

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

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Nairy Baghramian

by Olivia Sand (May 2021)

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NAIRY BAGHRAMIAN

by Olivia Sand

For a long time, sculpture has been a medium primarily defined by weight, volume, surface, scale, texture and mass, amongst other things. To consider additional parameters coming into play – and being the driving force of the creative process – is a rather recent development in sculpture. Nairy Baghramian (b 1971 in Iran) follows this new mindset, as she is determined to keep challenging our approach to this medium, as well as looking at other artistic disciplines, before integrating some of these features into her practice. A defining aspect, for example, is to be found in dance: when observing the human body moving on stage, it can perform countless poses that although seemingly unstable, nevertheless keep their balance. Why should such equilibrium not be within reach when dealing with the complexity of a sculpture?

As some artists paint, write, sing, or dance to express themselves, and to address issues of their time, Nairy Baghramian does this with sculpture, making us look at the possibilities of the medium from a different perspective. Currently based in Berlin, she is an artist bringing meaning to every aspect of her practice, from the selection of materials to the way the piece is mounted, entitled, and ultimately installed. As the following conversation emphasises, Baghramian pursues her leitmotif: to challenge and even disorient the viewer, to take the medium of sculpture where it does not fulfil expectations.

Asian Art Newspaper: You took a variety of diverse subjects during your studies ranging from art history to theatre, cinema, dance, and architecture. Ultimately, what made you lean towards sculpture?

Nairy Baghramian: In 1984, I fled Iran as a teenager and arrived in Berlin before the wall came down. Despite the pressure and urgency, it was fascinating to deal with a new language. In addition, I felt very drawn to the intense theatre and dance scene in the city, where

impressive figures such as Heiner Müller (1929–1995), Einar Schleef (1944–2001), Yvonne Rainer (b 1934), Merce Cunningham (1919–2009), and later Michael Clark (b 1962) and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker (b 1960) were performing. As a film aficionado, I absorbed films by Paradschanow (1924–1990), Tarkowski (1932–1986), Kiarostami (1940–2016), Forough Faroukzad (1934–1967) and Kurosawa (1910–1998), followed by German-language movies directed



Nairy Baghramian, Clark Institute, Williamstown, US. Photo: Tucker Blair

NEWS IN BRIEF

released a joint-statement in March calling for the country's National Assembly to 'immediately amend in-kind tax payment laws'.

Described by the group as a unique opportunity for the Korean public to enjoy these masterpieces, the group believes that housing Lee's collection in domestic arts institutions will also elevate the status of the country's museums. Lee's collection of Korean antiques, including 30 deemed as National Treasures by the South Korean government, will likely be donated to institutions such as Seoul's National Museum of Korea, due to a law that prohibits the overseas sale of domestically produced antiques. The family's decision regarding the collection's fate will be announced in due course.

MORI ART MUSEUM REOPENS

The Mori Art Museum has reopened at the end of April, after three months of renovations. To make the museum more convenient to visit, while helping to prevent the spread of Covid-19, they are introducing a new ticketing system involving online ticket purchase and QR code verification. Admission pricing has also been updated, with new prices for Saturdays, Sundays and holidays, and for advance purchasing online.

To mark the reopening of the museum exhibition, a new exhibition has been organised: *Another Energy: Power to Continue Challenging – 16 Women Artists from*

Around the World. The exhibition features powerful works by women artists from across the globe ranging in age from 71 to 105, with individual careers spanning more than 50 years and has been curated by the Director of the museum Kataoka Mami and Martin Germann, an independent curator. More information on www.mori.art.museum.

DECCANI PAINTING, HYDERABAD

To complement the article on Deccan art on page 12 and 13 of this issue, there is a presentation entitled *Rocks in the Frame!*, which is a conversation on rocks in Deccani art by Navina Haidar Haykel and Kathleen James-Chakraborty with the moderator Abbeer Gupta. It discusses the Deccani landscape and its importance in regional art and in a wider concept, such as in Chinese and Persian art, and its representation in the great epics. The video, *Rocks in a Frame!*, explores artistic encounters with Deccani rocks, mountains and landscapes. It can be found here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bl9eNoviptg>. For more information on this project for Hyderabad visit www.otherkohinoors.com.

