

PLAYWAYS

Nairy Baghramian: A State of Curiosity

By Martin Onufrowicz (July 2026)



Suit and shirt: GIVENCHY BY SARAH BURTON / Shoes: Nairy's own
Photography by Jelka Von Langen and Roman Goebel

In a culture that prizes certainty, artist Nairy Baghramian has built a practice around doubt. Born in Isfahan, Iran, to an Armenian family and based in Berlin since the 1980s, her sculptures resist fixed readings, exposing the structures, dependencies and negotiations that shape both objects and bodies. Speaking with us after the unveiling of her temporary public commission at Messeplatz, as part of this year's Art Basel, Baghramian reflects on the value of remaining unsettled. For the artist, curiosity is not merely a starting point but a method – one that pushes back against the comfort of expertise in favor of continual questioning, allowing each work to emerge through relation, contingency and change. It is this very approach that has made her one of the defining sculptural voices of her generation, without ever relinquishing the uncertainty that keeps the work alive.



Jacket: Nairy's own
Photography by Jelka Von Langen and Roman Goebel

Many of your works balance opposing qualities – fragility and structure, humor and critique. Do these tensions emerge intuitively, or are they consciously constructed?

I don't experience those qualities as opposites that need to be reconciled. Sculpture is always negotiating forms of dependence – between autonomy and relation, weight and support, stability and instability. The work develops through a continuous dialogue between intuitive decisions and deliberate construction, so those distinctions become less meaningful during the making process. Rather than arriving at formal equilibrium, the sculpture exposes the systems that sustain it. Brackets, prosthetic supports, joints and connective elements become visible instead of concealed. In that sense, fragility is not simply a material property but a structural condition. Sometimes even humor can offer criticality: it interrupts authority, destabilizes certainty, and opens another way of encountering the work. Ambiguity is certainly productive. It allows multiple readings to coexist without asking the work to resolve itself into a single interpretation.

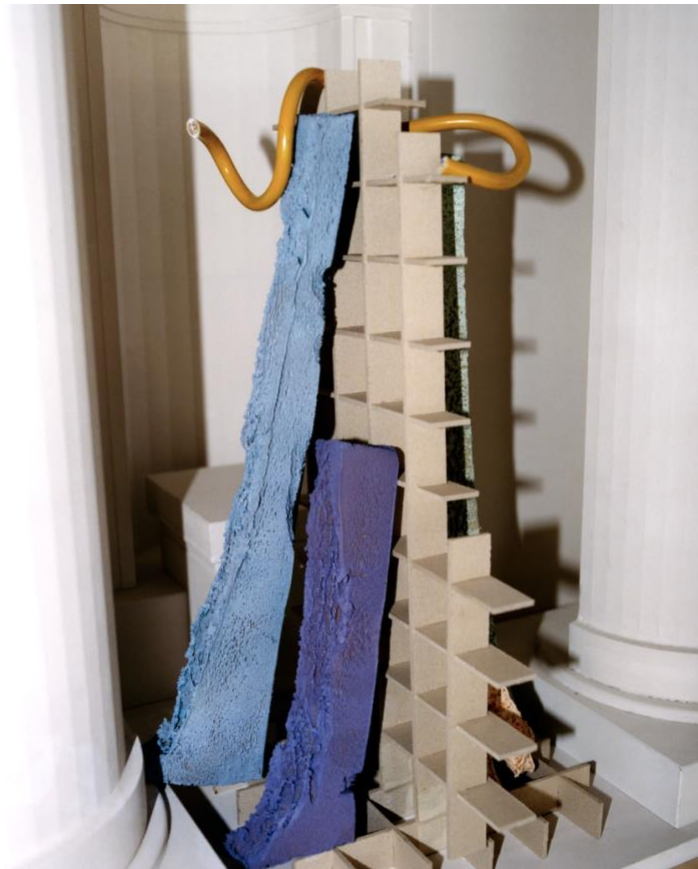
You've described your practice as grounded in curiosity rather than mastery. How do you preserve a sense of curiosity after decades of making work?

Curiosity survives by resisting the comfort of expertise. Once you believe you've mastered something, the work risks becoming repetitive. I prefer to remain in a position of questioning, where materials, sites and collaborations can still surprise me. Every project presents different constraints, and those

limitations often become productive. Remaining "emerging," even after many years, is more valuable to me than feeling established.

Your sculptures often evoke bodies without representing them directly. What possibilities does abstraction offer for thinking about embodiment?

Abstraction allows the body to be understood as a condition rather than an image. Bodies lean, depend, interrupt one another or require support. They don't need to resemble a figure in order to deal with care or pressure. Ambivalent abstraction allows those bodily experiences to remain complex rather than assigning them a fixed identity or narrative.



