

The Highlights - Rooms No One Lives In

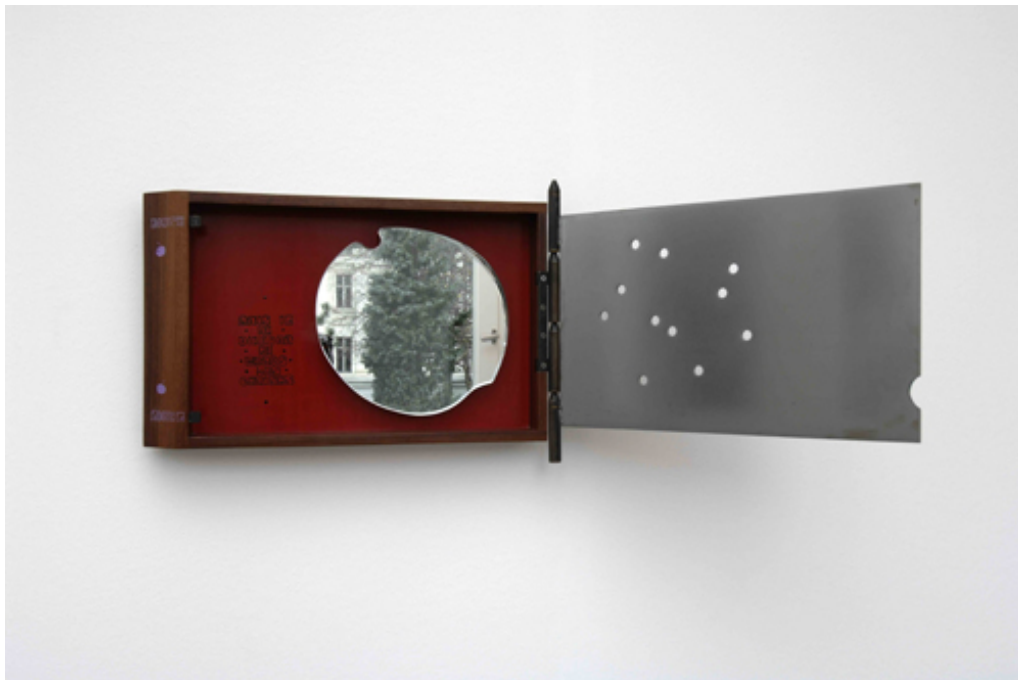
Entering the airy octagonal space of the Schinkel pavilion during last year's Berlin Biennial, I was pleasantly confused by what I saw: A structure within a structure, clean white on the outside and crisp turquoise inside; asymmetrical walls displayed a few sparsely hung objects with delicate grandeur and poise. The mostly mirrored items, seemingly initiated by utility, discreetly revealed themselves through hidden quotes, symbols and clues about figures from literature, politics and history. *À Gustave Courbet, Vanité, Dorian Gray*, read the titles of the mysterious pieces. *Chacun sa vérité* was another title, of a piece in which red lacquered oak shutters partially obscured a curved mirror embedded in varnished mahogany, with the name *Pirandello* delicately inscribed at the top-an inscription so subtle that it took a second glance. Like portholes inviting inquiry, these playful and secretive objects revealed a very personal repertoire of homages, recollections and ideology. However, the indulgent materials -speckled maple, sycamore, pear wood-as well as the precision and delicacy of the pieces seemed out of place-reminiscent of an earlier generation, influenced by years of working for a master craftsman. Where, I found myself asking, did they come from?



Nairy Baghramian/Janette Laverrière, *La Lampe dans l'horloge*, Berlin Biennale 2008.

Iranian-born, Berlin-based artist Nairy Baghramian discovered the work of ninety - eight - year - old Janette Laverrière while dodging the rain in a New York bookstore. She saw the catalogue of the designer's work, read a title of one of her pieces - *La Commune, homage a Louise Michel* - and called her up immediately. On the other line, Laverrière reportedly asked one initial question: was Baghramian *political*? The two ended up in Laverrière's Paris apartment not long after, sharing their views and ideas about their work. Their collaboration

began in earnest at the Schinkel pavilion -as part of a series in which contemporary artists were asked to work with other artists, designers, or architects from a preceding generation. Together they designed the structure within which Laverrière would show her objects, with the fitting overall title *La Lampe dans l'horloge*, (*The Lamp in the Grandfather Clock*), which is also the title of a 1948 André Breton surrealist piece, as well as the name of the Parisian gallery that Laverrière ran in the 1970's. Devising the structure for the older designer's work was an appropriate project for Baghramian, an artist whose oeuvre abounds with liminal sculptural work such as prop-like walls, partitions, or empty frames that often carry a myriad of meaning. On the surface Baghramian played the role of a facilitator: literally setting a stage for Laverrière's objects to be seen by a new audience, in a different context, and thus freeing her work from the constraints of design. Baghramian's structure, like much of her work, acted as a pseudo-interior, a nuanced showcase for art, disguised as interior design.



Janette Laverrière, *La Commune, hommage a Louise Michel*, 2001, Box in varnished rosewood with red, mauve and black lacquer, metal lid.

In truth, Baghramian's work has never placed much stock on the boundaries between art and design. She doesn't so much problematize them as work ovetop, through, and around them, with other things on her mind. This moment of stepping into the role of facilitator has folded back into the work of the artist - both artists - who have now embarked on an ongoing and fruitful conversation.

One can only assume that when Baghramian noticed the title that led her to Laverrière, it was because she was already familiar with the legendary Louise Michel, a feminist, social

activist, and schoolteacher associated with the Paris Commune. Michel represents a type of revolutionary figure who seems to be near the heart of what is essential to both artists: the potential of artwork to possess a power of defiant intelligence and rebellion. In Laverrière's piece, *La Commune, hommage a Louise Michel, 2001*, a hinged iron shutter with bullet-like holes reveals a beveled cherry-shaped mirror surrounded by red lacquer rosewood. Painted on the side is a quote from the popular French revolutionary song *Le Temp des Cerises*. The perforated holes in this piece call to mind Baghramian's *La colonne cassée (1871)*, (*The broken column (1871)*), a piece (shown elsewhere in Berlin's Biennial), in which two large, elegantly curved, black and white metal bookends face each other, sandwiching the large glass wall of the Mies van der Rohe-designed Neue Nationalgalerie. The sculptures are symmetrical except for their patterns of holes, which don't quite match up. As if trying to make contact, the two sculptural forms are in support of the space they inhabit but are also divided by it; without the weight of the white slabs holding them down, they would topple and shatter the glass. Drawing our attention to Mies's wall, they render the transparent boundary opaque. This piece exemplifies some of the strongest aspects of Baghramian's work, possessing an undeniable, minimal, formal elegance that elicits a multi-layered relationship with its surroundings, challenging our understanding of a space, building or structure. The strength of the evocation comes up from under its quiet appearance.



Nairy Baghramian, *La colonne cassée, 1871*, 2008. Painted steel 190 × 245 × 140 cm each. Courtesy Collection Wiese. Installation view berlin biennale 5, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Photo by Simon Vogel.

Intentional or not, the symbiotic relationship of the like minds of Janette Laverrière and Nairy Baghramian is apparent in the formal aspects of their work. Whether it be from Laverrière's long practice in furniture-making, or from Baghramian's shrewd understanding of sculptural art history, the formal elegance that they both possess seems to provide a veneer concealing a powerful undercurrent of political and social meaning. What interests me about their shared ground is the underlying desire to communicate something beyond a

referential or fetishistic design vocabulary. Laverrière was inspired by her architect father, as well as by members of the Bauhaus: a one-time communist, she worked in the empire of designer Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann, and has spent a large part of her life making functional, primarily utilitarian objects. Yet even early on, it was apparent that there was latent content under the surface of the table, such as in the desk she designed for an "ambassador's wife" which had hidden drawers to encourage a potential secret life. In her most recent work, such psychology is more direct as she reaches for historical figures that represent her intellectual ideals.

Baghramian's work is similarly resonant: while avoiding the overt, her work is seeping with allusion, with titles like *The Walker's Day Off*, *It is Outside of the House*, and *The Halfway House*. Such titles often imply an unknown entity, an action, or a psychological element that the sculptural work enacts in a subtly anthropomorphic way. Often with references to the house and the interior, Baghramian underscores her interest in interior design and in the problematic gender associations it often brings with it. The photos and images that she frequently includes provide more clues to the expanded, multilayered narrative within the work: for example, the stunning invite to a recent exhibition shows the image of the back of a woman walking through a doorway, taken from Cassavetes' film *Opening Night* - presenting us with a character entering a room beyond our reach. The direction of our attention is deflected and diverted to something that we cannot immediately comprehend, something that lies just outside of the house. This multilayered and evasive approach allows breathing room for an airy investigation into what the possible dimensions of the work could be.



Nairy Baghramian, Installation View, *Affairen. Ein semiotisches Haus, das nie gebaut wurde*, Nairy Baghramian zu Gast Janette Laverrière & Henrik Olesen, NAK Aachen, 2008.

The most recent collaboration between the two artists took place at the Neuer Aachener Kunstverein under the title of *Affairen. Ein semiotisches Haus, das nie gebaut wurde* (*Affairs. A semiotic house in vain*) and it involved Baghramian, Laverrière, and a third artist, Henrik Olesen. In a piece by Laverrière called *J'accuse*, 2008, a mirror shaped like a Cheshire Cat smile hangs from a chain on a concave mirrored bolt, ominously reflecting the visitor and most of the interior space around it. *J'accuse* was the first word of Emile Zola's famous text regarding the Dreyfus Affair - again a theme revisited: the wrongly accused. The

interplay between Laverrière's innocuous but sly mirrored pieces and Baghramian's reflected, folded, and unfolded structural screens works well both formally and conceptually. Whoever inhabits this fictitious interior space-the visitor or unknown other - is reflected in the objects, immediately becoming a part of the conversation. However, through their reflective opacity, the objects are at once welcoming a closer look while also referring the visitor to a distant or nearby distraction; leading the view from one piece to the next, the work caves in on itself, creating a space that barely exists.

Like the work of the mysterious Jean Michel Frank, a designer whose strangely lavish, yet delicate interiors were described by his contemporaries as "rooms that no one lived in", Baghramian's installations often teeter on a threshold, as if waiting for potential scenarios. Laverrière's mirrored objects have provided perfect characters for them to interact with. Together, the work of these two artists insinuates a more complicated story, with endless potential for a drama to unfold with an allusive protagonist. Stenciled on the Laverrière's 1989 *Cocteau* mirror is a fitting invocation: "Reflect, O mirror, make me beautiful and I will tell you my secrets."