

Amanda Rae, "Food Matters: Precious Okoyomon grows 'pleasure, abundance, and desire' in AAM's longest exhibition," *The Aspen Times*, September 9, 2021

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Food Matters: Precious Okoyomon grows 'pleasure, abundance, and desire' in AAM's longest exhibition

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Amanda Rae
Food Matters

IF YOU GO ...

Precious Okoyomon: "Every Earthly Morning the Sky's Light touches Ur Life is Unprecedented in its Beauty"

Aspen Art Museum

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Diners who stayed for dessert were treated to a frozen chlorophyll, *schizandra* berry, and guava sorbet ball gag, suspended on a silk ribbon. Those unsure of how to handle it turned to the front of the room, where a brave man had volunteered to model for a demonstration. Standing behind him, poet/artist Precious Okoyomon brought the forest-green ice sphere to the man's lips. SK Lyons, newest member of the Spiral Theory Test Kitchen queer culinary arts collective, narrated instructions. This dish would require help from a partner.



Precious Okoyomon in Pine Creek Cookhouse's kitchen. (Seth Beckton/Courtesy Aspen Art Museum)

“And then you wanna gently ... gently ... GENTLY! Shove it in your friend’s mouth,” Lyons said, tying the ribbon securely in a bow at the back of the man’s head. Eyes bulging, his face contorted into wild expressions of surprise and discomfort as melting sugar and saliva dripped uncontrollably from his chin. “Let it slowly melt,” Lyons continued. “Don’t take it out until it’s all gone.”

The room erupted in laughter. And then we all did as we were told.

So went the finale to “The Nothing,” a four-hour “post-Anthropocene eating experience” hosted by Spiral Theory Test Kitchen at Pine Creek Cookhouse on Aug. 4 as a lead-in to ArtCrush 2021, the Aspen Art Museum (AAM)’s annual summertime benefit. In June, Okoyomon (who, along with all members in Spiral Theory, uses they pronouns) opened their first U.S. museum exhibition at AAM, “Every Earthly Morning the Sky’s Light touches Ur Life is Unprecedented in its Beauty” — the words printed in gold on that ball-gag “poem bisection.”

Located on the AAM rooftop, Okoyomon’s lush garden bursts with organic matter and an enormous clay “angel protector” sculpture, based on those that decorate a Senegal cathedral. (Titled “My heart makes my head swim (ditto, ditto battle angel),” the work sold for \$110,000 during the ArtCrush auction.) Representing 18 months of total endeavor, the garden is the longest in-situ engagement mounted



Precious Okoyomon's garden installation on the Aspen Art Museum rooftop.

Similar to “The Nothing” — which, linguistically dissected, really was *something* — the AAM rooftop garden is interactive, mind-expanding, and a true celebration of “excessive abundance.” Okoyomon worked with Bluegreen landscaping in Aspen to achieve the buildout, which combines invasive plants (kudzu, a trailing vine native to Asia; honeysuckle) with Colorado-native cherry trees, dandelion, mugwort, and milk thistle.

According to materials composed by AAM curator-at-large Claude Adjil, this juxtaposition of native and invasive plants salutes the Nigerian-American artist's "observation of the natural world as itself an object of colonization and enslavement." Okoyomon's cross-pollination of these divergent species explores the "racialization" of the natural world and helps to nurture a new biosphere that will transform over time.

A stream of black algae water hydrates the flora, through which a visitor may walk on a series of wooden steps inset with hand-painted ceramic tiles, which the artist made during a residency at Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass Village.

Giving "voice to the universal hum of plants," jazz musician Gio Escobar of the Standing on the Corner ensemble composed a soundtrack that will change with the seasons. Okoyomon, meanwhile, will return to AAM to host activations including solstice rituals (next on Dec. 21) and cooking from a rooftop community oven come winter.

Back at Pine Creek, my lips felt numb, if not freeze-burned.

"You're all in it together, so there is this intimacy-building quality," noted artist Bobbi Salvör Menuez of Spiral Theory Test Kitchen, known for theatrical dinner parties in New York. "We work through a psychosexual framework around food ... it's a very loaded material."



The S&M sweet wasn't the first course, of course. Outside the log cabin dining room, a good stone's throw from the Prada Outdoor cocktail gathering before lunch, a large round table beckoned. On top, colorful totems stacked of whole melons, apples, oranges, pomegranates, plums and peaches stretched skyward, seeming to echo the Elk Mountains in view from Pine Creek's patio. Titled "Fruit towers and tuck," the display included a pile of more fruit, berries, nuts, sunflowers, dried grasses and a 10-inch-tall hunk of cheese hacked from a whole wheel. Large black chains draped over it all in a flower or star outline.

Plates, napkins and utensils sat on tree low stump columns a few paces away from the grazing table, which forced visitors to stoop to reach them. A long-handled carving knife was placed on the table beside the cheese, but it, too, went mostly untouched. It was a beautiful spread, but also a bit absurd. (Or were guests' reactions absurd?)

Later, the mess of the coursed meal was part of the beauty. When viewed from afar on dozens of place settings, plates of elk and beet carpaccio with cherries harvested from the rooftop garden (titled "Angel of the Sun") resembled a series of small massacres. Sweet peas and ponzu-pickled pluot were nestled on rye-cacao "dirt" with "goat buttermilk squirt." The "dirty juice" of cut fruit stained the tablecloths that were bunched dramatically under more whole-fruit totems. My dining companions and I observed that the table strewn with the detritus of this meal had become the ultimate art piece from the adventure



"I think food is one of the more overlooked art mediums," said Okoyomon, who cooked at Chicago's only 3-star Michelin restaurant, Alinea, during college. "I think of our meals as active, living poetry that you eat, and it changes you. We put our love into it. Then you eat it and it changes your gut biome and you go throughout your day. It lives inside of you."

One intention of "The Nothing," they noted, was to feel total bliss. Or, as Okoyomon said, "to feel overwhelmed in a safe space through food."

Enter this portal of abundance yourself: walk over those tiny steps in the AAM rooftop garden, where flowers and fruit trees stretch as tall as architect Shigeru Ban's trussed wooden ceiling. Or just listen to the music and follow Okoyomon's proposal: pick a few flowers to take home with you. Let their color change your living space, however subtly.