Photography by Jelka Von Langen and Roman Goebel

When developing a site-responsive commission, do you begin with the physical characteristics of the location, its social function, or something else entirely?

The site is never just architecture. It includes histories, patterns of movement and the way we occupy it. At Messeplatz in Basel, I became interested" in the sixty-meter-long and eight-meter-wide fountain just next to the main entrance because it was surprisingly overlooked despite its scale and location. Beyond the architectural conditions themselves, there is always another question to consider: who has invited me to place a sculpture in public space, and for what purpose? Equally important is the temporal context. This became a defining aspect of the work for Messeplatz, since the sculpture was installed for little more than a week.

It was precisely this sense of temporality that encouraged me to resist what might have seemed the obvious response – namely, to produce a visually expansive sculpture designed for maximum immediate impact. Instead, I wanted to make a work that argues for the seriousness and complexity of sculptural language itself.

The work was conceived as a conversation between the painted cast-aluminum forms suspended on polished, mirror-finished stainless-steel structures spanning the fountain and the viewer seated on the sculptural benches positioned opposite. The benches adopt the same formal vocabulary as the supports carrying the cast-aluminum elements, establishing a visual and spatial correspondence between the two. The reflective surfaces and the act of sitting on the benches deliberately leave it open to the viewer to decide which parts of the installation are perceived as sculpture, which may disappear into their surroundings through reflection, and how to read the presence of the flies printed onto the paving stones. The work proposes a space for sustained attention, offering the possibility of a slower, more concentrated encounter with sculpture.

Public space often comes with expectations of accessibility and usefulness. How do you navigate those expectations while maintaining the complexity of your artistic language?

Accessibility doesn't require simplifying the work. A public sculpture can sometimes invite use without becoming purely functional. The bench incorporated into *Modèle vivant (S'empilant)* allows people to sit, wait or meet, but it also remains part of the sculpture's conceptual structure. The work creates possibilities where people encounter art through everyday experience while still allowing it to retain its autonomy and complexity.

I appreciate it when my work invites people to engage with it and with the ideas it sets in motion. At the same time, especially in the context of public space, I find it entirely understandable if passers-by choose not to engage. Unlike visitors to a museum, they have not consciously decided to encounter art or to reflect on the questions it raises.

For this reason, I think of my works in public space as invitations. Through a certain degree of formal restraint, I try not to impose them on their audience, but rather to leave open the possibility of engagement for those who choose to accept it.

How does the possibility of everyday use – sitting, waiting for a tram, meeting a friend – change the meaning of a sculpture?

Someone might sit on the bench without intending to experience an artwork, yet that encounter still shapes their relationship with it. The sculpture becomes a place for temporary occupation as much as for visual contemplation.

How has migration – moving from Iran and building a life in Berlin – shaped your understanding of unfamiliarity and perspective?



All clothes: Nairy's own
Photography by Jelka Von Langen and Roman Goebel

My experience of migration as an Armenian born in Isfahan began long before my own flight from Iran in 1984. "Migration can change your relationship to language and belonging; moving makes you aware that perspective is never fixed. Rather than treating this as displacement alone, I think of it as a productive condition that encourages questioning and prevents certainty. It also sharpens your understanding of ambiguity, provisional structures, support, etc. But migration isn't necessarily only a geographical one; it is a necessity to be able to create a self-determined notion of identity that is more than a given one... That resistance to fixed categories reflects less a personal narrative than an understanding of yourself, or more importantly, the artwork as something continually negotiated through context and relation.

Migration produces a sustained awareness that cultural and social frameworks are contingent rather than fixed. Living between languages and political contexts makes one attentive to structures that otherwise become invisible through familiarity. But I wouldn't reduce migration to geography alone. There are many forms of migration – between languages, disciplines, institutions, or ways of thinking. Perhaps artistic practice itself depends on a continuous migration of perspective. It resists fixed identities and keeps both the work and oneself in a condition of negotiation.

Looking back at your practice today, what remains unresolved or still curious for you?

The questions have never really been resolved. I'm still interested in how sculpture can negotiate relationships between bodies, objects, forms, colors, shapes, materials, institutions, architecture and

their histories. Every new context changes those questions. If curiosity disappears, the work loses its vitality, so remaining open to unknowing, rethinking, redoing and reshaping is perhaps the most important part of continuing the practice.

The show "Nameless" by Nairy Baghramian will take place at Marian Goodman, New York, from November 13th, 2026 to January 16th, 2027.

The exhibition will then travel to Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin, in Spring 2027.

The exhibition "Nairy Baghramian/Alina Szapocznikow", will be on view at The Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, from October, 2026 to January, 2027.