

ASPEN ART MUSEUM

With: Nairy Baghramian, Kerstin Brätsch, Allison Katz & Florian Krewer



SUMMER 2023 EDITION



Exhibitions

Nairy Baghramian, the 2023 ArtCrush Artist Honoree, stages a major solo exhibition at the Aspen Art Museum this summer. Amelia Stein explores Baghramian's practice of "grouping" as a way to give form to sculptures, collaborations and friendships.

LEVITY AND GRAVITY

Opposite
Nairy Baghramian
in her studio in Berlin,
May 2023

Photography
Christian Werner

Exhibitions



Every part has a role to play in Nairy Baghramian's work. Although she is very much a sculptor, a recent recipient of both the prestigious Nasher Prize and the Metropolitan Museum in New York's 2023 facade commission, she is deeply attuned to performance and thinks in groupings, even within a single work. Showing contingency as well as contradiction is part of her method. This is apparent in the construction of the works—in her various techniques of casting, molding, carving and joining, and in her formal language of bends, droops, arcs and blobs. It's also there, sometimes indirectly, in the titling of her works or exhibitions, which always in some way anticipate and respond to the conditions of their setting and the dynamic unraveling of perspective an audience brings.

"Grouping" is Baghramian's chosen word. She prefers it to "series" or "collaboration"—no forced harmony. A grouping can be an ongoing body of work, like the large, colorful polyurethane and silicone *Sitzengeliebene/ Stay Downers* (2016-), or a selection of works for a specific exhibition. It can also describe Baghramian's relationships with other artists, including the interior designer Janette Laverrière, the contemporary choreographer Maria Hassabi, the midcentury architect Carlo Mollino, or the modernist writer Jane Bowles. Their work might appear in or alongside Baghramian's own work—in her forms or titles, or when she turns a solo into a group show.

In the case of Laverrière, Baghramian found what is still the only monograph of her work in a bookshop in New York in 2007. In it was a photograph of Laverrière's work, *Entre Deux Actes: Loge de Comédienne—Between Two Acts: An Actress's Dressing Room*, a collection of furniture she presented at a design salon in Paris in 1947, designed for her friend, a professional singer, who had suddenly stopped performing, left Paris altogether, and disappeared. After learning that Laverrière was still alive and living in Paris at the age of 98, Baghramian traveled to meet her. The two began an intense and productive dialogue that evolved into ideas for new work, and when Baghramian was asked to do an exhibition at the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden in Germany, she invited

Laverrière to restage *Entre Deux Actes*. She later called their partnership a "co-existence".

The new version of *Entre Deux Actes II—Loge des Comédiennes* (2009) was an installation by way of impression. Each original piece was either reduced to its bare structure or cursorily exaggerated like shapes in a dream. The colors were inverted and shadows solidified, using logics of memory and afterimage. The reimagined work felt improvisational and playful: a tiger rug was replaced by a chalk outline.

Baghramian's work is never funny *ha-ha*, but it has an incredible way with irony, sharp in the way that history is—tragedy not excluded. In the original *Entre Deux Actes*, Laverrière gives her friend one more appearance, a private moment of space and time, in the form of an ensemble. In the restaged work, there's still no body there. But the missing actress re-finds her audience in a new, uneasy context, and Laverrière and Baghramian work up complicated dynamics of disappearance and presence with a group of elements as forms of life.

How can a work be not like itself? I'm trying to identify some irreducible element of Baghramian's practice that is to do with relationships. She herself has titled more than one exhibition *ménage*. At Performa 19 in New York, Baghramian staged *Entre Deux Actes (Ménage à Quatre)* (2019) for which she installed the actress's reimagined quarters along with Mollino's erotic Polaroids, and a durational work by Hassabi where the dancers got very close but never touched. Their co-existence relied on a micron of autonomy. The dictionary definition of *ménage* is household, which also says a lot about desire and sublimation, about split infinitives and trust.

That there is never just one body in Baghramian's work is maybe clear by now. She often uses the example of doing away with the "to-scale" individual used in architectural models. Harder to account for is that there's every body and there's no body. Even when a work—bent over in sections of mottled pink and white marble reinforced by cast stainless steel—is called *Knee and Elbow* (2020), Baghramian's approach to the body is figural rather than figurative: about impressions

and exchanges. Her complex bargains of levity and gravity, her insertion of multiple, contradictory vantages, and the almost animistic drive her work seems to have toward formal evolution, are always in service of the subtle body of sculpture rather than the human body of mind and heart.

Baghramian is conscious of display, always bringing it into the work. Frames, struts, stands or other supportive or interruptive apparatuses are often part of the grouping of a work. Sometimes the rigid or sharp or generally unyielding metal that otherwise plays a remedial role is left alone to make a structure, as in *Scruff of the Neck* (2016): bare, arcing lines of polished aluminum or steel intersect with one another and the wall. They leave the mind nowhere to hide. Except in the titles, which are also lacerating in some instinctual way.

This feels important to spell out because of how reflexively and easily the modes and methods of collectivity in Baghramian's practice can get softened. What looks organic is really hard, cast silicone. Baghramian works with context, not influence. She isn't interested in collecting what she likes. She is interested in figuring difference, in making work that edges ever closer to what sculpture really is for her—a way of putting things together heterogeneously—somewhere between the audience and the object.

This third body again. I can only try to make a shape around it. Both knotted ends of *Treat (Marrowbone)* (2016), a large wax bone, feel like fists approaching my solar plexus. The *Portraits* (2016), a grouping of framed C-prints or Baryte prints of billowing smokestacks, subtitled: *The concept-artist smoking head, Stand-In*, make "me" neither here nor there. All of these are gathered together again for "Jupon de Corps" at the Aspen Art Museum—another reconfiguration or working through of iteration, proximity, timeliness and boundaries. The universe is expanding—meaning the distance between things or the scale of space is growing. Baghramian's universe expands via the innovative and complex ways she keeps the pieces as close as possible while holding them apart.

In her first co-existence with Laverrière, *La Lampe dans l'Horloge* (2008), or *The Lamp in the Clock*, named for the Surrealist writer André Breton, Baghramian made a "room" of free-standing colorful walls for Laverrière's iconographic mirror sculptures, or "useless objects," inside Berlin's Schinkel Pavillon. The "useless objects" were the designer's last works—homages to her creative and political heroes. The walls showed the works and kept them hidden, to an extent. Baghramian was dealing with how to strike a concomitance or equality of output and energy in a cross-generational partnership, against the still-pervasive trend of recuperating "lost" practitioners in contemporary art. When she remade a version of the installation within *Work Desk for the Ambassador's Wife* (2019), a posthumous show with Laverrière at Marian Goodman, she redesigned (dissolved) the walls in Plexiglass. It was still about interiority, but more in the way that air is interior to the legs of a table.

Baghramian brings systems of analysis to work in order to change her own structures. It might be too much to call this infrastructural. So I will say

instead that she shows the mechanics of work. *Work Desk for the Ambassador's Wife* included maquettes and drawings by Baghramian that were never meant to be made into sculptures. In *Modèle vivant* (2022) at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Baghramian seemed to wonder what artwork might look like from an archaeological perspective—that is, dug up after it has become extinct. New work—including enormous, fossil- or dental mold-like impressions on elaborate dark blue, green and violet powder-coated metal stands, and geometric aluminum panels suspended from the ceiling on polished stainless-steel poles, with other, coarser aluminum elements and C-prints of flies on animal skins attached—were all arranged around works from the museum's collection. If the job of Baghramian's sculpture was in some ways to be analogy, the historical works were asked to sincerely and somewhat anachronistically model how time changes shape.

Life models. Life models. Imagine being responsible for making—or *being*—a model of life. Baghramian was intending something, I think, about artistic process and labor. How much can I rely on the artwork, or figure of the artist? What will she give me to help me understand? A recurring figure in the work since 2008, perhaps a counterpart to Laverrière's actress, is the male escort, as in the exhibition, *The Walker's Day Off* (2008) at the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden. He needs structural support too; he bears the weight of our demand for charm and novelty. Beauty, a currency in every sense, is a complicated part of his job.

Baghramian's studio is in an industrial part of Berlin—something she does not want to fetishize. But it is where the actual mechanics are. When she first moved to the city with her family from Iran in the mid-1980s, it was customary for new buildings to receive colloquial nicknames, like the Washing Machine or the Oyster. This is something Baghramian thinks about: the shortest distance from alien to understanding, the economy of language and images, the way form enters into circulation through experience. Her sculptures must contend with the world they inhabit, one obsessed with legibility and output. How do works so heavy and in so abstract a language stay tenable; how do they live a life rather than only gesture at one?

I really believe that form and its challenges are fundamental, and I think Baghramian does too. Form is the organization of meaning; it is nimble and living. Baghramian's ability is in part to leverage the medium of sculpture in circulating formal ideas. As she wrote in *Frieze Masters* magazine in 2018, "My view on the present through the lens of the past is diverted by meandering around my surroundings and my own history". The works address the anxiety and frustration and joy of universality as well as subjectivity. They will remain possible. They and I and she and all of it are just another part.

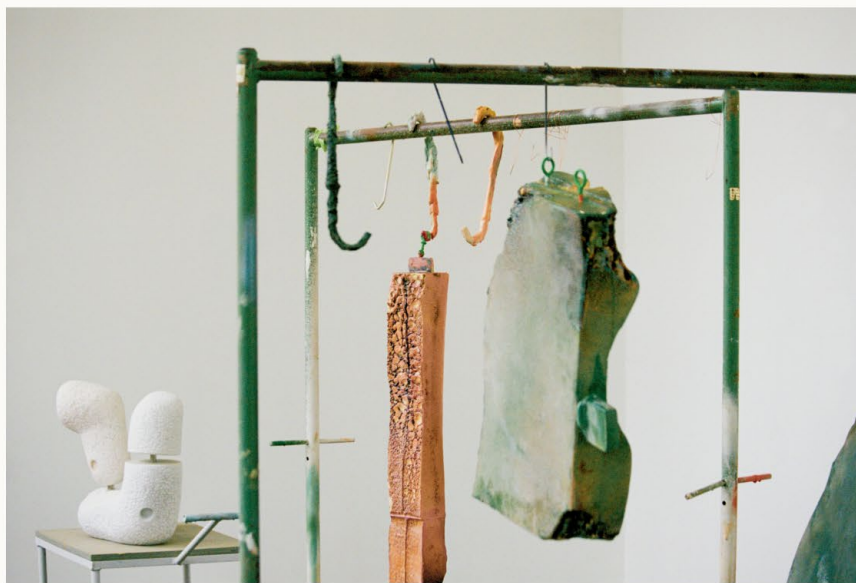
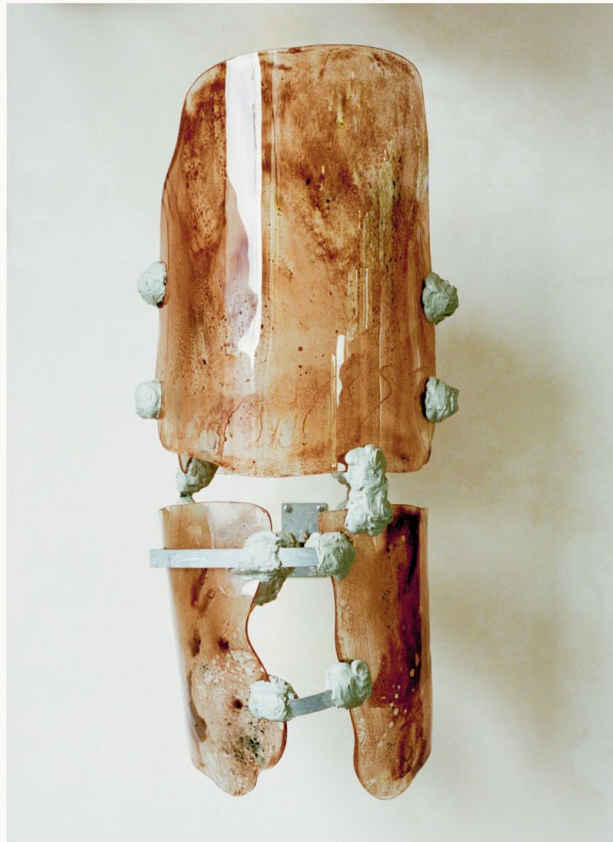
Amelia Stein is a writer, editor and teacher. She lives in London, UK.

