

Frieze

Sketch of a Sketch

Revision and revolt in the work of Nairy Baghramian

By Brian Dillon (September 7, 2017)



Nairy Baghramian, *Drawing Table (Homage to Jane Bowles)*, 2017, installation view at EMST–National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens, as part of *documenta 14*. Courtesy: the artist, Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/Berlin/New York, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/London/Paris, and kurimanzutto, Mexico City; photograph: Mathias Völzke

‘The Iron Table’ (1950) is a short story by Jane Bowles – no more than a fragment of two and a half pages – concerning an exchange between an American couple, perhaps holidaying in Tangiers, where the author once lived. ‘They sat in the sun, looking out over a big new boulevard. The waiter had dragged an old iron table around from the other side of the hotel and set it down on the cement near a half-empty flowerbed. A string stretched between stakes separated the hotel grounds from the sidewalk.’ The woman and her husband, who are clearly modelled on Jane and her own partner, Paul Bowles, are bickering about the desert, most likely the Sahara, where he would like to live. Americans and Europeans, he says, have destroyed Muslim culture in the city; authenticity is to be found only in the desert. His wife counters that the West is not a place or an idea that one can easily escape, and despairs at her husband’s ‘ceaseless complaining’.

In her sculpture *The Iron Table (Homage to Jane Bowles)* (2002), Nairy Baghramian takes as her starting point the waiter’s piece of string: an improvised border between indigenous culture and colonial enclave – the latter, of course, simply calls itself ‘civilization’. Baghramian’s string, which is decorated with black and white bunting, stretches from the gallery floor to the top of a pole or mast. There are waves below, rendered in wood and painted red, and adjacent to this schematic marine arrangement a gleaming metal sea, out of which two conical, bristling landmasses loom. Spotlit, with sand scattered around its base, *The Iron Table (Homage to Jane Bowles)* broaches distinctions between sea and land, ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘us’ and ‘them’, colonial adventure and its charted, chartered destination – not to mention its feared victims.

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Nairy Baghramian, *The Iron Table (Homage to Jane Bowles)*, 2002, installation view at Hessisches Landesmuseum, Kassel.
Courtesy: the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/London/Paris; photograph: Timo Ohler

For her recent solo exhibition 'Déformation Professionnelle' (Occupational Hazard) – which ran at S.M.A.K., Ghent, until February of this year and opens at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, this month – Baghramian remade or revised a number of key works from the past decade and a half. This effort, as she puts it, to 'survey the survey' is not the only instance in her work of this kind of self-critical refashioning. For documenta 14, *The Iron Table (Homage to Jane Bowles)* was reconfigured as *Drawing Table (Homage to Jane Bowles)* (2017): the original shown in Kassel, the new version in Athens. The latter piece – executed in waxed wood, metal, rope, canvas, glass, polyurethane and marble plaster – is the further abstracted sketch of a sketch. The red mass is still present but has become a flat lozenge, held at the centre of a pale wooden frame. Sundry verticals persist: dark metal supporting struts and some approximation of the pale grey mast, which now trails its decorated string on the gallery floor.

Baghramian's revision of *The Iron Table (Homage to Jane Bowles)* seems an instructive parable about the nature of her sculptural work in general, which is habitually but obliquely concerned with power and politics. (The political import is not often personal: she has only rarely, for example, addressed with any frankness her own status as an Iranian living, from the age of 14, in Germany.) Since the late 1990s, her art has reflected upon architecture's relegation of women and gay men to the restricted field of interior design; on the return of the repressed human body in the history of minimalist sculpture; and on modes of gallery display as deliberate or unthought ideologies. Most of this work – excepting a handful of photographs or, rather, works that include photographs – has involved the elaboration of a sculptural vocabulary that is tense, erudite, austere and bodily.



Nairy Baghramian, *Stay Downers (Nerd)*, 2016, polyurethane, 144 x 125 x 55 cm. Courtesy: Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/London/Paris, kurimanzutto, Mexico City; photograph: Timo Ohler

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Consider the works Baghramian made in collaboration with, and in homage to, the Swiss designer Janette Laverrière for the Berlin Biennale in 2008. (Laverrière was then nearing her 100th birthday; when Baghramian first happened upon the sole monograph on her work in a New York bookstore, she assumed that the designer was long dead.) Titled *La Lampe dans l'horloge* (The Lamp in the Clock), the collaborative project centred on a number of Laverrière's mirrors and bookshelves, which were hung on white and teal walls designed by Baghramian and presented at the Schinkel Pavillon. Laverrière's designs had long invoked the history of radical politics, and these new works made reference, in titles and inscriptions, to the Paris Commune: the revolutionary government that briefly controlled the French capital in the spring of 1871. At the Neue Nationalgalerie, as part of the same Berlin Biennale, Baghramian's sculpture *La Colonne cassée* (1871) (The Broken Column [1871], 2008) was composed of two adjacent L-shaped metal structures – one inside, one outside of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's glass-walled museum – that coolly alluded the destruction of the Napoleonic column in the Place Vendôme in 1871. (This demolition took place, in part, at the instigation of Gustave Courbet, who was imprisoned as a result.)

Public monuments are immediately political – but interiors? In Baghramian's mind, and in her work, assuredly so. Among those few photographic works is an image exhibited behind glass, held in a bulky, cubic, concrete frame, which formed part of her 2006 installation *Es ist ausser Haus* (It is outside of the house) at Kunsthalle Basel. The colour photograph shows a plushly appointed room in a former palace of the last Shah of Iran – Baghramian having covertly taken the snapshot while on a tour of the building, which is now a museum. There is red velvet seating and a small wooden table in the foreground, on which sit what appear to be family photographs. Look closer: they are portraits of Konrad Adenauer, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Adolf Hitler and Mao Zedong: an instructive quartet with which the present Iranian regime appears still to identify. When it comes to interiors, one might also think of an early work such as *Halfway House* (1999), in which photographs of women in the titular Berlin institution – the artist has been working in a women's shelter since she was 18 – are mixed with stills from Agnès Varda's 1961 film *Cléo from 5 to 7*. The film's protagonist, a famous young singer, is in a state of anxious suspension, waiting to hear if she has a fatal illness. Baghramian added telephone booths to the interiors in which she staged her shots, thinking of the halfway house, formerly an aristocratic mansion, as a film-set of sorts – a stage on which unfolded lives that would never be storied or glamorous.



Nairy Baghramian, *Flat Spine*, 2016, installation view at S.M.A.K., Ghent, 2016. Courtesy: Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/London/Paris, kurimanzutto, Mexico City

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But there is another sort of interior in Baghramian's spiny and somatic sculpture: the human body, or something approaching it: a fleshy expansion of minimalist forms into unruly organics. The tendency is implicit in a work such as *Peeper* (2016): a steel cable with tensioning devices, strung between distant walls as if it has stretched its limbs to measure the space; or *Jupon réassemblé* (*Reconstructed Petticoat*, 2016), the snaking steel rods of which creep between gallery spaces. There are the smooth aluminium segments of *French Curve* (2014), and then its reworking, *Flat Spine* (2016), with its lacquered-wood and resin components arrayed in loose series on the floor, like detached and desiccated vertebrae. The globular masses of the series 'Stay Downers' (2016) and *Chin Up (First Fitting)* (2016), pastel-hued and vulnerable, tentatively rub up against one another, either on the floor or stranded high on gallery walls. These look like bodily organs or vestigial lumps of flesh, corporeal blind alleys and occasional shapes that make a sort of sense: a footless leg emerging delicately from the gallery wall.

With this last piece, *Grubby Urchin* (2016), and many others, one immediately notices the armature by which it is held in place: the fixings. Time and again, especially in Baghramian's recent work, there is an uneasy relationship between the organic or abject unformed form and the bars, mountings and brackets by which it is held in place. Some of these sculptures are uncannily literal in their reference to the body. *Retainer* (2013) is a curve of pale, silicon forms tethered by chromed struts: the whole – first installed at SculptureCenter, New York, in 2013 – has the look of a ramshackle orthodontic intervention into the space. As with *Peeper*, it is hard to know if the sculpture is holding the room together or slowly pushing the building apart. The dental reference – and the resulting sense that one may be inside a somewhat tense and troubled head – is more direct in *Scruff of the Neck* (2016), where the suspended plaster lozenges are a toothy white and the supporting structures made of polished metal rods and sharp aluminium brackets. In much of this sculpture, elements that might seem coolly minimalist on their own – the polished metal anatomy, the cast-resin forms and skins – turn monstrous the moment they are juxtaposed: chrome and aluminium have grown unruly excrescences or, conversely, smooth white curves have split to reveal the bones and musculature below.



Nairy Baghramian, *Privileged Points*, 2017, installation view at Skulptur Projekte Münster.
Courtesy: Skulptur Projekte Münster;
photograph: Henning Rogge

Such works have the air of unlikely or alien furniture, a set of designs to accommodate some speculative anatomy or bizarre human adaptation. In the context of 'Déformation

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Professionnelle', they are stripped of their organic forms – are they bodies or are they upholstery? – and left as metal structures only, still attached to the walls. *Scruff of the Neck (Stopgap)* (2016) is the skeleton of the same work as it appeared at Marian Goodman Gallery in London in 2016: the substrate without the landscape, or merely a sign or billboard without its support. It's one of several works of Baghramian's that directly points to the conventions of gallery display and the unobtrusive forms and technical materials that, in part, determine where a viewer looks and how he or she moves in the gallery. *Privileged Points (Fellow)* (2016) revisits with negative marble plaster casts an earlier work, *Privileged Points* (2011): a series of thin, curved rods of metal that adhere to the gallery walls, denoting where a work might be placed to best – that is, most authoritative – effect.

At *Skulptur Projekte Münster* this summer, Baghramian installed vastly expanded versions of *Privileged Points* at a baroque palace, the *Erbdrostenhof*. The lacquered bronze structures, with their huge dried drips of paint, here mark the place where a monumental sculpture might be shown – which is to say that Baghramian's are something else altogether. In fact, they compose a laconic response to Richard Serra's *Trunk*, which was also installed at the *Erbdrostenhof* in 1987 and blocked the entrance to the palace's courtyard in the very same way that one of Baghramian's objects now does, 30 years later. The latter work seems to say: here is a monument that will last a mere season (the 100-day duration of *Skulptur Projekte Münster*), a sculpture that is no more than a mark, a tentative indication of where a work might live. They are of a piece with Baghramian's rigorous refusal of monumentalism, or the calm consolations of minimalism, even as she makes sculptures that have all the heft and self-presence of those tendencies. As ever in her work, the surfaces or edges of these edifices are stopgaps for fraying anxieties at the levels of politics and the history of art and design – their clean lines, on close inspection, will turn out to be made of string.

Nairy Baghramian is an Isfahan-born artist based in Berlin, Germany. This year, her work has been included in *documenta 14* (Athens, Greece, and Kassel, Germany), and *Skulptur Projekte Münster*, Germany, and she has had solo shows at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, USA; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA; and National Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark.