

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

# Nairy Baghramian

SCRUFF OF THE NECK //  
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By Dr Kostas Prapoglou



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Iranian born, Berlin-based artist Nairy Baghramian most recently presented a solo show at Marian Goodman Gallery in London, her first major exhibition since *The Walker's Day Off* (2010) at the Serpentine Gallery, where her work was shown alongside British artist Phyllida Barlow. Entitled *Scruff of the Neck*, the gallery exhibition encompasses a site-responsive installation, characterized by explorations of three-dimensional forms, permeated through her immense interest in minimalism and conceptual extensions of art. —

Transferring viewers into a surreal domain, the gallery space was transformed into a colossal mouth entered from behind. Mixed media sculptures redolent of dental topography were mounted onto the building's existing architectural elements. By symbolically portraying the gallery space as a talking vehicle, Baghramian evinces the importance of the venue—not only as a locus of idea generation, but also as a conduit that signifies the role of the viewer as a conveyor of ideas into the outside world. —

— Baghramian's visual vocabulary engages with notions of spatial negotiation and perception, as well as corporeality and an esotericism that unavoidably leads towards a form of concealed spiritualism.

Enhanced by elements of surrealism and abstraction, her oeuvre responds to past forms of conceptualism, current art trends, interior design, and modernist architecture.

Reinterpreting and remapping the role of women artists and other personalities who were overshadowed during twentieth century art historical movements, nearly dissolved from the cannon, Baghramian emphasizes aspects of memory control, and institutional criticism via socio-historical constraints.

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**KOSTAS PRAPOGLOU:** Your work engages with interior space, design history, furniture, and minimalism — often rewriting the past of overlooked personalities such as interior designer Janette Laverrière (1909–2011). What is the process of evoking such narratives, and what draws your inspiration from these realities?

**NAIRY BAGHRAMIAN:** You could also add to that list: post-feminism, abstraction, surrealism, the role of the viewer in institutional critique, site-specificity, post-modernism and so on. For me, all these things interrelate in contemporary sculpture. Maybe it is just about notionally assembling a critical mass of ideas, which through their contradictory potential can generate new perspectives. Going back and forth in history, and specifically revisiting modernist avant-garde movements, has been a general concern in the art production of the last years. But one of the aspects of this phenomenon that concerned me was what I would describe as a kind of condition of retreat—in the sense of getting too comfortable with the supposedly secure

ideological forms of the past.

This observation—and scepticism about it—was my motivation for research into dissenting makers and positions, for example Jean-Michel Frank, Clara Porset, and as you mentioned the designer and interior architect, Janette Laverrière. While learning about her oeuvre, I was not only mesmerized by its formal stringency, but also by her work titles which add tangential layers of meaning, evidencing a political thinking mind. So, it is not so much interior design or furniture per se that interests me, but rather the social and cultural-political implications entailed. For example, gender roles in those fields: there is a productive tension between the introverted world of the protected inner space, and the public sphere with its representational claims.

Laverrière's career—spanning nearly a century—reveals how, in that time, the possibilities for women have both changed and not changed. When she started out in the early 1930s, Laverrière wanted to become an architect like her father, but

quickly came to the realization that architecture's built façade seemingly belonged to her male contemporaries. For me, it is sobering to see how little has changed despite the valiant efforts of feminist movements. It has also always been a part of my practice to stress and visualize this membrane between the inner and outer realities with the intention to re-mould, pierce, break or re-form it. Take for instance, a sculpture like *La Colonne Cassée* (2008), which I made the same year for the 5<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale in the Neue Nationale Galerie, a work dedicated to Laverrière and inspired by her mirror *La Commune* (2001). The sculpture consists of two identical black lacquered solid steel 'J' forms perforated with holes originally positioned right up close on either side of one of the imposing glass panes constituting the façade of Mies van der Rohe's iconic building. The only thing stopping these massive twin forms from crashing into each other were heavy white lacquered steel counterweights laying on their base. Craning them into position inside and out was a high wire act around a monument.

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Incidentally, the one on the exterior was used like a public sculpture, even sometimes as a skate ramp.

KP: How do meanings with social-political extensions emerge through your work?

NB: Somewhat contrary to the more generally held view that socio-political issues in art are best negotiated through, for example, the documentary modes of political activism or in mediums like performance art through physical presence or vocal manifestations, I also believe in the political potential of sculptural form by stressing and exhausting the possibilities of the object. Every form carries information about its representational mode—and through its very positioning in a contextualized space, also recalls certain ideological presumptions, affiliations, and debates.

