

# MOUSSE

Mousse  
Nairy Baghramian.  
*Addressing the Institution*  
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## 8. Nairy Baghramian. Addressing the Institution

### SCULPTURE CENTER

44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, New York 11101  
sculpture-center.org

Those who dislike dentistry might get a bit squeamish when entering SculptureCenter's cavernous main gallery space, which is very ably anchored by Nairy Baghramian's large, somewhat sinister-looking sculptural installation *RETAINER* (2013). The title is apt, as the spindly, thin, criss-crossing chromed metal legs – holding up seventeen fleshy-looking, oozy silicon and polycarbonate panels – resemble some primitive tooth corrective, and the panels themselves are shaped very much *like* teeth, though they're translucent and thin in parts, thick and globular in others, and appear almost like skin. Roughly human-scaled and arranged in a sweeping semicircle, they evoke both the contours of a mouth and a row of people looking back at you as you look at them. This awkward form of spectatorship – a charged gathering, in a way – is suggestive of the title's other meaning, a fee paid in advance for services rendered. In this case, it's the artist's, with the sculptures her institutional product.

This complicity between viewer and object, artist and space, are thus the real gambit of *RETAINER*, or “the catch,” as the press materials state. This is a translation of the German phrase *Der Pferdefuß*, or “the horse's foot”, alluded to by a side gallery c-print of a horse's leg bandaged in yellow gauze. It's surrounded by what look like deconstructed frames blown apart and repurposed dysfunctionally. Merely aesthetic, their value is determined by this privileged setting. The question of value – specifically, institutional value – has always been addressed by Baghramian's oeuvre, often in very subtle ways, but other times dramatically through direct architectural interventions, such as blocking the Serpentine Gallery's doorway with curving forms or buttressing both sides of Berlin's iconic Neue Nationalgalerie with black metal for *La Colonne Cassée (1871)* (2008).

With *RETAINER*, SculptureCenter's own architecture is also implicated, though in dissimilar ways. Not only does Baghramian otherwise leave the space unadorned and unaltered – so that the industrial relics of its carriage-making past, such as the prominent brick walls, metal gurney, and clerestory catwalk, are acutely visible – but the building's street-side exterior provides the surface for *RETAINER*'s wall label. Listing off the artist's name, the work's title and a laundry list of media, the text's siting brings the work inside outside, putting both in dialectical tension, as she does with much of her aforementioned interests. She once noted, “You have to be able to investigate everything. You have to move on unstable ground, otherwise everything becomes too stable.” *RETAINER*, with its title's multivalent meanings and institutional implications, proves neither space nor object is ever easily determined.

(text by David Everitt Howe)



8 Nairy Baghramian, *RETAINER*, installation view at Sculpture Center, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella