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A Sculptor Breaks Through, Taking the Walls Down With Her

With powerfully alive new works at the Met and MoMA, the Iranian-born artist Nairy Baghramian embraces the canon, the better to take it apart.

by Siddhartha Mitter (September 6, 2023)



Nairy Baghramian in her Berlin studio. "A vertical swimming pool doesn't exist, but I would like to swim in it," she said. "There's no such thing as a horizontal staircase — but I would like to imagine it." Credit: Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times

Paris Bar, on Berlin's Kantstrasse thoroughfare, is an old-school artist hangout, the kind of place where dealers hold court over chateaubriand and some distinguished elder painter commandeers the table you had reserved — which is what happened when Nairy Baghramian and I met there in July.

Baghramian, 52, is an acclaimed sculptor whose work has appeared in two Venice Biennales (2011 and 2019) and one Documenta (2017). She is now on the cusp of her greatest visibility in the United States, with major new works at both the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art.

She enjoys Paris Bar for its folklore, she said over dinner. But she also wanted to point out the building across the street. It is where she lived from her teens through her emergence as an artist, in a small flat with a shifting cast of relatives and fellow émigrés — in her family's case, political refugees from Iran. Some waiters, she told me, remember her as that kid on the block.



Installation in progress of “Scratching the Back,” Baghramian’s sculptures for the Met facade. The commission appealed to her, she said, because it would reach not just museum-goers but the broader public outside. Credit: Amir Hamja/The New York Times



Her sculptures seem to tumble from the Met’s niches, as if beckoning a rockslide of shapes down to Fifth Avenue. Credit: Amir Hamja/The New York Times

Warm and engaging, Baghramian shares some of her background in casual conversation. But never — until recently, that is — in her art. Her sculptures are resolutely abstract, made using materials more often associated with industry and design (think aluminum, silicone, leather or glass). They are large and take over a gallery space, sprawling on the floor, climbing the wall on armatures, dangling from ceiling hooks, colonizing the roof.

Their uncanny, often humorous textures and shapes — from spiky-skeletal to placid and bulbous — have garnered admiration from adherents to the Modernist tradition and its heretics alike. To Baghramian they are political, a method for examining systems of power. “Forming political ideas,” she said, “taught me to form sculpture.”

This fall, Baghramian’s New York projects find her in full conceptual flow, while also making her most personal work ever.

At the Met she is taking on the canon and the role of museums. For its facade commission, she has placed in the niches next to the entrance four sculptures made of painted aluminum chunks and steel lattice. A reflection on the authority that a museum like the Met wields and what its collections project to the world, they seem to tumble from the niches, as if beckoning a rockslide of shapes down to Fifth Avenue.

At MoMA, meanwhile, a new sculpture has gone on extended view in the sculpture garden, titled “S’adossant (Pauline)” or “Reclining (Pauline).” Its three main sections are painted a fleshy pink and suggest a reclining figure. The sculpture bridges the two spheres that Baghramian previously kept separate: her creative work on one side and her family’s history on the other, including difficult memories she had psychologically sheltered.

With this work, she said, “I have the feeling that I’ve found something very close to me.”

‘It Was a Flux Moment’

On a hot Saturday in July, I rode the S-Bahn to the industrial zone in eastern Berlin where Baghramian and her longtime partner in life and work, Michel Ziegler, the former co-owner of a small gallery, spent much of the pandemic renovating a studio and living space. Among past incarnations, they told me, the building was once a depot where the East German army painted tanks before parades.

Baghramian is a creature of Berlin arguably more than she is German, having lived in the city stateless for years before receiving citizenship. She was born in Isfahan, the youngest child in an Armenian Iranian family with members who opposed both the shah’s government and, after the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic. They fled Iran by various routes — Baghramian and her mother flew to East Berlin in 1984, when she was 13 — and reunited in West Berlin as refugees.

For years, Baghramian existed in two worlds. One was the cosmos of exiles and refugees from Iran and elsewhere who cared for new arrivals and kept vigilant: In 1992, for instance, four exiled Kurdish dissidents were killed in a Berlin attack that a court later found was ordered by Iran’s top leaders. She spent tedious hours in government offices helping newcomers with paperwork, and worked at the women’s shelter that her sister Louise co-founded.

Her other world was the bohemian scene that sprawled across the city’s cheap apartments, squats, cafes and screening rooms, where she joined the era’s interminable debates over philosophy and art. “It was a flux moment,” she said of the 1990s in Berlin, “when things were changing and unstable in a positive way.”



“Retainer” (2013) at SculptureCenter in New York was Baghramian’s first U.S. exhibition. Credit: Jason Mandela

But the conversations were limited, and she kept hearing from friends that good sculpture should not convey politics. This dismissal bothered her: She needed to challenge it with her hands. “To understand something I need to hold it,” she said. “Sculpture gave me that opportunity.”

Her instinct was that the decisions involved in the production of a sculpture — how an object is built, what materials are chosen or excluded — mirrored social questions, too.

Baghramian’s sculptures quickly became large, sometimes elaborate. “The Iron Table (Homage to Jane Bowles)” (2002) involved wood, metal, sand, cables, a mast and spotlights. “Retainer” (2013), with its chrome struts and silicone sheets, took over the main hall at SculptureCenter, her first U.S. exhibition. Even small works protruded from walls, forming odd angles. “They occupied space, but they created space,” she said.

Sculpting Fragility and Resilience

There is no classic Baghramian form; her sculptures vary widely. Yet they share a sense of serious play, where uncanny humor can slip into something darker. In the studio, she showed me three sculptures awaiting shipping to Aspen, Colo., a new outdoor commission for the Aspen Art Museum, where she has a solo show through Oct. 22.

One was greenish, bulbous and placid, raised at one end on three metal stems. It reminded me of a walrus with an extra tusk. Another was a blue-gray form with a wild tubular pink shape coming up from its surface. They were part of an ongoing series, the “Sitzengebliebener,” or “Stay Downers,” she explained. The reference was to the slacker kids left behind at the school year’s end; the tangled pink tubing, she said, represented the kid who always showed up late with messy hair.



Sculptures by Baghramian are installed outside the Aspen Art Museum. Credit: Benjamin Rasmussen for The New York Times

But other works strike an eerier note, evoking sections of the anatomy — like windpipes or knee joints — or its supports, like prostheses and dental retainers. (The references could also be to buildings and their scaffolding, or infrastructure like heating ducts.) She does not hide the metal hooks, joints, pins or fasteners that connect the sections of a sculpture; they are part of the work, drawing attention to the fragility of the composition — or its resilience. Often the pieces seem to embrace each other.

By shifting attention, through the mechanics of the sculptures, to the mechanics of bodies or systems, Baghramian diverges from the pursuit, in much of abstraction, of form for its own sake. “Rather than defying use per se, Baghramian’s works ultimately defy *us*,” the critic Kerstin Stakemeier wrote in *Artforum*.

Or as Paulina Pobocha, associate curator of painting and sculpture at MoMA, put it, Baghramian’s human and social metaphors were “expanding the Modernist tradition of sculpture by allowing conceptual considerations in through the back door.”

Lately Baghramian has been working with cast aluminum. “It’s very different from bronze,” she told me. “It melts faster, it’s friendlier for producers.” She has honed a process that roughens the finished surfaces and makes them mottled or wrinkled.

She explained the method: First she cuts shapes out in polystyrene foam. Then she slices, scrapes and burns the foam — a vigorous, almost violent process — to produce an uneven surface. These shapes are then cast by packing them in sand; molten aluminum is poured on, which vaporized the foam and assumes its shape. The technique is hard to control, which she welcomes. “It’s rough, and I like that,” she said. “It’s as if the material still has a say.”

If she could, Baghramian added, she would challenge the idea of dimensionality itself. “A vertical swimming pool doesn’t exist, but I would like to swim in it,” she said. “There’s no such thing as a horizontal staircase — but I would like to imagine it.”



Baghramian, left, and colleagues in her Berlin studio work on sculptures that are part of her “Stay Downers” series.
Credit: Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times



“To understand something I need to hold it,” Baghramian said. “Sculpture gave me that opportunity.”
Credit: Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times

Making ‘Psychological Space’

For Max Hollein, the Met’s Austrian-born director, “Breath Holding Spell,” Baghramian’s 2021 exhibition at the Vienna Secession, sealed his urge to collaborate with her. It featured burned glass sections that looked like intestines or air ducts — “they had an erotic aspect but were slightly threatening,” Hollein recalled. Her work, he said, had now developed “deeply charged psychological space.”

On a visit to the Met last year, Baghramian walked the galleries with Akili Tommasino, associate curator of modern and contemporary art and the organizer of her current facade commission. “We ended up spending a lot of time on the backs of sculptures,” Tommasino told me. Many classical works, Baghramian pointed out to him, had rough-hewed backs because they were intended for niches, and viewed only from the front.



"Breath Holding Spell," 2018, at the Vienna Secession in 2021. Credit: Werner Kaligofsky

Always attuned to what gets excluded, Baghramian was thinking about those unfinished backs in almost emotional terms, like a wound. "No care, no love, no detail," she told me. "It's a painful abstraction." They also symbolized a museum's power: what it conceals, rather than reveals, to the world. She has called her commission "Scratching the Back" — a witty title for what is in fact a reflection on how museums work.

Viewers may encounter the sculptures simply as collections of pastel-colored fragments that are spilling out of the niches, yet seem held in by sections of steel grid. It is not clear whether they are entering or escaping, whether they are holding together or coming apart.

But David Breslin, the Met's curator in charge of modern and contemporary art, said that ambiguity applies to the purpose of a museum, which has the challenge of presenting to the public a collection of objects in coherent themes and messages. He viewed Baghramian's project as a "generous critique," he said.

Baghramian said the commission appealed to her because it would reach not just museum-goers but the broader public walking along Fifth Avenue or riding the bus. The museum, she said, projects authority and status; now she was scrambling the message.



Baghramian working on the maquette of "Scratching the Back," her Metropolitan Museum of Art facade commission.
Credit: Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times



"Forming political ideas," she said, "taught me to form sculpture."
Credit: Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times

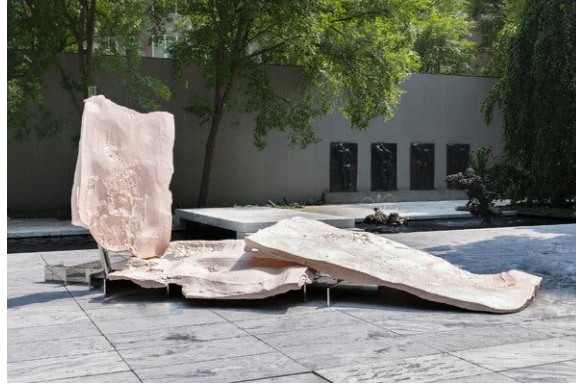
A Channel to Freedom

One subject never appeared in Baghramian's sculpture, at least consciously: her biography. It was a deliberate choice. For one, she refused to be interpreted — or marketed — as a "refugee" or "Iranian" artist. She also wanted to protect the privacy, and dignity, of her family, other dissidents and the women she helped at the shelter.

In her sculpture she implied but avoided depicting the human form — "a purposeful avoidance," she said. It was vulnerable, in her view, to threats, whether they manifest as physical violence or moral harms like sexism or xenophobia. "As soon as the body comes in, there is potential for misuse," she said.

Her new work, "S'adossant (Pauline)," in the MoMA garden, overcomes that reluctance. Colored soft pink, its aluminum sections form a distinctly corporeal pose. They are rough and furrowed, as if marked by time, or by violence.

When she started making this sculpture, Baghramian thought she was drawing on a range of art historical references, from Picasso's "Guernica" to Antonio Canova's "Venus Victrix," a neo-Classical sculptural portrait of Pauline Bonaparte, seminude.



“S’adossant (Pauline)” or “Reclining (Pauline)” at MoMA’s sculpture garden. With this work, Baghramian said, “I have the feeling that I’ve found something very close to me.” Credit: Jonathan Dorado/The Museum of Modern Art

It was her brother Razmik, Baghramian said, who unearthed her repressed memory. Observing how she cut and burned the polystyrene foam at the start of making the work, he reminded her of a time in childhood, back in Iran, when their mother escorted another woman to collect her murdered son’s body from prison. Later the siblings heard their mother describe to their father the horror of seeing marks, including the ghastly burns on his limbs.

“I had thought my brain was so strong as to protect me,” Baghramian said. “But as he was telling me, everything came back.” She dedicated “S’adossant (Pauline)” to all victims and survivors of torture.

But she isn’t pivoting to trauma. At MoMA, in another nod to art history, her sculpture is installed within sight of Henri Matisse’s bronze, “The Back (IV)” — depicting a woman’s gently curved back. Despite their very different emotional registers, she said, she felt a connection between her current New York presentations. Both “show how we collapse, struggle and the next moment stand up and deal with something else.”

In the end, Baghramian told me, sculpture was her own channel to freedom. “As a person, a self, I’m always protecting or arguing for myself or against myself,” she said. “Sculpture doesn’t have those limitations.”