

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Hannah Pitstick

I am the Archive

by Ellen Miller

Dancer, choreographer, video artist, and teacher [Merián Soto](#) has had a storied career. Now known for her improvisation-based dance practices—branch dancing and modal practice—Soto was actively involved in the Latina Arts, Equity, and Community Arts movements in New York City in the 1980s and 1990s, known for her collaborations with other artists, like visual artist [Pepón Osorio](#).

Recently retired from Temple University, Soto is still reaching new heights: she was recently awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Guggenheim Fellows are selected “based on both prior career achievement and exceptional promise.” Each fellow receives financial support to “pursue independent work at the highest level under ‘the freest possible conditions.’”

Soto had just returned from Jacob’s Pillow when we caught up to discuss her career, current projects, and advice for younger dancers.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Merián Soto, on her work and practice...

MS: I’ve been working for more than 50 years professionally, but for even longer I’ve been dancing. I’m from Puerto Rico, and that’s very important to me, even though I’ve lived most of my life in the US. I think of home as Puerto Rico; I go there fairly regularly and try to sustain my relationship with members of the dance community there.

My work holds power and knowledge. It has made a contribution to dance culture and changed it, despite its “ephemerality.” From the beginning of my career I was engaged in a decolonizing project, freeing myself and the dance of oppressive and eurocentric structures. I was driven to create liberating work and ways of working that owned and celebrated my experience as a Puerto Rican woman in the diaspora.

A bunch of us were doing this kind of work in the [80s and 90s](#). There's an amnesia around dance in general and Puerto Rican dancers in particular. Even some of my friends forget I created work alongside them in NY! This is more true for people from my generation whose early work is less documented because we didn't have access to the recording technology that we have now. It's important to bring that work back into the world. For the last 10 years I've been making projects around legacy, looking at my archives and bringing them back into the world.

When people ask what I do, I tell them I'm a dancer. I used to say "blah blah," all related to dance. But now I dance. At the core of my work is the dance, my identification as a dancer, and my love of dancing.

As I've aged, the thing that scares me the most is to not be able to dance freely into old age.

On what she's working on now...

MS: I've been invited to have a retrospective exhibition of my work at the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in San Juan, Puerto Rico—that is really my Guggenheim project, doing the research for that, a lot of laying the groundwork for that. It's been a good year, retirement, the invitation, and then the fellowship—a very nice “yes to retirement!”

I also hope there will be a commission as part of the retrospective. One of the things I'd like to do is take [branch dancing](#) to Puerto Rico. There's a lot of interest, but I haven't spent enough time there to teach the work. Happily, next year I will create a performance in El Yunque National Rainforest as part of an exhibition called Arte Yunque.

I've been working on a project with Liz Lerman, Jawole Zollar, Eiko Otake, and Joanna Haigood, called Legacy Unboxed, (that's what I was doing at Jacob's Pillow). We are reimagining traditional notions of artistic legacy and strategizing ways to energize archives now and into the future.

I'm still touring the documentary *Fenomenal* (that has been amazing!) with co-director Viveca Vázquez, and I've been collaborating with her on La Escuelita Fenomenal de Rompeforma, a series of educational residencies in Puerto Rico.

And in 2027 I will also be a part of an exhibition of seven artists at [Mass MoCA](#) called "Until We Get to the Core," curated by Michy Marxuach.

I'm trying to figure out how to weave everything together. I work very organically since 2004 (with La Máquina del Tiempo), when I said I'm not doing any more steps and fully committed to improvising. Even when I direct dancers, my choreography is improvisation. The process of creation is organic and responsive. I build most of my projects like that.

My work is about being present. Improvisation is about trusting the process and the body.

On how being based in Philadelphia has influenced her...

MS: Before coming to Philly I had reached a certain maturity in my work. I lived in New York for 25 years, and the year after I left to come here, I was awarded a Bessie for sustained achievement.

I feel like I have had a second career in Philly. It was very tied to my work as a professor...I had kind of quit performing after I had my kids in New York. Dancing with my students at Temple really got me back into being a dancer and reminded me that this is what I love.

It brought me back to my body, being in Philly.

Working at Temple helped me develop certain aspects of my work. For example, I had explored modal practice since the 80s in New York, but it was with my students that I developed it as a practice, researched it, broke it down, and gave it a name, and now a lot of artists use those techniques in their own work.

Philly also gave me the branch dances. That was something that came to me in Wissahickon Valley Park. For 10 years, I was performing every day in the park. There was always someone passing by, and there was my camera as a self-documentation practice. That work has been really wonderful and generative and transformative.

We'll see what the next 20 years have to offer!

On her advice for younger dancers...

MS: You have to surround yourself with...have your friends be artists, or support you, or be interesting people that inspire you, or want you to do your work. You can't do it alone.

Learn to collaborate.

Do the work. Dance is about action. Practice.

If no one is presenting you, present yourself; if you don't have a place to perform, perform on the street.

If you want to do it, you just have to do it, you can't wait for the ideal situation.

On how to get to know her work...

MS: You can find videos on [Vimeo](#), and there are articles about me and things on my website...but I'm the one who has the archives, *I'm the source*.

Eventually my archives will be preserved somewhere, but right now I'm still using my archives. I am also figuring out how I shape it, talk about it, and organize it in a way that I can make a performance or exhibition.

I don't feel like I am gushing with new dance ideas at this point. I feel I have gushed many times; now my ideas are more around exhibition. I am reflecting, "Oh, I did that, and it still is current, wow..." I am seeing a bigger picture and connecting the different parts of my work that may be separated by many years, and connecting that work to our present moment.

I keep thinking: will there even be a world left for the archives? We're living in really difficult times, but I keep thinking the work will save us. It always does, somehow.

[Guggenheim Fellowship](#), Merián Soto, 2025.

Homepage Image Description: *Dancer Merián Soto kneels with one knee slightly higher than the other. Her body faces the camera but her eyes are downcast. Her medium length gray hair falls towards her face. She is wearing a flowy rust-colored top and loose khaki-colored pants. In her outstretched hands she holds two curved branches. The branch in her left hand is nearly bent in half and almost touches the floor. The branch in her right hand extends in a graceful arc above her head, mirroring the casual grace in Soto's pose.*

Article Page Image Description: *Dancers rehearse for the closing performance of Merián Soto's exhibition last January celebrating her 25 years at Temple University. Marion Ramírez is center. Soto is to the right, overseeing the rehearsal and also participating. Each dancer is dressed in colorful, casual exercise clothing and holds a long branch vertically along their body, arms raised above their head and branch extended into the sky. From her vantage point, Soto is slightly removed; she is smiling.*

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June 13, 2025