness of the dancing invites us to notice how movement travels sequentially through the dancers' bodies, how they engage in a continual balancing act not only with the branches, but with their own bones, how they twist and bend to the extremes of their movement range and how they morph from one shape to another, simply, like a plant turning toward light.

The dancers "paint on the surface of the tents" by casting shadows in response to the shapes and shadows they see. We can savor the shifting designs they create. And watch for how they share weight and enact wordless conversations.

We might sense underlying stories. Soto has said that one aspect of branch dancing is "magnifying." When she stands upright with a branch held vertically it makes her feel heroic, like a sentinel, and she goes deeper into that image. Or using a branch that's planted firmly on the ground like a crutch makes her imagine herself as a crone, so she delves into that feeling. When the branches are held horizontally, Soto sees it as a place of grace, of balancing.

In watching *SoMoS* there's nothing specific to "get." It can be read as a series of beautiful images and interactions. But Soto sees it also as a form of environmental activism. Her motivation for creating it arises from her sense of the natural world as being in peril. She sees the

body as being in peril too, and in making *SoMoS*, is reflecting on how we might contribute to preserving these fragile areas of our existence.

Perhaps some will be inspired to create something beautiful out of ordinary objects for themselves. Soto sees the potential for that all around us.

We live in a fast-paced, multi-screen, jump-cut moment. With a performance like *SoMoS*, we're not entertained so much as invited to tune in in a different way, to a subtler set of channels. Hopefully what we find is a measure of peace, of curiosity and of connection to nature, both within the body and in our wider world.