Above
Nairy Baghramian
working on the
exhibition *Modèle
vivant* in her studio
in Berlin, May 2022

Opposite, top
Nairy Baghramian,
Duivander, 2018

Opposite, bottom
Nairy Baghramian's
studio in Berlin,
May 2022

Nairy Baghramian's
exhibition "Jupon
de Corps" runs from
June 22 to October 22,
2022. More information
about the exhibition
and related events
can be found online at
aspenartmuseum.org



Exhibitions

Nairy Baghramian's work occupies a nexus of relationships, cooperations and dialogues with designers, curators and fellow artists. Susanne Titz, Paulina Olowska, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Charles Aubin talk to Laura McLean-Ferris about how some of Baghramian's past projects manifest this spirit of connectivity.

SPATIAL RELATIONS

Exhibitions



Susanne Titz
Director, Museum Abteiberg,
Mönchengladbach, Germany

I first saw Nairy's work when she had an amazing installation titled *Fourth Wall/Two Female Protagonists* (2005) as part of her solo show at Galerie Nagel Draxler in Cologne, Germany, that year. I realized she was thinking about the way a work can be both art and display as well. This interested me because I felt she was producing the entire space, as both artist and curator—an approach that connects to the Museum Abteiberg's history. Artists collaborated with Johannes Cladders during his directorship here (1967–85), as a way of thinking about the institution, thinking about the role of art in the public sphere.

When I invited her for a solo exhibition, Nairy responded that it would be much better to work in a constellation. The show we eventually planned, "Open Dress" (2014–15), with Lukas Duwenhögger, Lutz Bacher and Danh Võ, was more like a play: the museum was the stage, and it happened in four rehearsals. I like the term "rehearsal" because every part of the exhibition was in a state of flow. It was not set, showing the audience: "This is it, this is the result". Instead the audience was invited to think about the possible reasons for what was there.

For the first rehearsal we hung Lukas Duwenhögger's paintings, which were rarely seen at that time, alongside other half-unwrapped works and crates. On the floor was Lutz Bacher's *Big Boy* (1992)—a work based

on a puppet used in therapy sessions with kids who have been abused and who are not able to speak about things—but which has been scaled up about ten times. There was a 15th century Portuguese Christ figure in Danh Võ's *Dirty Dancing* (2019) installation, and Nairy's table sculpture from *Formage de tête* (2011), which always reminds me of an autopsy table or a butcher's shop. Everything looked so rough and raw and so physical—very fleshy, in a way. For the subsequent rehearsals we produced a number of other scenes with the same objects.

I think when Nairy was working on "Open Dress" she was concerned with how artists were being controlled or defined by others and being put in a position where they couldn't define their own exhibitions. She was thinking of

Above:
Nairy Baghramian,
Vierte Wand Zwei Protagonistinnen, 2005.
Courtesy: Wilhelm
Schürmann Collection,
Herzogenrath;
photograph: Thor
Broederskiit

the public presentation of art as something that needs to be determined and argued for by the artists themselves. This chimed so closely with ideas I had about the rewriting of art history since 1960. At that time, artists were much better informed than the curators, art historians and critics, and in a way, they taught everybody to change the modes of exhibition and the terms of art production and art presentation. I think Nairy is an artist who always reflects all of this, while also presenting sculpture that is itself, formally, so autonomous, so seductive. Her work creates a discourse around objects and the sculptural process that she is undertaking.

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Exhibitions



Paulina Olowska
Artist

For a very long time, Nairy and I were always in conversation about our roles as women in art. We came from different backgrounds but we both had a sense of angst, and a desire to change the position of women. She was always inspirational to me in the radicality of her speech, and in the way she looked for answers through connecting to women artists from other generations. I'm a painter, while Nairy approaches things more from the point of view of sculpture: sculpture as a body, as a three-dimensional form. But we share a sense of narration, of building a story within a show. In the 2011 Venice Biennale I loved her presentation *Formage de tête*, in which

she worked with the idea of sculpture belonging to the kitchen. So there were tables, reflections, hooks. It reminded me of the film, *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989).

