

NOUR MOBARAK

Interview by Rachel Small
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At 19, Nour Mobarak broke up with her first love. “It was very dramatic. I woke him up in the middle of the night, and I was like, ‘I’m leaving, and you really can’t stop me this time.’ And I drove with no real destination for two days and just slept in my car,” says the artist.

The next time she encountered him was three days later, at the summer camp where she was working. “One day, it’s lunch break. It’s recess at the summer camp and we’re playing outside. All of a sudden, the kids are like, ‘Miss Nour, who’s that?’ And I look over, and I see my ex, who was this very tall and imposing guy. But he had long hair. And as he was walking toward us, his hair was just chopped off. He went at it himself—it was very unevenly cut off. And he was marching toward me with a Rite Aid bag. He came up to me in front of all these children, and he said, ‘Here, here’s my bag of hair.’”

“Take it.”

The episode would prove to be formative for Mobarak, who, over the next two decades, would travel with the bag of his hair from England to Paris to Portland to Portugal, and finally, to Los Angeles, where she currently resides. Last year, she decided to make use of the hair as material for a major work-on-canvas: *Reproductive Logistics* (2020), which also contains semen from her most recent lover, though its overall shape is composed of a fungus—called *Trametes versicolor*—that she grew from spores. The completed work is the centerpiece of the artist’s latest show, “Logistique Elastique.” On view at Miguel Abreu Gallery, the exhibition marks her first solo show in New York City.

Also on display is a series of sculptures, “Sphere Studies.” For these, Mobarak infused various

orbs—most of which are made out of wood and acrylic, though one is based within a vinyl beach ball—with mycelium, to cultivate fungal growth. The fungus developed inside these ovoid frameworks, filling them up, before eventually bursting through strategically placed holes that the artist drilled into the outer shells.

Complementing “Sphere Studies” within the installation is *Subterranean Bounce (Exposed)* (2020), a five-channel sound piece. The speakers appear in an ‘x’ formation in the space—mirroring the placement of the microphones in Mobarak’s studio as she executed, performatively, the audio element. “I took spheres or balls, and I spent a couple hours investigating their properties, sonically, to further delve into this inter-sensual investigation of the sphere,” she explains. In addition and conceptually vital to the presentation is Mobarak’s use of a specific type of plastic, OCTAL DPET. The material—the most transparent plastic in existence—was invented by her uncle. “When I was talking to him about it, he really loved, and he really emphasized, its transparency—which is amazing,” says the artist, whose family was displaced in the early 1980s as a result of the Lebanese Civil War. “People do love transparent things...I couldn’t help but make the connection between transparency and psychoanalysis and obfuscation of family histories.”

RACHEL SMALL: I’d love to hear about your background.

NOUR MOBARAK: I went to school for English and Media Studies at University of Sussex, which definitely has this very Marxist and psychoanalytic critical theory focus, and on poetics. That suited my temperament, for sure.

RS: What do you mean by that?

NM: I was already a person who had some issues with society. [Both Laugh] Going to a very Marxist school really brought that out. Once you start going into questions like that, you start having, I think, as a young person, paralysis by analysis, you know? I came out pretty confused as to how I could work in any way that doesn’t sort of consider the mechanics of exploitation at large. I ended up working in social services for a long time: I was working at a nonprofit community center that would sustain this very personal art practice that I was developing.

I came from an itinerant refugee family. We had the Lebanese Civil War, we moved around. I’m not too hard done by it, but you end up having a mentality that’s incredibly adaptable. My family

had its fair dose of trauma. I kept thinking about cycles of abuse and how they manifest when people repress their pasts and their truths. I was thinking a lot about taboos and the violence they perpetuate. Five or six years ago, I started to formalize things and formalize my performances. For me, integrity with my use of materials became less important than the central process. Meanwhile, I discovered mycelium. It felt like this wonder substrate because it's material—but it builds and creates a way that dematerializes. It was functioning and performing in these ways that sort of related to the ways that my own body wanted to perform and function. With my first works of mycelium, I was connecting mycelium strongly to language and linguistics.

RS: Can you give me an example?

NM: I made a [series] called “Fugue”—there was *Fugue 1* and *Fugue 2* [both 2019]. I showed those at Miguel's gallery in 2019 in a group show. I grew the same kind of mushroom—*Trametes versicolor*— and I implanted speakers inside them so that the mycelium sculpts themselves broadcast the sound. The sound was conversations with my father; his short-term memory lasts about 30 seconds. So, conversations with him would loop. Those were called fugues, because of this Baroque compositional concept of the fugue, which creates a musical motif and then it modulates and repeats itself.

