



## THE ART NEWSPAPER

# *Nairy Baghramian: 'Dissent is part of society, it is a healthy freedom'*

*The Iranian-born, Berlin-based artist discusses the beauty that lies in "in-between spaces", and the relationship between art and democracy*

by Ben Luke (October 9, 2024)



Baghramian says her *Misfits* series, the latest iteration of which is on show at the South London Gallery, was inspired by a children's playground she was not allowed to enter. Abigail Enzaldo

Nairy Baghramian's sculptures and installations tease out the possibilities and limitations of her discipline. Redolent of observed bodies, objects and spaces, her forms implore touch and engagement, while remaining elusively abstract.

Her newest show, *Jumbled Alphabet*, at the South London Gallery (SLG), exemplifies the exuberance and strangeness of her work. Inspired in part by a playground in Milan, and by the concept of play more widely, the sculptures, from her *Misfits* series begun in 2021, are rendered in wood, marble, metal and resin, and in distinctive hues. They suggest everything from the letters hinted at in the title, to body parts and urban street structures.



Children are encouraged to contribute to the work at the South London Gallery© Jo Underhill

The SLG exhibition follows Baghramian's façade commission project last year at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, *Scratching the Back*, in which she became fascinated by the backs of the sculptures in the Met's collection. The clusters of forms with which she filled the niches on the front of the building deliberately evoked flotsam and jetsam, and played with orientation, as much hinting at concealed forms as opening themselves up to the crowds gathered outside the museum.

**The Art Newspaper: In this South London Gallery show, you are building on the *Misfits* series.**

Nairy Baghramian: Actually, I do within the exhibition what's already implied in the title, *Jumbled Alphabet*. I shuffle existing groups from the *Misfits* series and mix in new elements. So I do everything that collections are apprehensive about when they allow artists to reconfigure their own works from the collection.

**The point being, you always need to move bodies of work on.**

I believe this is something every artist engages in, though I may be mistaken. The artwork, especially in its inception, is inherently malleable; it exists in the mind and is constantly shifting and transforming. If this were not the case, one would likely never embark on the journey of creating a new piece.

**You said that *Misfits* is about the beauty of things that do not fit. Can you expand on that?**

My questions were evoked by the architectural layout of the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Milan, a Neo-Classical villa with five consecutive marble-adorned rooms that overlook a park, which adults are only allowed to enter when accompanying children. So I was only permitted to view the park through the windows, while the terrace, strictly separated from the exhibition space, sparked a thought experiment during my first visit: how can seemingly related elements, placed both inside and outside and yet separated, metaphorically create a shared mental space? This space arises from the failed attempt to mentally reconcile different forms. The beauty lies in this in-between space, in the realisation that not everything fits together as it might initially seem.



An installation at Baghramian's London show builds on the *Misfits* series the artist began three years ago © Jo Underhill

**You said you wanted to make works that entertain the idea that failure was possible.**

Absolutely. It's also about the expectation we place on things to make sense, and how art is the one realm that allows us to break free from that. I always ask curators, writers, museum directors: what is it that makes the space we're creating together so special? Most of the time, the answer is simple—because we don't fully know. It's the unpredictability, the way things don't quite fit. We have expectations, but art never crumbles under them when they aren't met. It's such a uniquely rare space in the world.

**It is related to concepts such as doubt, uncertainty, the unresolved. It seems to me that so much of the best art being made now occupies that space.**

My experience has been that artists are often expected to do the right thing, hold the right opinions, and take the right positions. I find this concerning, as it implies the existence of a binary notion of good and bad art. That is not the essence of what art is about. Art that tries to get everything right loses its transformative power. It's not there to fulfil. Dissent is part of society, part of democracy, part of a healthy freedom. The ability to act unconventionally and not seek approval has always felt under threat for me when it comes to competitions or proposals, and that's why I'm scared of them.

**Your Metropolitan Museum of Art commission is an example of an unconventional proposal. It explored the fact that what you don't see in a sculpture in a niche is its back.**

*Scratching the Back*, as I named my niche project, is not only a literary study of the back views of sculptures in the collection of the Met. Rather, the back view could be seen as an invitation to perceive things more holistically, with multiple perspectives, and to reflect on an encyclopaedic museum whose content and façade warrant consideration. It was an attempt to recognise the façade and the vacant niches as a frontal view and a display window, while, additionally, the sculptures point towards the museum and extend beyond the representative space in all directions. My thinking was inspired by a quote from Gertrude Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which I referenced years ago for a contribution to Hans Ulrich Obrist's book project *Do It* [1997]. While sitting in her garden, contemplating nature, Stein wrote: "I like a view, but I like to sit with my back turned to it." So my instruction became: "Following Gertrude Stein, every now and then, sit with your back to nature." What I loved about that sentence is the idea that whatever you cherish, sometimes you need to turn away—to reflect or even to find your own path.

**Do you aim to create a sense of movement in your work?**

Movement both generates and demands different perspectives, and this is a principle I first apply to myself. Subsequently, the same question arises for the sculpture and the viewer. In painting, the relationship between the canvas, the wall, the space, and the architecture seems more clearly defined. Sculpture, however, must always consider how it relates to the space, where it positions itself, how much space it allows for other sculptures, and what place the viewer occupies. This, in turn, requires significant mental as well as physical movement.

**The late Phyllida Barlow, with whom you showed at the Serpentine in 2010, avoided what she called "pictorial sculpture". Do you also avoid it?**

I had suggested Phyllida as a partner for the exhibition because her approach to occupying space from the centre differed from my then more peripheral way of thinking. This dialectic had the potential to evoke the very movement I was just referring to. While I understand Phyllida's argument that colour is more than just a painted surface and can claim a sculptural presence, there are numerous examples of pictorial aspects in sculptures, such as those by Claes Oldenburg or Jeff Koons, that justify this phenomenon, while still making sculptural statements. As for my own work, I wouldn't fundamentally oppose a particular interpretation. Similar to the concept of the *Misfits* series, my use of materials and techniques is neither linear nor neatly aligned, but rather resembles a jumbled alphabet.

Nairy Baghramian: Jumbled Alphabet, *South London Gallery, until 12 January 2025*