

“NOUR MOBARAK: DAFNE PHONO” AT MOMA, NEW YORK

Text By MOUSSE Magazine
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This show was selected as part of New York Oomph—a curated roundup of the best contemporary art exhibitions and events held by galleries, museums, and institutions in town during ADAA: The Art Show, New York, October 2024.

“Nour Mobarak: Dafne Phono” is the artist’s first museum exhibition in New York City and their most ambitious project to date. *Dafne Phono*, a large-scale installation reinterpreting the first opera, *Dafne*, which was staged by Jacopo Peri and Ottavio Rinuccini in 1598 and inspired by Ovid’s myth of Apollo and Daphne, will be on view in MoMA’s Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Studio. In Mobarak’s reimagining of *Dafne*, 15 singing sculptures—which encase a multichannel sound installation within mycelium structures—recount the tale in some of the world’s most phonetically complex languages. Fusing the artist’s longstanding engagement with mechanized voice and memory with an interest in sonic sculpture, Mobarak brings a lost opera to life through a polyphonic, large-scale installation. “Nour Mobarak: Dafne Phono” is organized by Sophie Cavoulacos, Associate Curator, Department of Film, with May Makki, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Media and Performance.

“In its use of voice as a material at the heart of an avant-garde opera, ‘Dafne Phono’ evokes histories of performance in the tradition of Robert Ashley and Joan La Barbara,” said Cavoulacos. “It is thrilling to see contemporary artists like Mobarak engaging with the Studio as a platform to reanimate these histories spatially, fusing the time-based and the sculptural. The work is an invitation to be transported by the power of the human voice, and to ponder the alternate worldviews we can build by reimagining speech.”

“I’m excited to share this work where I was thinking so much about the micro and the macro—our individual voices as vibrating, formant tools shaping and shaped by a body politic, a geopolitic, an interspecial politic,” said Mobarak. “Creating ‘Dafne Phono’ let me embody those politics in regards to systems of decomposition, unruly translations, and metamorphosis.”

At the origin of Mobarak’s immersive new work, which was first exhibited at the Municipal Theater

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of Piraeus in Athens, is an opera composed by Jacopo Peri and written by Ottavio Rinuccini in 1598, whose music is largely lost. Inspired by the myth of Daphne and Apollo from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—a story of conquest and unrequited love—*Dafne* was first staged in a Medici palace in Florence at the dawn of the 17th century. Shaped by technological and social changes of its time, the nascent art form of opera sought to make music from speech. Mobarak brings this vocal experiment into the present day, reprising each character in sculptural forms, which broadcast audio tracks in a respective language: Abkhaz, San Juan Quiahije Eastern Chatino, Silbo Gomero, Latin, Italian, and !Xoon. Drawing on histories of avant-garde sound, Mobarak's composition transforms the surviving libretto into a chorus of manifold voices, exploring how everyday speech can be broken down into constituent sounds and reassembled into new forms that transcend the fixed meaning of language.

With “Dafne Phono,” Mobarak brings together a remarkably wide palette of human vocalization, which is further heightened by the mycelium sculpture housing each channel of sound. Mobarak has been working with mycelium since 2017, and here draws analogies between linguistic structure and the material's biological processes, considering how both are governed by systems of repetition, decomposition, and regeneration, and relate to wider forces of political power. The organic substance produces unique resonance and spatialization as the work's 20-minute cycle cascades across the Studio, creating an experience for visitors that is as visual as it is sonic.

Coming out of a live practice that spans vocal performance, improvisation, electronic sound, movement, and poetry, and a polymathic interest in experimental materials, Mobarak's “Dafne Phono” joins nature and technology in an exploration of the voice's ability to endure cycles of life and death, bridging histories both ancient and present.

<https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/nour-mobarak-dafne-phono-moma-new-york-2024/>