I was making these mushrooms, which have a similar structure—it has a rhizomatic structure that creates a network through repetition—and repetition is also decomposing matter. Ideas of how repetition and language also mean the destruction of meaning: because as things are repeated, the arbitrary connection between language and the words and their meanings—you really start focusing on that in these conversations.

Then, when I was making “Logistique Elastique,” I wanted to continue using mycelium because it's so adaptable—it has its own iteration of formal thoughts. It can take on any mold. It's just an incredibly dynamic, incredible material that you can make reliefs with, you can shape with your hands—you can do so much with it. I thought that using it was almost like ceramics. It gives so much and then on top of that it has this added benefit of having its own system of life.

When it is killed, it is petrified and it will last indefinitely. It's almost like wood. It's this bizarre material that has a life of its own, that also can be guided. Whereas first the mycelium represented language and negation, for this show, it's working to talk about systems and logistics and sexual reproduction and reproduction and form.

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RS: Like portraying how malleable the circumstances pertaining to those scenarios are?

NM: For me, personally, it was the idea of embedding what we call the speculative spreadsheet that mapped out the the choices I had made in life and setting those into mycelium, for mycelium's own logic and its own system to actually impose itself upon my decisions; to create an artwork that was showing that tension between my free will and this material that lives off of a process of decay and destruction as well as regeneration and reproduction. That's what *Reproductive Logistics* is all about.

RS: I'm curious about the conceptual basis for *Reproductive Logistics*?

NM: It's got this color-coded y-axis of these eight major partners I've had in my life. I use that color-code to paint a self-portrait And I had the benefit of having some of my ex-lovers' biological material at hand.

RS: Because you held onto the hair your ex handed you after you had ended it with him?

NM: I moved around the world and I always had this bag of this man's hair. As I was making [*Reproductive Logistics*], I was meditating on my own ticking clock and my decisions of whether or not I want to make a baby and thinking about my art as a career and what that means.

So, I [figured], "Well, rather than making a crate to shape the artwork, I am going to find a crate, and I'm going to let the limitations of the crate make the artwork." I embedded the hair and then I got my latest lover to come to my studio. We had sex for the process of the work. I made him come into a paint tray. I used the semen from the paint tray to go into the work.

RS: What about the series of spheres?

NM: The "Sphere Studies" were the same idea, in a much less complicated way, the basic idea of giving form to decomposition, and fusing and synthesizing these ideas of positive and negative form.

RS: They're filled with the mushrooms?

NM: The body of each sculpture is the same organism that creates the mushroom. The body

is the root form, if you will, and the mushroom is the fruiting body. So, I'm not attaching two things together—that is all one organism. I'm putting mycelium and wood together into a sphere. And I drill holes into the sphere. And wherever I drill holes, the mushrooms will grow out of that.

RS: With the beach ball [*Sphere Study 3 (Failed Sphere)* (2020)], there's almost a kitsch element, but that's undermined by the mushrooms which deform it, undoing the connotation of a pop cultural motif.

NM: It's kind of funny to me—*Reproductive Logistics* is ultimately absurd, it's grotesque. It's super sexual and libidinous. While I love so many facets of mushroom, my focus isn't on making some kind of huge work on ecology. It's also about the synthesis of the toxic and the organic.

There's *Horse Head* (2020) on the ground. I love that piece because I was able to mold the [OCTAL DPET] plastic using a heat gun and make this form. The more I heated the material, the more opaque it became. With the duress that this plastic material undergoes, the transparency goes totally opaque, which I thought had a funny relationship to cycling analytic processes of repression and taboos. Then, I could also fill this plastic work with mycelium to synthesize these ideas of organic decomposition, toxicity, transparency, and opacity.

RS: You were talking about your conceptual foundation going back to undergrad and relating that to capitalism. Capitalism, especially recently, has an odd relationship to transparency.

NM: I would say that any economic structure works with information or manipulates information in a specific way. Definitely, capitalism is one with a pretty nefarious approach to how it manipulates. Those are definitely questions that are swimming in the soup that I have no answers to. But that's the pleasure, again, that goes back to my initial impulses in making art at all: It's a place with not necessarily answers, but a place where you're allowed to explore your impulses.

<https://theguide.art/exclusive/nour-mobarak-miguel-aberu/>