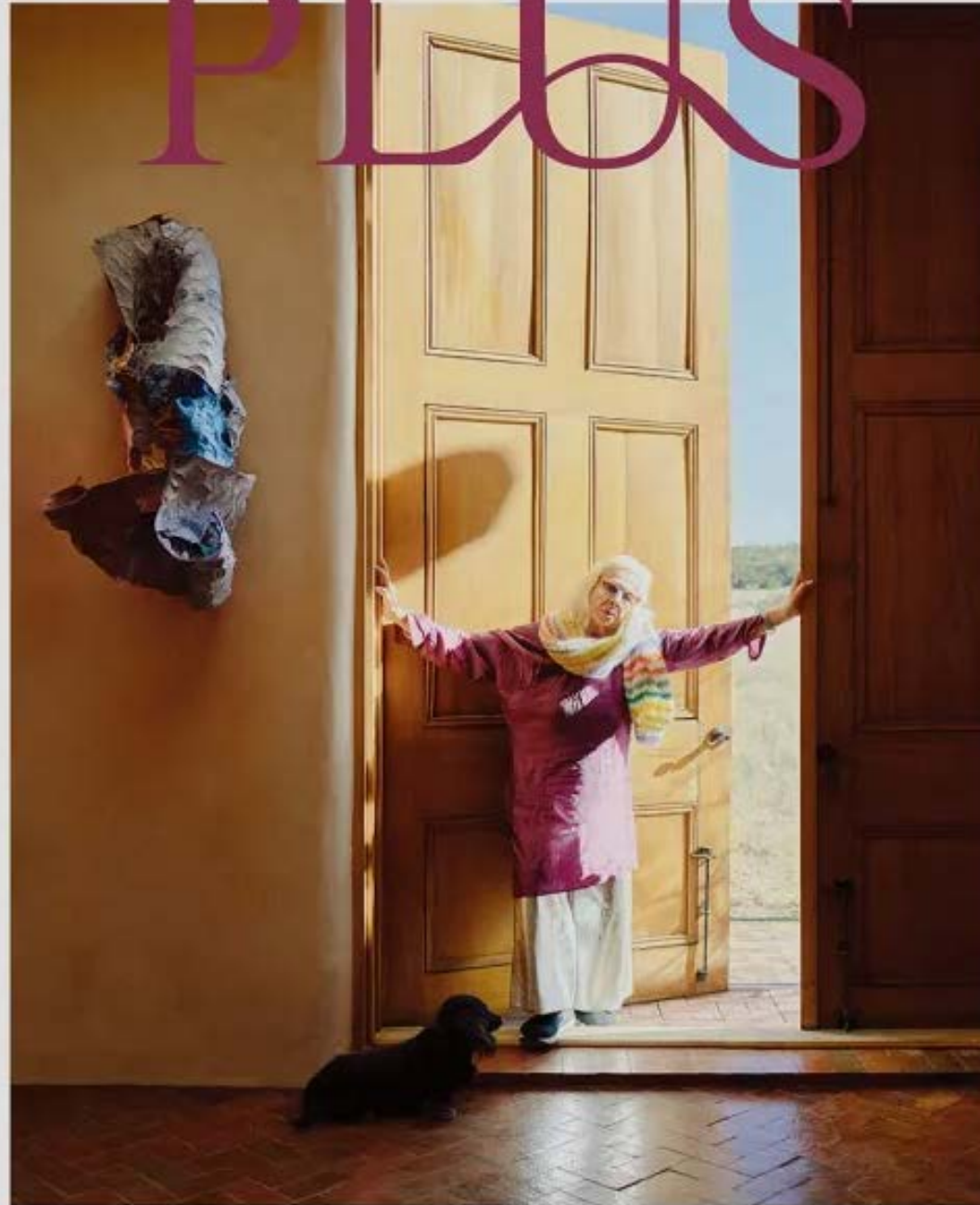


REDEFINING THE WORLD OF CREATIVITY

LYNDA BENGLIS BY WILLIAM JESS LAIRD

# PLUS



FLUIDITY IN MOTION: FINDING ONESELF IN A NATURAL STRIDE

## ORGANIC FORMS



NAIRY



BAGHIRAMIAN

Words  
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## INTERVIEWS

Nairy Baghramian's sculptures fascinate as well as disturb – even titillate. With their round edges and soft colors in matte wax or shiny aluminum, we could call them elegant. But then, large and unwieldy as these amorphous blobs of styrofoam or epoxy resin are – somewhere between a cartoon Henry Moore and the remnants of a prehistoric animal – they take on their surroundings like a challenge. Their maker, Baghramian – born in Iran in 1971, a Berliner since childhood – is the same. We met in her apartment, where small French cakes were arranged on the Memphis-style letter plates Marcello Morandini designed for Rosenthal in the 1980s. “Did you collect the whole alphabet?” I asked, but of course, as Baghramian responded, no alphabet is ever complete. Her eye is always directed at what resists completion, what is absent or in excess. She is a lover of objects of art and design as a way of being in conversation. “When it comes to myself, it seems I cannot talk,” she told me, weary of the interview scenario. “When I talk about others, I can go on for hours, but not about myself. But then, of course, talking about others is talking about yourself.” “So let’s talk about others,” I consented, “but first, we have to address your sculptures – they’re so strange to me, like from another world.”

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**Nairy Baghramian:** I think they are part of everyday life... But I can't say. What do you think about them?

**Kristian Vistrup Madsen:** We are here to talk about organic forms, but I understand your view of the world as one that is bent on picking apart the idea of the organic or the natural. There's a lot of style in your work and notions of beauty that are configured only to be deconstructed again. You maintain a critical distance from what it would mean to be authentic or organic.

**NB:** I like that way of looking at it. It's not organically understood as a thing that mim-

ics nature or natural forms. It's more artificial than that. But if organic means malleable, like an aversion to being fixed, then I would agree.

