sculpture

Productive Tension: A Conversation with Nairy Baghramian

By Michaël Amy (September/October 2026)

Se ployant (soufre), 2024. Cast aluminum, stainless steel, and bronze, 210 x 170 x 90 cm.
Installation view at Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino, Italy, 2024.

Nairy Baghramian's abstract, process-driven sculptures can be interpreted as solutions to problems that we might have trouble identifying. In many ways, the flexibility of her work reflects the trajectory of her life and her unusual education in art. An Iranian-born, German artist of Armenian descent, she had to reinvent herself after arriving in Berlin as a youth in 1984. She soon excelled at figuring things out, parsing her surroundings and observations into a rigorous, open-minded approach to art-making and inquiry.

Created in an improvisational manner, without preparatory studies and subject to adjustment and evolution, her works involve intuition and respond to their intended setting. Baghramian shuns prescribed meanings, leaving her work open-ended and vulnerable. Equally wary of perfection, she rejects any form of idealization; instead, as she says, she "prioritiz(es) the perspectives of children." A sense of play permeates her work, which also displays empathy and humor-additional survival skills. She draws sculptures, though never in preparation for sculpture, and likes handling the industrial materials that she prefers, which amounts to an ongoing learning process involving trial and error. In the words of one curator, Baghramian welcomes "doubt, indecision, and even failure."

Sculpture was traditionally about the body and its emotional makeup. Baghramian's abstracted forms, which do what our bodies do, take on our mortal shells indirectly. They convey attitudes. They can be erotic or abject. They perform, hang, lean, stretch, slouch, bend, sit, and lie down. They even acquire titles that reflect their actions as in the case of *Se ployant (soufre)* and *S'accrochant (encre),* two works from her 2024 exhibition "Modele vivant (Se ployant)," coined in French (a language with which she is less familiar) to keep things off-kilter and mysterious.

Taking the position of an outsider in her chosen field, Baghramian also bypasses the traditional division between statuary and relief sculpture. Her mixed-media works rarely act as we assume sculpture should do, sometimes lacking decorum and always defying expectations. Like some of her artistic predecessors, she frequently does away with base, plinth, and pedestal. Color matters as well. It is often subdued, as if washed or sucked out. She cites the Surrealist sculptors Hans Arp and Isamu Noguchi as influences. Their impact percolates through the lens of post-Minimalism, mixed in with a dash of Franz West and DIY, at times grungy, aesthetic tendencies (as celebrated in "Unmonumental" at the New Museum in 2007-08).

The abstract, biomorphic forms that Baghramian produces often look eroded, fragile like our bodies, which age and change, thereby evoking the ravages of time. Erosion reduces everything to residue, and yet, Baghramian welcomes impermanence, accepting the eventual breakdown of her work.

S'accrochant (encre), 2024. Cast aluminum, aluminum, stainless steel, painted steel, and c-print, 210 x 170 x 90 cm.

Michaël Amy: The 1979 triumph of the mullahs in your native Iran brought about a repression of cultural expression. Did your espousal of culture, following your arrival in Berlin in 1984, amount to an act of political rebellion and healing?

Nairy Baghramian: It is interesting—and perhaps, given the zeitgeist, somewhat understandable—that I am usually approached first in terms of my origin and experience as a refugee. At the same time, it has become increasingly important for me to advocate for a more complex and consciously constructed understanding of identity. However, isn't the emphasis on native, national, or ethnic background a reflex grounded in reactionary social structures? I have observed that, even within my liberal environment, the wish to acknowledge the origins of artists from certain regions of the world risks becoming entangled in hermetic and nationalistic ways of thinking, in which origin, roots, homeland, and nationality contribute to a reactionary notion of purity of being. I had hoped that politically, philosophically, and socially we had moved beyond such terms and frameworks. This is not to say that our experiences of different places and histories do not shape or inform us—they undoubtedly do.

Continuing in the spirit of the open, pluralistic, and politically and socially engaged family in which I first sensed the capacity and potential of difference and co-existence, it was self-evident for me, as a teenager living in Berlin, to immerse myself in the arts—which was something that had been taken away from the people by the repressive, totalitarian regime of the mullahs. I see my embrace of the arts as an affirmation of the necessity of democratic structures within society, rather than an act of rebellion against trauma.

Democratic structures are essential to guaranteeing the possibility and the knowledge that are required to develop a more complex identity for oneself. Berlin in the 1980s provided a stimulating environment in which to pursue these interests. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the end of the Cold War, and the initiatives throughout the 1990s to confront the political, social, and cultural challenges of this profound transition, I became part of an art-theoretical discourse that deeply shaped my perspective.

MA: German Neo-Expressionist painting was front and center during much of the '80s. You went on to work in sculpture. How did that come about? What were you looking at? Where did you study art?

NB: One of the most enduring memories of that period in my life was Paul Thek's exhibition at the Neue Nationalgalerie in the mid-'90s, along with performances by Trisha Brown's Dance Company, Yvonne Rainer, Heiner Miiller, Merce Cunningham, and Robert Ashley—just to name a few. However, my interests were also situated within art theory and projects addressing the city's transformation, such as gentrification in post-reunification Berlin. Understanding what art could evoke in a particular context, and the social role it might assume, was central.

Activist art dominated the discourse, and sculpture was, generally speaking, not considered a medium capable of taking on a politically relevant position. This consensus—which amounted to dogma in many circles—prompted me to engage more closely with sculpture and its possibilities. Since the structure and concept of the masterclass (*Meisterklasse*) in German academies were not suited to my approach. I drew influences from diverse sources: the free classes (*Freie Klasse*) at the Berlin University of the Arts, Gertrud Koch's art history lectures at the Free University of Berlin, Gregor Stemmrich's contributions to experimental film at the Berlin University of the Arts, and, subsequent to that, my time at Goldsmiths

(University of London), to which Sarat Maharaj, professor of art and art theory, had invited me; he generously allowed me to attend his classes, as well as those of Irit Rogoff, and others, without formal enrollment. This diversity of views and approaches confirms that there is no single source of knowledge, nor a single perspective from which to approach artistic practice.

Piff Paff (c), 2015. Cast, varnished, and polished aluminum and silicone, 5 pieces, dimensions variable.

MA: How are your interests in theater, dance, and language reflected in your practice?

NB: While recognizing the autonomy of the art object, the viewer and their embodied experience remain relevant to understanding sculpture. How bodies relate to one another, and how these relationships are modulated, intensified, or mediated through objects and spatial conditions, is a primary consideration in shaping a sculptural body. Language functions as another complex and demanding medium. It is inherently determinative and offers conceptual possibilities that run parallel to those explored in sculpture. Sculptural practice can thus incorporate a form of linguistic abstraction-one that engages both the semantic and semiotic potential of materials, as well as the politics of materiality. In this way, sculpture exists simultaneously as a spatial and linguistic field, negotiating the interplay between object, context, interpretation, and meaning.

MA: Could you explain your notion of fear as a creative strategy?

NB: Fear—or better, self-criticality—like other conditions or affective states, contributes to a complex understanding of art and its production. Rather than functioning as a paralyzing force, it operates as a productive tension, provoking experimentation and demanding careful engagement with material, form, and process. In this sense, fear functions as a structuring principle, guiding decisions and sustaining openness, contingency, and critical reflexivity. Through such tension, the work navigates indeterminacy, allowing possibilities for experimentation, disruption, and the reconfiguration of meaning to emerge.

MA: Your sculptural installations seem in a transitional state, subject to emendation. You reject the status quo.

NB: It is interesting to consider it in this way. There has long been a fascination with the alienation effect (*Veifremdungseffekt*) in Brechtian theater, which Brecht employed to create emotional distance in the audience, enabling critical reflection on the content, rather than immersion through emotional identification. In a comparable manner, my work avoids presenting a complete image or any form of perfection—there is no such thing as a perfect idea. Instead, my work is often fragmentary, provoking individual questioning and responses.

Side Leaps, not dated. Painted polyurethane, feathers, zinc coated metal, and Plexiglas, 179.7 x 100.6 x 72.1 cm.

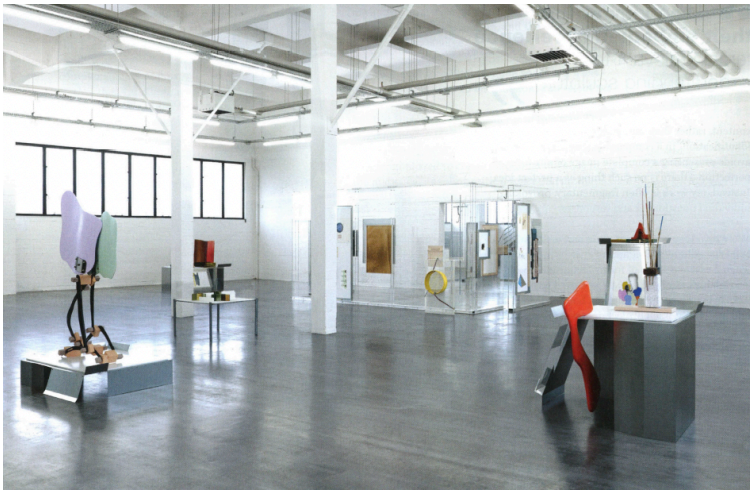
MA: Why reject a signature style and medium?

NB: Why adhere to a signature style or medium when a vast spectrum of forms, materials, and ideas is available? Limiting oneself to a fixed approach risks bringing about stagnation, both conceptually and materially. Each project deserves the space to generate its own conditions, questions, and possibilities, evolving in dialogue with context, perception, and the viewer. Avoiding a singular style is not merely enjoyable—it is a deliberate operational mode to keep artistic inquiry alive, dynamic, and responsive.

MA: You avoid materials that are traditionally associated with sculptural practice. Did this stem from having had to make do with whatever was available to you when you were living in Berlin? Or is there a conceptual position at play?

NB: These observations are less about a limited personal experience than about broader patterns as seen in the work of other artists, particularly those who were active before, during, and after World

War II. That line of inquiry informed my exhibition "nameless" (2025-26), recently on view at WIELS in Brussels. Over many years, certain works and objects have persisted in memory, enduring beyond their historical moment and remaining visible despite turbulent conditions. Many of these works were created under unstable living conditions, yet they retain the capacity to communicate and resonate as objects, independent of circumstances. Artists such as Katarzyna Kobro, Toyen, Wols, Isamu Noguchi, Max Ernst, and many others, served as points of departure for "nameless," because I studied the practices of these artists across different stages of their careers; I was particularly interested in objects that were created under extreme conditions. However, my intention was by no means to align myself formally with these works, or to integrate them into my decisions. Rather-and this brings us back to the beginning of our conversation—one of the aims of the exhibition was to argue for the complexity and generative capacity of the works themselves: as confusions and conglomerates of historical, aesthetic, psychical, and political experiences, they can exchange information, provoke reflection, and effect change. Even in cases of material destruction—take, for example, the colossal Bamiyan Buddhas of Afghanistan that the Taliban destroyed—the works can be reconfigured in our minds, their presence and meaning regenerated over and over again despite the absence of their actual sculptural form.



Installation view of "nameless," WIELS, Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, Belgium, 2025-26.