TASWEER PHOTO FESTIVAL, QATAR

The first edition of this photographic festival runs until 30 May in Qatar. The festival's mission is to amplify diverse photographic practices and

dialogues, and to support the creative growth of photographers based in the Western Asia and North Africa (WANA) region. Running for two months, the Tasweer festival present broad programme of exhibitions, awards, commissions, collaborations, presentations, and workshops.

The biennial event, which is led by director Khalifa Ahmad Al Obaidly and artistic director Charlotte Cotton, includes three exhibitions dedicated to global photographers and image makers. For more information on the exhibitions and surround cultural events, visit www.tasweer.qa.

THE HIRSHHORN GARDEN PROJECT AND SUGIMOTO

Hiroshi Sugimoto has been tasked to create a design for a complete renovation of the Hirshhorn Museum's sunken sculpture garden. The artist had already transformed the museum's lobby and coffee shop in 2018. In late March this year, the museum announced today the completion of a sixth public consultation meeting for the revitalisation of the area. The proposed design will be the first comprehensive update to Gordon Bunshaft's 1974 campus since landscape architect Lester Collins' modifications to the Sculpture Garden in 1981, adding much-needed infrastructure repairs in addition to improvements to visitor amenities such as shade and seating. The date of a seventh public

meeting, during which the public will be invited to view a mock-up of the proposed stacked stone, will be announced soon. A final design is expected to be submitted by the Smithsonian to the NCPC and the CFA for approval this year.

More information on the project and additional resources can be found at <https://hirshhorn.si.edu/sculpture-garden-revitalization/>.

UBUD WRITERS AND READERS FESTIVAL INDONESIA

It has been announced that Ubud Writers & Readers Festival returns for its 18th year, from 8 to 17 October 2021, online and on-site. Drawn from a Balinese-Hindu philosophy, *Mulat Sarira* (interpreted in English as Self-Reflection) is the spiritual principle of examining one's actions, thoughts, and values to ultimately build the deepest sense of self-understanding and inter-connectedness in pursuit of Dharma, the Truth. The Festival will explore self-reflection, cultural introspection, and human rights: examining who we are, what unites and divides us, and what drives our actions. Along with the theme, UWRF also returns to the artwork created by an acclaimed Balinese artist Teja Astawa. His distinctive traditional Kamasan style art represents human stories that are told in classic and bold natural settings. For more information, visit <https://www.ubudwritersfestival.com/about/>.

by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945–1982) and Michael Haneke (b 1942), but also productions by John Cassavates (1929–1989) with Gena Rowlands (b 1930). The writings by Frieda Gräfe (1934–2002) fundamentally shaped my broader understanding, as well as the blending of disciplines such as film, theatre, dance, painting, performance, and sculpture. Language opened up to me as a tool and I enjoyed the fact that after a performance in the theatre, everything was suddenly gone. I liked that radical temporal fusion of theatrical negotiations on stage and its literally complete disappearance afterwards. I liked this ephemeral element, too.

With regards to sculpture, an exhibition in a small institution in Berlin two decades ago proved to be significant. The works in the exhibition were strictly text based, evidently carrying out political issues with a notable absence of painting, or sculpture. Aware of the historical and hierarchical weight of those two mediums, I kept wondering, in the context of this exhibition, why the political aspect in sculpture or painting was erased? In my opinion, there was something problematic about sculpture and I was affected by it: I wanted to know what it was, as perhaps there was something unwieldy hidden in it, undefined, maybe even an interest in the gap in class, or in the allocation of a hierarchy between genres of art. Maybe I was also drawn to sculpture, at that time, because it was three-dimensional, allowing me to circle it and look at things from different perspectives. In the end, it requires you to look at things from a different angle, thinking two or three times about the same thing, it is about not being safe in your own observations and their historically unchallenged allocations. The works and their reading should always be in flux – as we all are, too.

AAN: When you started out as an artist, did you feel something was missing in sculpture, or did you have the desire to communicate a message through sculpture?

NB: Back then, the contemporary visual art scene in Berlin was quite manageable and, at that time, hardly any art was produced here. Rather, it was a very political environment that was primarily defined by language and content. That attracted me, but the more I became involved in the visual arts, the more I was under the impression that both painting and sculpture were sometimes stigmatised within that environment. That provoked me and



Maintainers (H), 2019, cast aluminium, painted aluminium, cork, Styrofoam, pigmented paraffin wax, 235 x 410 x 280 cm., courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: Cathy Carver

also triggered my curiosity. It sparked the question as to what extent sculpture and form could continue shaping socio-political discourses. The fact that sculpture was frowned upon and treated like an outsider in the schoolyard made it even more exciting for me.