**KVM:** That's also what I mean by style. I am thinking of Carlo Mollino and Janette Laverrière whose photographs and design objects from the 20th century you've exhibited alongside your sculptures, and, here in your apartment, your interest in Memphis design. I share your passion for post-modernism's audacity and drama; to make something so eccentric for no reason, so far from the dictum of form following function. I think about your work in a similar way as

ornaments in action.

**NB:** I think ornaments have a function and politics, which is to do with uselessness and beauty: two concepts that are complex and worthwhile. Carlo Mollino, Jean-Michel Frank, Janette Laverrière, Jean Cocteau, Florine Stettheimer, Francis Picabia, Jack Smith, Mike Kelly, John Waters – there are so many names – they all share a certain opulence. I've discovered that it's something the sculptures sometimes produce by themselves because they have this malleability. Maybe what the organic means, in this case, has to do with losing control while at the same time being aware of a certain loss of decency. This

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*Sitzengelebene (Eigenbrödler) / Stay Downers (Maverick), 2017.*



*Dwinder\_Pallor, 2018. Installation view, Breath Holding Spell, Secession, Vienna, Austria, 2021/2022.*



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is also why I think that we shouldn't speak about objects over their heads. They have their own *raison d'être*. Somewhat flippantly, I would say that if my sculptures could speak, they would ask me not to. And that's why I'm often looking around for other voices and elements to include. I don't want to occupy the objects that I make.

**KVM:** You have often organized exhibitions that include other artists, writers, and performers. Outside of Mollino and Laverrière, for instance, at the Wattis Institute in San Francisco, where you brought together works by Phil Steinmetz, Paulina Olowaska, Michaela Eichwald, Frieda Grafe, Adam Linder— to name a few — while choosing not to include objects of your own. At the Serpentine Gallery in London, you shared your solo exhibition with the artist Phyllida Barlow. In a way, you use the works of other artists as lightning rods. Because they offer themselves more readily as the talking

point or charity, when previously there was an idea of it — from, say, Sturtevant or the Pictures Generation — as a type of institutional critique or a more intellectual and unsettling question to authorship and originality. Mollino, for instance, is controversial for the polaroids he took of women in their underwear, but I see your appropriation of them in your exhibition neither as endorsement nor critique but just the addition of another layer.

**NB:** What's great about Mollino is that, from my understanding, he really had a problem with time. To have the fire to resist your time is something very impressive. He decorated a secret house in Turin that he only used as a set to take these polaroids of the women. In a way, the house was a camera. And I love that he created something it is not immediately possible to share with others. It's the opposite of modernism's glass houses, created for middle-class life. No doubt, they are gorgeous,

and that Mollino didn't follow the rules of the design commission.

**KVM:** It has the absurdity of early Italian postmodernism, like Studio Alchimia's moka pot, where the bottom part is much too tall, and there's no way it could function. It's a hardcore riposte against functionalism to make truly useless objects.

**NB:** During the last two decades of her life, Janette rejected all commissions and only made what she called "useless objects." Under the title *Evocation*, she set about transforming people and stories — Jean Cocteau, Dorian Gray, or the smile of the Cheshire cat from Alice in Wonderland — into a series of mirror sculptures, which, even though they're mirrors, are not there for you to look into. She often only made prototypes and gave them long, unwieldy titles like *Work Desk for an Ambassador's Wife* from 1956. And she was asked why not just give them numbers, and they can be

**“In art, politics are often aestheticized in ways that are too simplistic, as if the only way to understand politics is through information and discourse.”**

points of an exhibition, your sculptures are saved from language.

**NB:** What I've learned and always try to keep in mind is not to use other artists, but rather to be in dialogue or conversation. I met Janette Laverrière when Adam Szymczyk and Elena Filipovic curated the fifth Berlin Biennial in 2008, and they asked four artists to invite an unknown or under-represented artist. But there's a problem in that approach, I think: Why is somebody unknown, and to whom? Luckily we were able to locate Janette in Paris, and she was very sympathetic to my suggestion of collaborating on the project in a non-hierarchical way. For me, it was a successful exhibition insofar as it was difficult to discern where one person's work ended and another's began. And somewhere along that fine line, a common ground emerged.

**KVM:** It's true that in recent years appropriation tends to be understood either as ex-

ploitation or charity, when previously there was an idea of it — from, say, Sturtevant or the Pictures Generation — as a type of institutional critique or a more intellectual and unsettling question to authorship and originality. Mollino, for instance, is controversial for the polaroids he took of women in their underwear, but I see your appropriation of them in your exhibition neither as endorsement nor critique but just the addition of another layer.

**KVM:** And what of privacy? When I visited Mollino's house in Turin a few years ago, I wondered if it was even true, this story about how it's arranged like a Pharaoh's tomb, with all these mythological clues — it seems so fantastical and the evidence so scant. But then I concluded that the whole thing is quite fabulous, regardless.

**NB:** I also love that people could think that it's all made up. I heard this story years ago about his famous Fenis chair from 1959 — I hope I'm not making it up, but, as you say: *whatever* — that when Mollino delivered it to the man who had commissioned it, it collapsed under him. Obviously, the commissioner complained and said the chair had to be more sturdy, that it is not functional. But Mollino insisted that he would not change a thing. I appreciate the notion that a piece of furniture is made to collapse

mass-produced, but she resisted.

**KVM:** It resonates with the widespread pressure today to identify with certain categories and to hashtag your art in order to make it easier to grasp for audiences and buyers. How have you experienced that in your life as an artist?

**NB:** In the 90s in Berlin, everyone was asking me to relate to being a refugee woman artist, and I was skeptical of that and resistant, too. It was like the mold was already cast, and I was just expected to fit into it. Outside of my art practice, I've been working with and supporting refugee organizations and have made my living as a social worker at a women's shelter. But I didn't want to directly transfer this political engagement into my physical artworks, as I believe these are two different realities, each complex in their own way. In art, politics are often aestheticized in ways that are too simplistic, as if the only way to under-



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stand politics is through information and discourse. And these are things we've been through already. Why do we go back so naively to certain notions of politics? Another implication of that pressure to use identity in art was that fitting in and accepting the premises of the group would be a kind of resolution. And this, in turn, is related to the idea that you have to agree with an artwork or an exhibition, which I don't believe is the case.

