

TIMEZONES BAY AREA TRANSCRIPT

A Podcast by Lara Sarkissian

My name is Sofia Cordova, I am an artist that works with performance video and music. I am from Carolina, Puerto Rico but am currently living right on the border of Emeryville and Oakland here in California in the unseeded lands of the Ohlone.

My name is Esra Canogullari. I DJ and make music under the name 8ULENTINA. I am based in Oakland, CA. I am an interdisciplinary artist.

My name is Khatchadour Khatchadourian, I run Khatch music. I am Lebanese by birth, I've spent my early years both in Lebanon then in Syria. I am primarily in the Bay Area.

My name is Nadia Shihab. I'm an artist based in Oakland California that works across film and video, sound and collage.

My name is Greg, or as I'd like to be called now reclaiming my original name as Greekor, Nemet. I used to be a photographer, currently I'm in winemaking.

Sofia:

The way that I'm interested in engaging with art, reflects the way that I am interested in engaging with the world and I don't engage with the world in a single language...or a single...I don't stay in a single lane, right, so whether that is how I practice my feminisms or how I am a queer person or the fact that I come from a colonized country that itself is the product of a violent mestizaje - I'm an afroindigenous person because of terrible histories of colonialism - but that is my reality. So there is no space, in my life really, to just work in one avenue. So it would make little sense to me to work in one avenue in my work. And that is something that I developed once I moved to the Bay Area and I will say that it actually started out as a mode of survival.

Khatchadour:

I lean on several languages, I lean on my birth language, my home language - Armenian. Western Armenian. I sing a little bit in Eastern Armenian dialect. I also sing in Arabic. I recently started singing in Persian language as well. As far as my woodwinds, I am primarily a duduk player, and if I need to create additional samples of the other Armenian instruments - pku, blul, zurna - or Japanese shakuhachi, and Arab ney, I lean on those. So that's my acoustic point of view.

Nadia:

I'm interested in spaces of becoming within diasporic and feminist histories, and nearly all my work has a quality of intimacy to it perhaps because I often collaborate with family, and often with the matriarchs in my family. The deeper I've moved into my practice, the more I reject strict categories, and the more I embrace a general entanglement of genres and forms. I think a lot of the creative work that I'm drawn to coming out of the Bay Area has historically

challenged notions of purity in categories or genres. There's a hybridity here that comes out of spaces of deep experimentation

8ULENTINA:

I think for me, as someone who is a non-binary person, and comes from a non-western perspective, or diasporic perspective, my creative output or my artwork...being able to be an extension of my physical body. So thinking about the limitlessness of sound, of space, and when we make a creative world for ourselves to exist in, when we create a context for ourselves, we're really creating an extension of our physical selves.

Khatchadour:

So there really is a kind of place, where all this foundation for electronic music is enabled. There is quite a bit of high level engineering and talent from that perspective, that really brought up a whole movement of music. To see these kinds of figures - Don Buchla, Dave Smith Instruments, now in their later age, or you know some have passed on. But to see that movement having translated - the Bay Area is kind of digesting that technology and allowing for space to really understand what this technology can do, pushing the human expression in a human sense.

Nadia:

I remember going to a party once and this older guy was wailing on a two headed saxophone - he had literally fused two saxophones to create a new instrument. I think that's indicative of a spirit that exists here. That spirit doesn't shun technology - it works with it in unexpected ways.

Materially, these fragments I draw from, come from lived experience of the worlds I inhabit and the people I love. And the worlds they inhabited that now only exist in memory, because of migration and diaspora. And time.

8ULENTINA:

Linking to the past and to the future. Relationship to our lineage, invoking relationship to history, and creating alternative histories, especially since the canon and the archive of music both electronic and within the Middle East is so dominated by a Western perspective or its often coming from a very patriarchal view. Using my perspective as a queer and trans person, as a Middle Eastern person, how I can use sound to create my own conversations with history, with my ancestors, creating kinship. I really think about the poetic value of objects, the poetic value of sound, through hybridizing different sounds... Through hybridizing a wide range of experiences you can really create different relationships to the world, and create a physical space and digital space for a marginalized body.

Khatchadour:

I come from an informal line of family singers - my grandfather was a street singer, was a street performer for years in his youth - this is what, six decades ago. And my aunt had a small debut when she was a young teenager of folk music. And then I started playing the Armenian woodwind - double reed woodwind - duduk - which is a beautiful instrument, very rich in harmonics and textures. That led to the opening of my voice. As a child I used to sing in a children's choir, of 150 kids in Syria, Aleppo in Syria for seven years. So some musical background there but not a classically trained musician. Came here to the US and once I

started doing music, one collaboration led to another and it was really a process of opening up and understanding what the Bay Area community, musically, is.

Greekor:

My late uncle was a photographer. My former guitar teacher back in the old country was a photographer. You know, your lungs open up and you want to continue doing it because it's so organic. And I was drawn to the wet process, in the analog process, that the darkroom process. But right at the time when everything was transitional, digital and for some reason I understood that the digital was not where I want to be. Transition into wine happened organically because the darkroom process is a solitary process where you can sit there, you know for hours in the dark, turning over this one image over and over until it turns into what you exactly what you wanted to be, how it to your perfect print. Similarly, in the cellar, the harvest, the fermentation, those cycles are very kind of communal. And the sharing of the wine, of course, kind of like the sharing of the art in the gallery, right? That was really something that drew me as a parallel from the dark room to the cellar.

Sofia:

but at the time I was strictly a photographer, and photography at the time as well, was very indebted to a very European aesthetic that was incredibly formal and these beautifully composed, large format images. And that's what I was doing because I thought that's what I needed to be doing somewhere along the way, While being deeply enmeshed in the academy and the sort of institutional thinking that it brings, I was feeling all of the history that I carry with me. All of the subjectivity is that I carry with me the fact that every day my identity is multiple and shifts, and I'm not the same person day today. All of that was sort of screaming out from within, and it was so hard to synthesize all of that into a single medium.

Greekor:

Everything was going into a tech oriented world, product photography less and less and less and less of these bohemian things that I was attracted to - 2009,'10. This is when you know Uber, Facebook, everybody, that Twitter, the hyper hyper techisation of San Francisco like shifted from Silicon Valley into SF and by default to Oakland, where I lived into everything else. Everything kind of became tech oriented. The reason why tech was attracted, meaning like the tech workers were attracted to SF was because of everything that the artist class brought to SF. But the double edged sword there obviously was that no longer were the artists able to roam freely in the cities.

Sofia:

I responded by beginning to make music. So that's when I started the XUXA SANTAMARIA project, which originally was an alter ego. It wasn't even meant to exist beyond that project. It was essentially an alter ego that themselves would contain all of the histories of sort of the Caribbean and the diaspora through a lens of dance music and from that video sprung out and installation sprung out and costume making and all of these other things that became a constellation of artworks. That, for me immediately reflected my experience in a way that felt so much more embodied closer to the center of where I was coming from than these very kind of again beautiful but incredibly formal images.

8ULENTINA:

People's stories feel heard here, and I think that that's a huge part of the history of what makes up the Bay Area's creative identity. I mean, that's changed so much over time, with so many different periods of gentrification and periods of changes in the economy. When you think about the relationship the tech infiltration has had on the Bay Area and how that shifted so much on so many levels. And I think if anything, as that process happened, people in my communities started to care more and more about how to tell stories with an intentional way. Since in a lot of ways, the story of the Bay Area and the identity of the Bay Area was being hijacked by tech and being hijacked by all of these economies that didn't actually consider or care for the people who really make up, what the city is, what the cities are, what art can be made, what culture can be made is really always determined by what kind of economy is present. Sometimes those limitations create a really flourishing underground, but with that amazing sort of like underground or DIY world, there's also sort of like a lack of financial support and lack of sustainability.

Khatchadour:

It's fair to say that the Bay Area does have this intersectionality where the space is multipurpose and those multipurpose spaces bringing audiences that are very open to being curious about different kinds of music, to have one foot in this door, and be performing artist in an acoustic setting, but also be inspired by the electronic music scene and and and you know, the artists and creators in in that room.

Nadia:

But when I think of the physical art and music spaces that have shaped me most as an artist, I think of the people behind them, the collectives who ran them, that act of keeping the doors open knowing there's no financial gain in it, but just for the love of it and for the community it builds and sustains. The idea that if you're not seeing/hearing/experience what you want to be experiencing, you create it yourself.

Sofia:

as I became more proficient as a filmmaker and as a musician, finding those people across time and then also contemporaneously right. So to shout out CLUB CHAI and to shout out all of the friends of that family and all of the people that I met through, just being a musician in the world expanded for me my vision of what is possible. And then I take all of that back with me to the studio and again, even if I'm making work that is going to exist in an institutional space or whatever, that spirit of experimentation and strangeness and mystery and that the work doesn't need to be eligible immediately.

8ULENTINA:

People really figure out a way to make things happen. They try to find the resources within their immediate community to do that

Sofia:

we started engaging with an audience and a group of peers that themselves found their bodies and experience is reflected in the work that I was making so work that was concerned with the liberation of queer, colored and colonized bodies. And that was really where the Bay pushed me to work in a way that was multivalent, because if these experiences are multivalent then the work needs to reflect that. And I think for me that was really crucial in

thinking about not just my audience but how I wanted to make the work that I make now to attempt to connect with audiences beyond the kind of fancy museum gallery world that I think so many of us are struggling with these days,

Khatchadour:

I have experimented with Eurorack modular synthesizers, which are a whole canvas of possibility, the way you work through them is not necessarily linear. One of the early founders of ASMR, a wife of one of my former roommates, is actually in Berkeley. She invited me to contribute to a ASMR Sessions where I primarily used to do a little bit of voice and lots of the duduk synthesis to create soundscapes and ambient music.

8ULENTINA:

The past five years of organizing a project like CLUB CHAI, which really like, created and fostered an audience for myself - a city like Oakland was able to hold space for the kinds of projects that we are trying to work on. And I think there was definitely a desire for a space that considered how our personal identities and how our stories intersect with sound thinking about things from a less drawn or specific way. We definitely had to do the work to sort of foster that audience. It was something that carried through with us in everything that we did, and even now that CLUB CHAI is over, that audience is still present in the work that I do as an individual, and the process is still really present in the output of everyone who touched the CLUB CHAI path.

Sofia:

But my people are here like never in my travels have I seen a more diverse, brilliant group of people that come from all over the world, that are queer in myriad ways, that are really doing the solidarity work of collective organizing across class and race and gender, never really, and and and in very few places in the world, have I experienced that, and that is a treasure to me. So to be able to make that work here is a gift.

Greekor:

You would have photographers, dancers, musicians, DJs, producers, visual artists, painters, all kind of coming together, throwing things by and large. A lot of people knew one another when you hustled in the art space, even if you didn't know somebody very well. They kind of understood what your life in the Bay Area as an artist was, meaning that you're constantly kind of being pressed by this behemoth capitalist tech thing.

Sofia:

Song for Sanctuary is a pretty long experimental performance that XUXA SANTAMARIA, so myself and my partner Matt Gonzalez Kirkland, did at the request of the San Francisco Arts Commission. They were celebrating the fact that San Francisco is a sanctuary city, meaning that folks that are undocumented will, in some ways, although this is debatable, be protected from federal law enforcement, and their immigration status won't be necessarily questioned. Sanctuary, as as we probably know, is when you approach usually the Christian sort of institution for protection. So for that, to them means something similar under the the eye of the state felt a little bit kind of uncomfortable to me, So I wanted to complicate the themes - in the American imaginary immigrants are always from Central, South America, and after a visit to the demographics office in the city of San Francisco, I learned that there's actually lots of folks from other countries, China, Korea, that are protected under sanctuary here, and in

exchange the price to pay was the complete loss of their, whether it's lands or autonomy in the case of the Philippines and in the case of these tribes.

Trump's policy on immigration had just become so violent that I kind of wanted to like, really pair all of those questions down and make a work about a singular journey. And I don't mean this in an individualistic way because the work is meant to address many people the way that the performance was carried out was that we worked with one dancer, Stephanie Hewett, who I worked with a lot in my pieces. We see a body kind of traversing through an imaginary landscape, and that landscape could be the desert or the Mediterranean, because I also wanted to talk about migration across the globe as it's being experienced. In this time, she did these sort of interpretive dances that responded to the music. Now the music was made exclusively from samples that we collected from the radio from various radio stations that are designated to immigrant communities, the music being played back in their countries. It was really important that the source material responded specifically to the bodies of the work was being made about the moment they were. They gave me choice on where I wanted to perform this. I knew I wanted to perform it around City Hall, and originally I was going to be content with doing it out front. Outfront is where protests happened. Out front is where you kind of like kind of YELL at the building, if you will, but eventually through the work of the commission and the very nice people actually at City Hall we were able to perform it inside the rotunda of City Hall, and that became really meaningful because I wanted to state that even though these folks are here protected under sanctuary, the sort of scale of the state, the sort of big, beautiful building that represents the state doesn't actually respond to these communities. So I really wanted to emphasize the smallness of the dancer's body in this huge, beautiful architectural space that is the state as we, the people, have constructed it. So you see this body that is kind of negotiating her space and herself, in contrast to this hard marble cold places cold entrance to the seat of power.

Nadia:

There is definitely a space where the line between art and branded content has become so thin as to be indistinguishable. I think the market is always going to capitalize on the talent of artists, and many artists will gladly take on well-paid work for hire because you have to pay the bills. Unless you're independently wealthy, as an artist you have to have a hustle. That's not unique to SF. But that entanglement with the world of marketing does feel like it has led to this expectation everything has to be similarly tight and packaged and polished – branded basically. It becomes part of that pressure to brand oneself, and translate work whose value is not monetary and is not commodifiable into just another piece of content in that infinite death scroll.

Khatchadour:

Like the very cutting sharp economy of the Bay Area, the artist has become an entertainer. The artist can be an entertainer, but the artist can be a storyteller. The artist could be carrier of song wisdom, carrier of vibrations. The artist could be an artist. The artist could allow themselves to time and mental space to not worry about - Oh, when am I? How am I going to pay my next month's rent and food, limiting the artists - and the artists then works with that limitation. The artist can facilitate a certain connection with oneself with emotions, with let's say God with spirit. Whatever it is, the artist, through their craft, is finding a way of bringing you back to yourself a little bit. And I think that's beautiful and for the audience to mature in understanding so that they see that this is not just entertainment but an intersection of

beautiful possibility. As philosophical as that sounds, it may not happen ever again. You know where you see this isn't being played in this way with this sound effect, and you're like, blown away and it's gone. It's a moment, and you can either enjoy it and go deep into it and appreciate the artist as both the performer, entertainer and but also a craftsman.

Greekor:

Places where we would host a lot of the photo exhibits became incubators. There are a couple of dark rooms that I probably spent like, I don't know, weeks on end in there. And now I don't even know of a dark room in the Bay Area where at one point, this was the film capital of California. SF was seventies sixties fifties Hitchcock. All these movies were always filmed here, and in the late seventies there was a concerted effort to stop that. But the arts community was very tight knit people, from all walks - all disciplines came together. It's just that the venues no longer became available. All sorts of stories that pinpoint that a lot of the problems with the art community that erupted from it because all of the venues of yesterday are now incubators or restaurants or some headquarter for some new venture funded X Y Z. Like I remember as I was studying photography, I was also making money on the side, working at the Jewelry and Gift exchange center in SF, and that in an in it of itself was kind of like a microcosm of what SF is. It's essentially like this. All the jeweler's came together, right? And guess what it is now. Today it's Airbnb. That's where Airbnb headquarters and every time I passed that building, my heart sinks, because that used to be a huge space for interaction. Stalls of people from all walks of life in the jewelry business, which also is, you know, has art inside of it, right,

8ULENTINA:

that kind of lack of space or diminishment of space, disappearing of space over, the past decade. On the one hand, it's creates a really difficult dilemma for you to be sustainable if you can't really perform, and if you don't really feel like it's easy to access the spaces that we have. But on the other hand, I think that's so much interesting. Music is made here because we don't have so many examples that we're constantly looking at, and we don't have so many venues that are known for specific genre or known for specific sound in a lot of ways. People have always been working in some sort of isolation here, and then the work somehow exists in a community space or in a performance realm where it's been received. But I don't think that there's always this feedback loop of absorbing sounds from a certain genre in a club and then feeling pressure to kind of like respond to that standard. I think that we really have such a wide range of experimentation within sound. When it comes to the Bay Area, why not do whatever I want, especially if there's not already not going to be spaces to support this? Why should I cater to what exists for me? I should instead create my own world in my own sounds and that inherently creates more underground spaces and more underground experiences or more DIY experiences around sound.

Nadia:

But it sometimes also feels hard to imagine how to sustain a life here, how to make art and raise a family and buy a home. But I think that impossibility is also forcing me to be creative and maybe rethink my expectations about what is possible. There is an ethos here between the artists I know, of respect, of experimentation and risk, and of what I can only call balance. By balance, I mean quality of life. Relations. Rest. Being outside. The ocean. The forest. The geography here is such a gift and so unique. I try never to take it for granted.