I believe sculptures have a discursive life of their own. They can be consciousness of post-minimalist allowances of the body, and their attendant subjective resonances. They have a

materiality that is at once at ease with sculptural canons, at the same time it sits uneasily with them. In my practice, this allows for deviations or excursions. My series *Privileged Points* (2015) consists of solid steel bars hand bent into rough open circles through the application of a blow torch and considerable muscle and then repeatedly dipped into pastel shades of paint. In any given art space, they simply hang or lean on the walls or lay on the floor. My intention is to demarcate (and thus cultural-politically charge) these 'privileged' vantage points for the display and experience of works of art: what does it mean to take center stage, to put yourself in a corner, to pose as casual, to hang up high? The installation of the works function as placeholders for past or future 'masterpieces,' or prize possessions and I hope I make visible to viewers certain hanging traditions and hierarchies.

KP: *Scruff of the neck* was your first major solo exhibition in London since *The Walker's Day Off* at the Serpentine Gallery back in 2010. What do you feel is the impact of your

work on the London audience and how is this read by different audiences worldwide?

NB: I cannot really talk about the reception of my own work, but I can say that as a viewer and recipient of art in different contexts that when, for example, I see a work by Cady Noland at the Art Institute of Chicago or in the Museum Ludwig Cologne, or somewhere else in the world, the initial impetus of the work stays with me the same whilst my view on the surrounding realities can be affected.

KP: Your visual repertoire negotiates the perception of space challenging the human presence and hypostasis in immediate relation to it. Where has this impetus derived from?

NB: The notion of 'space' as a component is as much Minimalist as it was the fantasy-filled and Coldwar frontier of mid-twentieth century. So, there is not only space as a sculptural dimension to the thing, but also the cultural utopias around the notion of space. In the day-to-day world, this utopia is

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in fact also an indicator of social class, and a status object.

KP: Your show at Marian Goodman gallery in London entailed a unique spatial interpretation. How did this concept emerge and what are your inner processes to implement its narrative?

NB: I hope the exhibition in London entails a postmodern approach to the idea of space in a good sense; it still allows the modern utopia of perfection or self-improvement, but it is also unafraid of the inherent problems and their subjective reflections. The show is an extension of my work *Retainer* (2012) at SculptureCenter in New York that tried to create a possible utopia by attempting to imagine optimizing a given spatial structure. My sculptural space *Bridges* (2016) in the exhibition at Marian Goodman raises the question: who owns idealism? Braces are for your future, bridges are too, but they address real imperfect conditions. An internal support is something invisible that is needed to keep things going: holding the space, not making a fuss, continuing. The London exhibition was also imagined as if you enter it from the back of the head. You do not enter from the front opening, the orifice that everyone uses socially, and one that is repeated in the architectural idea of the façade as a face, but as something more subversive—coming from behind, and within. There is some absurdity in the wide smile, showing imperfections. Like with the talk of 'space' there is a lot of talk of 'the body,' but both of these things are actually highly charged and difficult to talk about (art sometimes fills the awkward pause); what if the sculptures might allow that difficulty?

KP: What are your immediate future plans after your London exhibition?

NB: I am currently working on the completion of the *Bridges* series as recipient of the Zürich Art Prize at Haus Konstruktiv. In November, a touring exhibition will open at the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (SMAK) in Ghent, Belgium, which then will travel to the Museum der Moderne Salzburg, and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis in 2017.

There, I will also have a contribution to the newly constructed sculpture garden. This touring exhibition will be a kind of 'survey' of my work, but it will be structured around a series of new works that each rebound off some of my work to date, thus attempting to critique the usual static nature of institutionalized surveys or retrospectives, while at the same time allowing some rethinking to take place about conditions and the sound of my own making. In 2017, I will also participate in the Documenta 14 and in the Skulptur Projekte Münster. Exhibitions are also planned for the National Gallery of Denmark in Copenhagen and the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. I am trying to remain conscious in all this of the privilege and the welcome pitfalls involved; in each and every space, and each object, and the reverb that might surround them.

Nairy Baghramian has been featured in numerous exhibitions worldwide including Museo Tamayo, Mexico City, Mexico (2015); Punta della Dogana, Venice, Italy (2015); the Serralves Museum, Porto, Portugal (2014); the Art Institute of Chicago, USA (2014); Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, Germany (2014); MIT Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, USA (2013); the Sculpture Center, New York, USA (2013); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, NL (2011) and at the Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland (2006). She has participated in the Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art, UK (2012); the 45th International Venice Biennale, Italy (2011); the 8th Berlin Biennial, Germany (2014) and the 5th Berlin Biennial, Germany (2008). She is the recipient of the Zürich Art Prize, Zürich, Switzerland (2016) the Bode Prize, Germany (2014), the Hector Prize, Germany (2012) and the Schering Prize, Germany (2007).

TITLE PAGE:

*Scruff of the Neck*, installation view Marian Goodman Gallery, London, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

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*Retainer* (2012), installation view SculptureCenter New York, 2012. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

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PREVIOUS SPREAD:

*Le Colonne Casée* (2008), installation view 8th Berlin Biennale at Neue National Galerie Berlin, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

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BELOW:

Nairy Baghramian, portrait shot.  
Photo: Oliver Jackel.



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