

NOUR MOBARAK'S CHORUS OF SINGING SCULPTURES

The artist works with mycelium and myth in a new
sonic installation that echoes the first-ever opera.

Text By MoMA

Sophie Cavoulacos, Nour Mobarak

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Dafne Phono, a new work by Lebanese-American artist Nour Mobarak, reflects its maker's wide-ranging interests. It builds on Mobarak's experimentation with voice and language as a performer, composer, and poet, and shows a new scale and complexity in her approach to sculpture and installation. The artist often approaches a new subject or material as an open question. In this work, she crafts mycelium, which has appeared in her work over the last several years, into singing sculptures that recite an adaptation of the first known opera, composed in 1598. To celebrate the opening of *Nour Mobarak: Dafne Phono* in the Kravis Studio on October 26, I invited Mobarak to take us through her work, with a roll call of the opera's characters offering a chance to delve deeply into the artist's process.

—Sophie Cavoulacos, Associate Curator, Department of Film

Ovid (on the source material)

There is a lot of improvisation in my work as a performer, and *Dafne Phono* grew through a number of things I didn't plan. One was the myth of Daphne and Apollo. The impetus for the project was an interest in the origins of opera and using it to think about the voice as an instrument. When I discovered that the first opera was based on Ovid's myth from *Metamorphoses*, it could not have been more serendipitous in terms of what I wanted to talk about: the human voice being subjugated by oppressive forces in society, and how the movement of peoples affects the phonetic makeup of languages.

Ovid only speaks once in the opera, delivering the prologue in Latin. He's a kind of anti-sculpture, created through the negative space of air being sucked out through a hole in the wall. I wanted him to be the

vacuum of Western civilization. Ovid. Void. It's an anagram, you know?

Dafne (on translation)

Most of the original music for *Dafne* is lost, but I had the Italian Renaissance-era libretto, and worked with two opera scholars on an English translation. Early on in the project, I'd reached out to the linguistic research division at the Smithsonian, telling them I was a vocalist interested in making an opera with the widest variety of vocal sounds. They suggested I look into the Chatino, Taa, and Abkhaz languages; I had also been interested in Silbo Gomero, the whistling language of the Canary Islands. And so the first step of the project was translating our English translation into these other languages, and then going from that translation into a recorded version.

Each language had a different translation process. Some were done remotely; I wasn't able to go to Abkhazia, for instance. I did travel to Oaxaca to work with Indigenous Chatino speakers, but already had a translation in hand through a linguist in Mexico City. On the other hand, for the Taa translation I worked with the San people who speak West !Xoon, the Namibian version of that language. It was an incredible process. There are roughly 2,000 people who speak this language. Linguists believe that it's been spoken longer than any other language that's still spoken today. So it's an important language to document, and through a series of connections, in spring of 2022, I was invited by members of a village to visit them.

We set up an open-air translation workshop, and members of the village would join and hang out; many ended up consulting on the project. My host, Klosi, served as our interpreter, and Franco, the sole village member who writes Taa, was our scribe. We went line by line—I would read the line out loud in English, and then I would sort of expound upon it. Then they would discuss in Taa, come to a consensus, and Franco would write it down. And finally, in order to get a recording, I went to various people in the tribe and recorded them speaking each line. I was very grateful to have the opportunity to work with people who spoke such a sonically sophisticated language—being surrounded by people speaking !Xoon deepened my appreciation for the voice as an instrument.

To close the loop, once we had finished these translations, I wanted to translate all of it back, word-for-word, into English, which is what you see in the video. Through the slippages of translation, things became incredibly...impressionistic. The video libretto functions as a kind of concrete poetry. I was able to shape language and text much like sculpture, and the video mirrors visually what's happening sonically in the space.

Chorus (on composition)

SYLVIA KOUVALI

Once I had all the recordings, the composition came together quickly. The process of deciding each character's language came organically. I knew I wanted to keep Apollo in Italian and that the chorus would be composed of all of the other languages. The chorus is the sound of the town, an amalgamation of the other characters, while Apollo is an external, oppressive force.

The opera has five scenes, five choruses, and four monologue or dialogue moments, and I wanted the voice to largely be its own instrumentation—that was the original idea. So I would listen to all of these voices and pick out moments that were melodic or percussive, or voices that had a musicality I liked apart from the meaning of the phrase. The choruses were really fun to compose. I was working with sound-editing software and whenever there was a moment I found compelling, I'd splice that part in. There are certain looped micro-samples where I'm falling into my own groove. That's how I like to work. I like to create interior logics that I can move around in, but then have a pleasurable, sensual sort of material that I can fuck around with.

Apollo (on the sculptural forms and intro to mycellium)

Each of the 15 voices is a separate sound channel in the installation. They play through a speaker encased in mycelium sculptures that have simple, geometric forms, like Apollo, who is an ovoid. I was thinking about these transcendent, godly entities and whittling things down to basic geometries. Choosing these sort of rudimentary shapes was also a way to push the limits and scale of working with mycelium. It's important to situate things—I was living between Athens and Los Angeles while working on the sound phase of the project, which was exhibited at JOAN in 2022. Concurrently, in 2021 I had started working on the mycelium sculptures in Athens, where I had been invited by Sylvia Kouvali to develop the work. Through her support, I worked there with the assistance of Sotiris Vougiatzis, then a young Greek art student. He was learning some pretty classical methods of sculpture, which came into play in our mold-making.

