

# The New York Times

CRITIC'S PICK

## *Nairy Baghramian: Rubble Rouser Outside the Met*

*With "Scratching the Back," the artist creates the most colorful and unsettling Facade Commission yet, chipping away at the gray stones of the museum.*

by Roberta Smith (September 14, 2023)



Nairy Baghramian, the Iranian-born German artist, completed the fourth Facade Commission at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Scratching the Back: Drift (Pink Ribbon)" is the most monumental of her works here, and with its flood of red, the most ominous. Credit: Amir Hamja/The New York Times

There are some offers an artist cannot refuse — and first among them is the annual Facade Commission at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, now in its fourth iteration. Unless you're someone who doesn't mind the prospect of being forever haunted by what-ifs, you gird your loins and accept the assignment, which is to create sculpture for display in one of the most visible and challenging spots in the New York art world. That is, the four domed niches embedded in the neo-Classical facade of the Met's main entrance on Fifth Avenue. Each niche frames a plinth and is in turn framed by a pair of robust columns two stories high. The viselike setting is spatially difficult, yet culturally rich in opportunities to comment on the treasure house — with its power, prestige, human vanity and folly — just beyond.

So you accept and hope your response to the site is commensurate with your achievement. This tends not to happen. The three artists chosen thus far — Wangechi Mutu, Carol Bove and Hew Locke — have done well enough, but it may be best to lower expectations. The Met's facade is an oppressive windmill to tilt at. Selectees should be granted a certain amount of slack.

Now it is Nairy Baghramian's turn. An Iranian-born artist who came to Berlin at 14 as a refugee, she is among the best sculptors of her generation, which includes artists like Bove, Huma Bhabha and Leilah Babirye. All use the past to enliven the sculptural present, erase boundaries between styles and cultures and employ new materials and techniques.

Baghramian, who has shown widely in Europe but not so much in this country, has lifted sculpture's possibilities, for which she has won many honors, among them the 2022 Nasher Prize for "works highlighting the poignant, contradictory, and sometimes humorous circumstances that can suffuse both the artistic process as well as everyday life." (It was accompanied by her large U.S. exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas.) As an artist she has given herself an unusually wide latitude.

She specializes in quietly eccentric abstract forms often made of epoxy resin, rubber and aluminum, finished in subtle matte colors. Her pieces fuse the organic and the geometric while invoking architecture, design, the body and other sculpture, from Jean Arp to Eva Hesse to Matthew Barney. The work has restraint, wit and at its best, an unexpected emotional depth, even sentience. Sometimes, the sculptures almost have a life of their own.

The pieces displayed on the Met's facade represent a change, possibly a transition for the artist. They depart from the absorptive quiet of previous works. They're brash and noisy — their forms seem to be in motion. They romp through color, some of the brightest Baghramian has ever used or that have ever been seen on this facade.

The sculptures consist of two or more large irregular forms cast in aluminum from chunks of Styrofoam shaped and textured in different ways. They are powder-coated in bright red and blue, a heavy lavender and various greens. Some resemble rocks, others suggest pieces from eroding ruins. In three, whiplash cords or ribbons of orange, pink or yellow move through or are suspended above them. The rocklike elements rest on or lean against white gridded aluminum that, according to placement, resembles a Sol LeWitt sculpture, a supersize garden trellis or a fancy storage pallet.

It can be hard to get a bead on what you're looking up at. Moving around the Met's big porch, you can see different parts, but that doesn't make the totality clearer. The way some pieces are cantilevered over the edge of the niche give the ensemble a temporary, precarious look, like avalanches poised to happen.

Baghramian's project was conceived in consultation with Akili Tommasino, an associate curator. To Baghramian's credit, she avoids a traditional theme-and-variation predictability, making each piece different in this commission, whose general title is "Scratching the Back." (The titles of individual works refer to colors of the ribbons.) Going from left to right, arrangements become increasingly complex, suggesting different dramas. The first, simplest and most peaceful lacks even a ribbon. It consists only of two wedges of light and dark blue sitting on separate pallets at different levels. The lower leans on the upper in a decidedly tender gesture and announce the artist's turn to stronger, shinier color. The chiseled surfaces are softened by thick, rippling paint that resembles glaze.



Nairy Baghramian's installation of "Scratching the Back: Drift (Without Ribbon)," 2023, cast and powder-coated aluminum, at the Met, appears to be a tender gesture between two forms.  
Credit: Amir Hamja/The New York Times

The next work features two tall vertical pieces — fragments of columns perhaps — in pale green and lavender leaning on either side of the white grid, as if separated by a fence through which an orange ribbon darts freely. Each vertical is accompanied by a shorter element (perhaps a child). The scene looks familiar from a world full of refugees, but the implication of paired figures locked in a charged encounter and the delicate colors also bring to mind the Renaissance master Pontormo's "Visitation," which was seen at the Morgan in 2018.



"Scratching the Back: Drift (Orange Ribbon)," 2023, suggests a meeting of two figures separated by a fence.  
Credit: Amir Hamja/The New York Times



Nairy Baghramian in front of her installation at the Met.  
Credit: Amir Hamja/The New York Times

The third piece, to the right of the doors, is especially full. It leads off with a large boulder of deep sky blue and a curl of lavender ribbon. The boulder leans to the right, bullying a thin slab of green; at the back a large wedge of bright red remains above the fray. And behind it, a grid reaching almost to the top of the niche is forestalling a tall broad sentry, blood-red in color — an implicit reference to violence.



In “Scratching the Back: Drift (Yellow Ribbon),” forms that look more architectural than natural surge out of the niche.  
Credit: Amir Hamja/The New York Times

The final niche has its own intimations of chaos. A yellow ribbon undulates across a sandwich with three chunks of stone, suggestive of tumbledown buildings. The combination extends beyond the edge of the niche, waiting for the next surge.

With forms propped or pitted against one another, Baghramian's compositions subtly convey some of the unease and dread that permeate our time. The artist plays this instability against the seeming permanence of the Met and its values, and, literally, its stone facade. Baghramian's stones, by contrast, seem on the verge of returning to nature. Their final lesson may be almost biblical — stone to stone, dust to dust — which is the illusory nature of all things, institutions included.

**The Facade Commission: Nairy Baghramian, Scratching the Back**

Through May 28, 2024, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Ave., (212) 535-7710;  
[metmuseum.org](http://metmuseum.org).