There is always a sense of a question or a proposal in her exhibitions: the role of the artist doesn't end at all when a work is made. For "Off Broadway" at the CCA Wattis Institute in San Francisco, she invited other artists to be part of a structure where works would come on and off the "stage". At that time I had been struggling to renovate a huge neon of a volleyball player on a building in Warsaw. Nairy asked me if I had any work about that, and we chose a neon that said *Dancing* (2007)—another piece I tried to renovate in Warsaw. It was a good choice because it is like a public

sculpture, so I felt it related to Nairy's work as well as the theme.

When I saw her installation *Scruff of the Neck* (2016) in a collection display at Tate Modern last year, it gave me shivers of pride because I really feel that every time, she moves the ancient subject of sculpture forward. She really grabs sculpture and connects it to the oddest things such as dentistry, dog bones, the tongue, skin, lips and so on. It seems to relate to appetite. I want to see her work more and more because every time she touches a new nerve of corporeal sensitivity.

Nairy is one of my muses. She's an absolute artist in a way, and I'm fascinated by watching her create work over the last 20 years and seeing her political engagement, her outspokenness and the way she really stands up for other

Above
Nairy Baghramian,
Scruff of the Neck
(LL 20/24 & LR 26/27/
28) 2016. Courtesy:
Tate, London

artists as well. She is also not afraid to "play with the boys". She can take on the big guys of sculpture like Claes Oldenburg and Franz West. There can only be one Franz West, right? Don't fuck with Oldenburg. But Nairy, she does it in her own way. And she's better.

Exhibitions



Hans Ulrich Obrist
Artistic Director, Serpentine Galleries, London

When I first met Nairy, she was doing a residency at Studio Voltaire in London, and I made a studio visit together with Julia Peyton-Jones. We were absolutely blown away by what we saw. Nairy told us about the fact that she had come out of performance and dance, and had started to almost break down choreography into sculptural elements. So her sculptures in that sense were always connected to the body and to prosthetics and fragments: that was something which very much struck me at the time.

I started doing studio visits when I was a teenager, and when I was 17, Fischli/Weiss sent me to see Rosemarie Trockel in Cologne, Germany. Rosemarie

was really happy that I was visiting younger artists, but she thought I should also visit more pioneering artists. And she particularly talked about the idea that many extraordinary women artists hadn't had enough visibility. She believed that I should always ask when visiting a city if there were pioneering artists whom I should visit.

So since then, I have applied the Rosemarie Trockel methodology, which also led us to make a studio visit with Phyllida Barlow, as many younger artists told us about her. The nanosecond that *Artforum's* end of the year issue arrives, I always go to the section where artists talk about other artists, because I love the idea of the artist's artist: the generosity of artists talking about other artists. And I always remember this tiny paragraph that Nairy wrote about

Phyllida's work. I thought it was fascinating, and that there was a real trans-generational dialogue, and so that was the initial prompt for us to do a two-person show with them at the Serpentine in 2010.

Nairy once told me that for her, sculpture should have the possibility to not fulfill expectations, and maybe sculpture could change what we expect from it somehow. We felt that both she and Phyllida were brilliantly fulfilling that in such different ways, and thought it would be interesting to combine them. There was some very interesting asymmetry about their approaches because obviously, if the work was too similar, I think there would be something slightly reductive. I always think that genealogy can be a problem.

Paradoxically, it reminds me of Alexis Pauline Gumbs's book on Sylvia Wynter, *Dub: Finding Ceremony* (2020). In it Gumbs

Above, left
Nairy Baghramian and Phyllida Barlow, *Nairy Baghramian and Phyllida Barlow, Nairy Baghramian and Phyllida Barlow, *Klassenspezifisch (Class Decisions)*, 2008, installation view, Serpentine Gallery, London, 2010.*

Above, right
Nairy Baghramian and Phyllida Barlow, *Nairy Baghramian and Phyllida Barlow, *Londoner Fürstener (London Bouncer)*, 2010, installation view, Serpentine Gallery, London, 2010.*

writes so beautifully about the fact that her relationship to Wynter is not one of genealogy. It's not like her work would be derived from hers genealogically, but that she is always thinking *with* Wynter. And that resonated with me a lot because that's what I have always done with Édouard Glissant. It's not a genealogy, it's a toolbox.