AAN: Your work is primarily based on the human body. What draws you to this specific physicality rather than a random shape taken from nature or your surroundings?

NB: To me, the body is also a random shape. It cannot be isolated from the context in which it moves and through which it is being shaped. If you are questioning the socio-political or the gender discourse, there is no getting around the body. I do not see the random shape of something being opposed to the body as a complex thing. Therefore, the shift between these two is important. It is like a dialogue that has to happen.

AAN: Fragility and instability are key aspects of your work. What intrigues you in these concepts?

NB: Not questioning stability always puzzles me. When it comes to political cohesion in society, I am in

favour of an attitude that is not too rigid, at the risk of being more fragile and unstable. This balancing act gives me the freedom, but also the obligation, to look at things closely, avoiding the static. From that considered position, I can look to the centre, allowing me to define what the centre actually means. It has nothing to do with this cliché of overestimating the idea of instability as a position that is so interesting. It is about allowing yourself to know where the periphery is, all the more so as the distance does not exist without the periphery. Therefore, I am not obsessed with the beauty of instability. I am just taking it as something that is there. That, of course, also leads me to think about what stability is – and who is occupying the centre?

AAN: As per its definition, art carries an aesthetic aspect. Is beauty an important factor in your work, or is the priority to challenge or even disorient the viewer without fulfilling expectations?

NB: Lulling and seducing the viewer with beauty is clearly not what I am striving for. I do not see the viewer as an object that I either want to hold on to, or that I want to educate.

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For me, it is more about reinforcing the viewer as a subject, free to evaluate things by themselves, or simply to walk past them. As a result, back in 2008, I called one of my first solo exhibitions *Walker's Day Off*. In the show, I primarily worked with the supposed emptiness of the transitions between rooms, thus affecting the viewer's subsequent expectations. To some viewers it was irritating, but I always felt more attracted to the periphery than the centre. As in most of my solo exhibitions, I ended the walkthrough of the exhibition with a photo entitled *The Conceptual Artist's Smoking Head*, alluding to the fact that, for a moment, I wanted to relieve the viewer of the explanation of conceptual art. In my opinion, art is not here to be loved: it is about disorienting, taking people's minds to somewhere else. Basically, art is as beautiful – and as ugly – as everything else.

AAN: Your work represents a temporary state: the pieces almost feel like a still image, in slow motion in our fast-paced world. Do you agree?

NB: What interests me is the moment between two moments, which I neither perceive as static, or as movement. Perhaps, it has more to do with an ambiguous thought.

AAN: As to that aspect, the dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer (b 1934) was an important figure in conjunction to your work. Why?

More specifically, what correlations did you establish between dance and sculpture?

NB: I take the apparent simplicity of Yvonne Rainer's movements as a beneficial complication. The mind is a muscle. I was in love with her work, which revealed both the complexity and the simplicity of the body. She made me aware that every simple gesture, every simple idea, had its own complexity. That perhaps takes us back to the earlier question, why the human body? Simply because I thought random forms are as complex as the complex idea of the human body. Bringing these two extremes together was one of the things I learned from Yvonne Rainer. In addition, she raised many questions going beyond the formal issues of dance to deal with social and socio-political issues on the stage. All these issues were intertwined and you could not separate them anymore. Her approach echoed my early interest in questions related to power and social matters among others.

AAN: Another important figure for you was the interior designer Janette Laverrière (1909–2011). What impact did she have?

NB: Janette was a dear friend and she once referred to us as 'sisters in creation'. From the time I had my first solo show in 2004, I have often shared my solo exhibitions with artist friends. The invitation can create realities that address issues such as gender or media inequalities. I wanted to avoid sharing direct historical positions in my exhibitions or using them as references so as not to potentially take them over.

The direct and equal dialogue with an artist as counterpart is very important to me. In Janette's case, I shared several exhibition projects with her during her lifetime. I was fascinated by her story and indomitable political stance as the 'grande dame' of French design, but above all, by her irrepressible creative urge as well as the power and contradictions of her objects.