**KVM:** It's like your experience from the 90s is repeating itself today. I think to insist on the uselessness of art right now is to be in opposition.

**NB:** Oh, I couldn't agree more. And it is important to do so even with yourself! Like, if you can use one work to make the next one and the next one after that, the concept loses force because you're aware of the usefulness of it. Instead, you have to close the door to the works and let them be. I prefer

to me. It acts in parallel to everything that I think of. The *Dwindlers* that I installed at the Palazzo Crystal of the Reina Sofia in 2018, for example, were very much about going along with the shape of a void. Likewise, *French Curve*, a work I made in 2014, refers to the curved ruler that measures something that you normally can't measure, but it also creates the outline of a void.

**KVM:** In that way, you're working through the contradiction of how heavy and large it's possible to make something that's actually a void. It's this tension between a cumbersome material that takes up a lot of space but still has the sexiness of something that's almost not there. The works at the Nasher strike me as a little different, but that could be because they are installed in the context of the figurative sculptures from their collection. On which grounds did you choose which objects to include?

**NB:** The first time I visited the Nasher

and not "cancel" it. The new works can be understood as the outcome of looking at figuration until it becomes something else. I don't believe in the concept of an "I" or an individual self, and so I don't use figuration as a mode of representation. Especially at a time that's dominated by identity politics, figuration can serve to simplify identities. So I set myself the task of taking figuration beyond identity or outside it.

**KVM:** Your focus on figuration in modernism in relation to contemporary notions of identity is super interesting. In modernism's reduced furniture, there's always the implication of a body that we don't see, and in your work, it's almost like the body and the furniture have merged into one. In Gauguin's sculpture, it's him seeing her, seeing him, a kind of double reflection that is multiplied every time someone looks at his work too. It's a shame that people are so afraid of artwork.

“Desire creates a second space between the object and the viewer, something exceptional that you can't grasp.”

working simultaneously on different bodies of work, it helps me to keep the fear and uncertainty in the room for longer. Certainly, to merely continue to produce varieties of works that have already been well-received would be useless – but not in a good way.

**KVM:** What first struck me about your work was its libidinous quality, a certain deliciousness, something fleshy. Already upon seeing the sculptures, you can imagine what it feels like to touch them. And this desire acts like a mirror, it makes you self-conscious. Part of what's exciting about desire is that you face the possibility of rejection. I wonder how that relates to this idea of the work turning its back on you.

**NB:** There is a lot said about hope in art, but I want to get lost in desire. I'm glad we both share this view. Desire creates a second space between the object and the viewer, something exceptional that you can't grasp. It's a kind of void, or lack, that really speaks

Sculpture Centre was in 2015 after I had just seen Picasso's studies for *Guernica* in Madrid. I was so surprised by how great the heads of the women were. They don't show women as lovers or in relation to men, but as witnesses to the war; what they saw, their relation to the violence, and how that made them violent too. They're beautiful and essential to my understanding of the representation of the female body in art history more generally. And so, I was thinking a lot about figuration and all these women sculpted by men. And, weirdly, I like them. Some people see it as a female body colonized by the male gaze, but for me, the gaze is an additional complication of the body. And that interests me. Gauguin's *Tahitian Girl* (1896) is especially amazing: it's almost like her back is moving backward in a pose that says, "don't touch me." It speaks volumes about the time and the implications of Gauguin going to Tahiti. It's important to look at a work in such a context, I think,

**NB:** It's because people are obsessed with the author. And while there is a necessity within the discipline of art history to know more about the biographies of artists, we also have to be aware that it doesn't complete the story but only complicates it. It shouldn't be about pinning down work but opening another view.

**KVM:** Speaking of the performative and not being pinned down – in the image material prepared for this interview, you're wearing a rodeo-style jacket. What's that about?

**NB:** During the installation period at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, where the photo shoot also took place, I came across this young girl, Najiah Knight, who wants to become the first professional female bullfighter, and I was so inspired by how she takes on this masculine world. I adore her strength and her refusal to accept the unwritten law of what boys and girls are supposed to do.