Mycelium is a fungus, the root of the mushroom. Venus, Apollo, and Cupid are all made of *Trametes versicolor*, or turkey tail mushroom. This kind of mycelium moves by finding things that are already dead and basically breaking them down. It finds a substrate and takes it over. I've been interested for a long time in this material that grows over and over again to the point of destruction, but then that creates a positive. In *Dafne Phono*, there's a classical dimension that's being undermined by a material that literally destroys it.

Cupid (on mycelium as a material)

SYLVIA KOUVALI

When I started working with mycelium in 2017, I didn't know anyone else working with it. And now it has taken on its own life, appropriately! In previous work, I've connected mycelium's rhizomatic system of replication with linguistics. But it was also liberating as a new material: I was able to experiment a lot, which becomes for me a very tactile practice, and one where I can go into a flow of my own inquiry.

Most of the large works are made using molds, but eventually I found that once the mycelium was grown, I could also shape it, almost woodwork with it. Cupid was an assembly, and is the only figurative mycelium sculpture, floating above, voiced by a mischievous-sounding Abkhaz child. Introducing iconography, like the trope of the baby angel, the blind love, I liked that as just a formal disruption. Depending on the conditions of growth, *Trametes versicolor* develops surface textures that can end up looking almost like marbled limestone, which end up recalling ancient statuary. I also was drawn to that aspect—a détournement of very classical sculpture, these works look decayed and ruined but are actually alive, more alive than any of those classical sculptures have ever been.

Venus (the crash course)

Working with mycelium, there were certain things outside of my control, which conceptually this project relied on. There were a lot of failures.

There are various ways of growing mycelium, and I was taught to do it by using syringes loaded with spores. In short, you take mason jars filled with millet, and pressure cook them. Then you inject them with a syringe of liquid culture, and the mycelium starts to colonize what ends up becoming my grain spawn. So in my studio I ended up having jars and jars full of sterilized millet colonized by *Trametes versicolor* mycelium. After that, I pasteurized wooden pellets, which break down into a sawdust substrate. During this whole process, the mycelium is very susceptible to contamination, so you have to create a sterile environment, factoring in airflow, humidity, and temperature.

Venus was the first sculpture I created; she's made of two massive cones. I made a mold out of these huge rolls of plastic, Sotiri made an amazing wooden frame, we poked holes all around the cone, packed down sawdust and grain spawn layer by layer, and finally sealed the top. Each cone took about eight months to grow, to fully get really hard and strong—not to mention that there were many versions that had to get thrown away before she finally started taking. (In the mythology, Venus is Cupid's mother, and she really was the diva mom!) By the time Venus was finally going, I could let her work her magic. By then, I was working on Apollo, which I did a bit differently, with a plaster mold. I was also trying to find a solution to grow Dafne, and started a relationship with a mushroom farm in Evia, a large island a couple hours

northeast of Athens.

Dafne (scaling up)

Dafne was very special and very challenging. In Ovid's myth, she's a nymph who transforms into a laurel tree to evade Apollo. I wanted to take the idea of the tree—not limbs and branches but rather a winding form in conversation with the other sculptures. As she moves from human to immortal, Dafne is this line that moves through space.

We first constructed Dafne in my studio, at scale, using styrofoam and stilts. I thought I was going to grow her in these vacuum-formed plastic shells, and I had finally found a local supplier, one of the largest in the Southern EU, that provides mushrooms to 80 percent of Greece. I ordered pounds and pounds of an already inoculated substrate of *Pleurotus*, the oyster mushroom that I was going to use for Dafne. And then the next day I came back to the studio and it had overheated, and everything had rotted. It was a really low point. I called the supplier on the phone, in tears, and explained what had happened. Thanassis, one of the partners, said, "Just come. We are curious, and we can help."

Dirfis Mushrooms, in Evia, is an incredible operation with miles and miles of land and silo after silo of mushrooms. They invited me to use their facilities. It was like a switch: having access to this bioindustrial scale, industrial-size inoculators and climate control. I brought Apollo there to grow, and set Cupid, Dafne, and all of the choruses there. They have substrate that's coming out already inoculated, and I was just ripping open these bags and fitting them into plastic HVAC tubing, then shaping Dafne on the spot. Once she was grown, I cut into her center to be able to string those modular pieces along a steel armature, like beads on a string.

While Dafne was growing, I told the farm that they were welcome to harvest her mushrooms, and those mushrooms ended up being distributed, sold, and consumed. After I unwrapped her and put her in the dehydration silos, a few mushrooms grew, and those I left on. But otherwise, Dafne was a living creature who fed people.

Python (on metamorphosis, life, and death)

The last character from the original tale is the python. Other than Ovid, it's the only element that's not mycelium. It's half vacuum-formed plastic, the same material I used to create molds, and half plaster coated in a high-gloss vinyl. The python is dead, killed by Apollo at the start of the story. So there was an

economy of materials at play: inert, deadly plastic for this slain creature. I also wanted to bring some color into the show. I used a glowing, arresting green which fades to black as the life force leaves the python and it moves into death and decay.

The python was based on an extension cord I had in the studio, and drew its shape using that line before casting it in clay, plaster, and vacuum-formed plastic to get to the hollow structures. There is an echo with Dafne, who is a winding line as well. In the myth, Apollo subjugates both the python and Daphne, so they're sort of these mirrors of each other. The python is killed and Daphne transforms. But they're sort of partners in that way, and so as above, so below. Daphne is oppressed, and as a result her body and voice are transmuted. But in *Dafne Phono*, she helps us consider the expansiveness of what a body is, and witness her metamorphosis and enduring force.

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