Continued on page 4



Side Leaps, zinc coated metal, Plexiglas, 5 gouache on paper, 118 x 435.6 x 27.3 cm, courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: Cathy Carver



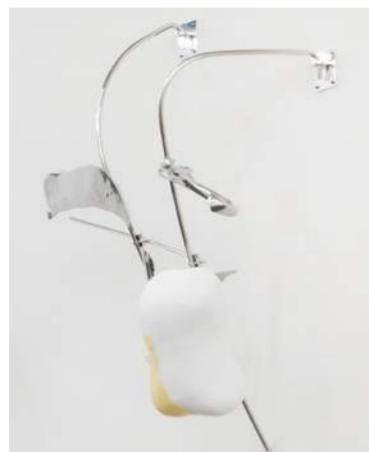
Staydowners, installation view Deformation Professionnelle Walker Art Center, 2017, courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: Timo Ohler

This is best exemplified by the piece entitled *Work Desk of an Ambassador's Wife*, my last project with Janette, shown in 2019 at Marian Goodman in New York. The titles she gave to her pieces already created an impact: she fully realised that calling her table *Work Desk of an Ambassador's Wife* would make it hard to sell, but she never changed it. Indirectly, Janette also shaped my thinking about art as I realised that a creation did not necessarily have to be successful in order to be allowed into this world. It has its own right to exist. That takes me to the idea of the centre, emphasising that not only the centre is allowed to survive. All these elements may explain why I was so fascinated by her prototypes. I will continue having dialogues with artists in the future, and Janette was not the last.

AAN: Do you have any specific plans for future collaborations?

NB: I hope they can take place next year in Vienna, or Munich, as exhibitions are scheduled at the Secession and Haus der Kunst. It would be a wonderful occasion in Vienna, as the Secession was founded by a group of artists. When I am working with other artists, it is a very open discussion that also brings up some contradictions. As I indicated earlier, I am not that interested in pairing my own work with historical works – that is best left to art historians and curators.

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Scruff of the Neck (UL 11, F), 2016, cast and polished aluminium, polished aluminium rods, plaster, beeswax and rubber, 257.8 x 226.1 x 116.8 cm, courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: Thierry Bal

To me, it is more urgent and challenging to have an open conversation with our own generation, with our own time.

AAN: Space is a continuation of your practice, emphasising the importance of the context. Considering your interest in architecture, how do you go about apprehending space?

NB: I would describe my handling of the exhibition space as site responsive, as opposed to site specific, which is often used in an inflationist way, considering how consistently the conceptual artist Michael Asher (1943-2012) interpreted this term. If I am invited to an exhibition, I do not limit my research to the architectural features of the exhibition space, but also try to bring in the larger context. The surroundings keep suggesting materials to me; that was the case with my latest work, *Misfits*, for my exhibition in Milan, where I relied on marble and cast aluminium. If you consider the body as socio-political, it is no different with material and colour. The desert is not a blank slate either.

More specifically, I am not just interested in the architectural site, the walls and the room, or the three-dimensional idea of the room. It also involves the travelling to places and thinking about the materials I am using. Although the concept of my upcoming exhibitions in Milan and in Sardinia is very similar, the

surroundings and the history of both places are radically different. When I travelled to Sardinia to see the Nivola Museum, I noticed that the whole island was based on architecture from the 1970s with many unfinished concrete buildings. As there was insufficient funding at the time, the construction of all these concrete buildings, which symbolised the promise of a new future, was frozen and the buildings left half-finished. Therefore, you are not only confronted with the site of the museum, but it also makes you reflect upon what materials are on the island. Consequently, it is not only the site, the history of the museum, or the history of the exhibitions that took place there, but it is more about taking into account multitude of things that are important when you enter a space, a site, or a location.

AAN: Your work seems at the same time very real but also very abstract. How do you see it?

NB: My relationship to such categorisations is ambivalent. However, at the same time, I like to evolve in them and with them. In addition, I am in favour of the artist helping define such historical demarcations instead of accepting them without resistance.

AAN: You had a travelling exhibition at SMAK in Ghent and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where instead of a retrospective, you decided on revisiting previous pieces. How did you plan and create these shows?