Nairy has always shared my conviction that we need to protest against forgetting. In this digital age, we can assume that information leads to more memory, and one can see this in her collaborations with Janette Laverrière, the extraordinary Swiss-French designer. So Nairy has always had in her practice that idea of talking about and working around artists from previous generations whom she admires and then connects to with her work.

The work has such incredible potential as public art, as we have seen in the last

couple of years. Each time we collaborate, for me, there is another window that opens into another dimension. Most recently, I saw in her studio an amazing body of drawings which I had no idea about. I just think there are probably so many facets to Nairy's work that we don't even know about yet. It has only just begun.

Charles Aublin
Senior Curator and Head of Publications, Performa, New York

A lot of Nairy's sculptures allude to the idea of a prosthetic, or extension, or replication of limbs and body parts. She thinks in a very direct, corporeal sense, and the materials she uses (wax, rubber, resin ...) often have a kind of tactile appeal. They make a direct call to the viewer in a physical way. During a studio visit back in 2018, Nairy told me about an installation that she had presented at Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Germany—a collaboration with the designer Janette Laverrière called *Entre Deux Actes II—Loge des Comédiennes*, which was a reconfiguration of one of Janette's designs from 1947, as an installation. It's a green room for a singer. At the time, when she told me about this project, I was simultaneously in conversation with a space on Fifth Avenue in New York about partnering for Performa. It's called 1014 now, but it was the old Goethe Institute building—an empty townhouse from 1907, facing the Met. I felt there was something to explore around its domestic aspect, and this is where the performance *Entre Deux Actes (Ménage à Quatre)* was eventually held.

What I think is very special about *Entre Deux Actes (Ménage à Quatre)* is the way that Nairy is a true collaborator. She has a studio practice that she keeps private, but she also often makes space for projects that are more open-ended in their relationship to other artists. The green room with Janette was done very respectfully. It was not Nairy as a visual artist taking over the legacy or what this older modernist designer represents. It was a conversation. Nairy created the conditions for a very mindful collaboration. In New York, she also included her collection of Carlo Mollino photographs in the installation. They're erotic images that the Italian architect and designer made in the 1960s, in secret, with a series of women who he would dress for the occasion in wigs and lingerie. These photoshoots were a performance for one, and that was something that Nairy was interested in. For Performa, we invited the choreographer Maria Hassabi to join in. Together, Nairy and Maria were very interested in seeing how you can mix up, or turn upside down, the quality of some of the spaces in the townhouse. So for instance, the parlor became Janette's green room, and the ballroom the site for Maria's very intimate duet—a space where you would usually expect to find group dances, social dances.

Every time I see a show by Nairy, I feel as if I learn something new about sculpture and what it means to be a sculptor, whether as I said, that is the relationship to the body, or the relationship to matter, materiality and processes. Also, something that I find unusual and very impressive in Nairy's work is that she does not really repeat herself, and yet you sense that her approach is consistent. Her engagement with sculpture, formally and conceptually, and her ability to push the limits of the medium makes her work unique.

Laura McLean-Ferris is a writer and curator. She lives in Turin, Italy.

Below
Nairy Baghramian and Maria Hassabi, with Janette Laverrière and Carlo Mollino, *Entre Deux Actes (Ménage à Quatre)*, 2019, installation view, Performa 19



Nairy Baghramian is this year's recipient of the Aspen Art Museum's Award for Art, which is awarded at the museum's annual ArtCrash Gala. For details of Aspen ArtWeek & the ArtCrash Gala please visit aspenartmuseum.org



Nairy Baghramian

Congratulations from all of us at kurimanzutto & Marian Goodman Gallery on receiving a solo exhibition and becoming the 2023 Artcrush Artist Honoree at Aspen Art Museum.

kurimanzutto

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY