

NAIRY BAGHRAMIAN. *Misfits*

By Bruna Roccasalva

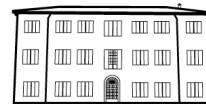
The artist's first solo exhibition in an Italian institution, *Misfits* encapsulates some of the constitutive elements of Baghramian's work, such as her investigation of the very definition of sculpture, based on a practice deeply rooted in the sculptural language and her interest in crossing and re-imagining the border between interior and exterior. It also highlights her attention to materials and the process of production of the aesthetic object in its relation to the setting and to the properties of a specific artistic practice.

For two decades **Nairy Baghramian** has been conducting rigorous formal and conceptual research, investigating the relationship between architecture, object and the human body. In her reflection on the political potential of the sculptural form she focuses on the importance of the physicality of the work, which embodies ideas and theoretical assumptions through its specific formal, material and presentational features.

Baghramian firmly believes that despite its considerable autonomy, a work of art is inextricably linked to the time, place and socio-political context in which it appears. Accordingly, for the *Misfits* project, she began with the specific urban setting of the GAM. The Neoclassical Villa Reale, which houses the museum, overlooks a magnificent English garden, one of the first of its kind in Milan. Curiously, it is open to adults only when accompanied by children. The contrasting impressions created by a context that evokes the reassuring and playful world of childhood, while at the same time engendering a sense of frustration through its limited accessibility, provide the inspiration for *Misfits*. By combining the idea of play as an educational tool with reflection on the experience of disappointment and inadequacy, Baghramian has created a series of large-scale sculptures, formally designed to inhabit both the interior and exterior spaces of the museum.

Inside the museum, the exhibition unfolds across five rooms, each housing a sculptural piece. These works inhabit the rooms in a discrete way, according to a deliberately rarefied arrangement that expands the space between the architecture, the work and the viewer engaging with them. This rarefaction is pushed to the limit through the artist's choice to create a 'break' in the itinerary. The exhibition continues on the terrace adjacent to the rooms, which visitors can catch a glimpse of through the windows – or from the garden, but always according to the rules governing its access. On the outdoor terrace there are five sculptural pieces, and they are arranged according to those in the museum rooms. Each work on display comprises two halves that are made of different materials – painted casted aluminum and wood for the interior pieces, marble for the exterior ones – and installed as the disjointed parts of a possible whole.

Baghramian has always been interested in exploring the relationship between interior and exterior – between the institution and its socio-cultural context, the work and its setting, the idea and the concrete form it takes. The artist intervenes in spaces that mark a boundary, in order to cross and rethink them. These interspaces are places for reflection, for raising doubts and posing questions. Separating opposites, rather than trying to make them fit together, means questioning everything that lies between these two extremes, and hence undermining fixed ideas and pre-established rules.



The partial displacement of each sculpture outside the rooms of the GAM creates an osmosis between the space devoted to art and that of a public garden primarily open to children. The disassembled parts of these sculptures evoke the structure typical of certain toys based on making geometric shapes fit together. From childhood, we are taught to assemble elements that dovetail perfectly and hence to develop a way of thinking according to which things must necessarily fit one another. Baghramian's sculptures negate this alleged coincidence: their forms do not dovetail perfectly; on the contrary, they offer the experience of error as the only possible one, inviting us to discover beauty precisely in their imperfect juxtaposition.

The artist's choice and treatment of materials also contributes to conveying this experience. Understanding the nature of materials and testing their potential are crucial aspects of Baghramian's practice. This approach often translates into the unusual association of different materials within the same work, as is also the case with the sculptures in this exhibition, which combine wood and varnished aluminum casts with marbles of different kinds and provenances. Aluminum is a recurring material in the artist's production, whereas the hand-painted finish is unique. The rigor and precision of industrial methods, reminiscent of the Minimalist tradition, makes way for a more pictorial attitude, which accepts the imperfections and flaws of the 'handmade.'

Misfits has also given the artist a unique opportunity to approach a traditional material such as marble for the first time and, by collaborating with Fondazione Henraux, to become familiar with its history, quarrying, and processing. The choice of marble has been far from random: in using this noble material – which has always stood as a symbol of completeness and perfection – to lend sculptural form to imperfection, Baghramian is questioning every preconceived notion of beauty and form, thus suggesting that sculpture too should have 'the chance not to fulfil expectations.'

Misfits springs from a short-circuit of impressions and moods, and is informed by the perfect synthesis of contradictions marking *Jumbled Alphabet*, the photographic portrait of a child. While the reference to the world of childhood is explicit in this work, the girl's frown contradicts the child portrait genre stereotype, reminding us that any typification and classification stems from constructions and superstructures. The work's title is an allusion to the game that consists in reordering jumbled letters of the alphabet to form meaningful words. But the girl's grumpy and rebellious expression seems to urge us not to let our cognitive capacities automatically be activated to ensure an orderly arrangement.

This 'incorrect' portrait and the sculptures with imperfect fits, then, are not based on pre-established and generalized aesthetic canons, but foresee the possibility of error, inadequacy, and failure. They reveal the beauty of these experiences, which are part of the individual's formation, by showing that they can find a *raison d'être* even as formal manifestations.