NB: A retrospective is always a template and an invitation to summarise and dare to look back. I thought these exhibitions would be a good opportunity to take part in this observation of myself. Indeed, I did not show any previous works, but took them as the starting point for new works, confronting them with the changed reality. In addition, I still have the feeling that I am far too young for an historic outlook!

AAN: How did the museums react to your decision?

NB: At the beginning, it was hard to discuss this topic with institutions because they kept wondering why, as an artist, I questioned the idea of a retrospective instead of embracing it. But in the end, we began to share the same interest that art had to move on. To me, the word 'retrospective' in itself was interesting, as you can think retrospectively about something and use it productively for your own practice. Looking back at my own works, I started re-questioning them, squeezing them differently. In my case, the retrospective was an excellent tool to consider what happens when thinking about a work retrospectively, without presenting it in a retrospective way. I was glad I had the opportunity to take my own sculptures towards something new, moving them conceptually upside down, to left and right, to work with them, letting them move, and not represent them.

AAN: You also have several upcoming exhibitions planned in Milan, Paris, and Sardinia. Can you briefly speak about them?

NB: The exhibitions are at Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Milan, Marian Goodman Gallery in Paris, and the Nivola Museum in Sardinia. They are planned for spring and summer 2021 and belong together thematically and all carry the term 'Misfits' in their title. Misfits began with the specific urban setting of the

Galleria d'Arte Moderna, a garden open to adults, but only when accompanied by children. A series of large-scale sculptures inhabit both the museum's interior and exterior spaces, combining the idea of play with a reflection on the aesthetic experience of inadequacy and imperfection. Therefore, dealing with the different exhibition contexts, I used marble in Milan for the sculptures on the institution's terrace, while in Sardinia I rely on simple concrete for the work in the outside space, involving the complex material experience of the unfinished architectural building projects in the region. In the gallery in Paris, the works are shown untidily indoors and, accordingly, I used less formal materials such as wood.

AAN: Beyond the projects you mentioned, do you have any other future projects you can share?

NB: As I mentioned, there is the exhibition at the Secession in Vienna. For 2022, planned exhibitions include the Haus der Kunst in Munich, the Carré d'Art in Nîmes and the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. Looking back, the pandemic has actually been a time for me to rework things, although I believe a work of art should not be in the hands of the artist for too long, as it never finishes.

AAN: In today's challenging times, do you feel the artist has a responsibility?

NB: For me, making art is, per se, a political and responsible act. Without art, we would be dealing with an impoverished society.

AAN: As an artist you seem to prefer to be discreet and private. Is that a deliberate choice?

NB: I speak out when I think there is need for it, but presently with the importance of Zoom to experience shows (as most physical exhibitions have been cancelled or postponed), the artist is in the spotlight again, which, in a way, makes their voice seem as if it is occupying almost too



Beliebte Stellen (Privileged Points), 2017, bronze, paint, dimensions variable, courtesy the artist, MUDAM Luxembourg, and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: Remi Villagi



Portrait (The concept-artist Smoking Head, Stand-In), 2016, Baryte b/w print (framed), 121.5 x 193 x 5.5 cm, edition 1 of 1, 1 AP, courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: Timo Ohler

much space. Under these circumstances, I am longing for a balance that implicates production and inspiration, which is in relation with others, experiencing exhibitions in real time and space, sharing thoughts – and not being left behind in a virtual bubble for too long. With the artist being over-present, and hearing yourself talking (as an artist), there seems to be something poisonous about it, as you can take yourself too seriously. You almost end up finding yourself

in a video by Bruce Nauman (b 1941), left with the paranoia of yourself in that box. Now, when I am looking at myself, it appears that Bruce Nauman's idea of that question is becoming a reality for many of us.

• Nairy Baghramian's work is on view at the Fondazione Furla and GAM - Galleria d'Arte Moderna, in Milan, May 26 - September 26, 2021 as well as at Galerie Marian Goodman in Paris, June 5 - July 24, 2021



La lampe d'Horloge by Nairy Baghramian and Janette Laverrière, 2008, brass, wood, painted wood, stained wood, mirrors, colored glass, varnished rosewood, painted rosewood, lacquer, metal lid, multiplies, ink on vellum, pencil on vellum, gouache on vellum, zinc coated metal, Plexiglas, courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: Cathy Carver



WATCH
Nairy Baghramian discuss her work