



Lia Bagrationi, *Car as a Wall*, 2016, installation view at *Festival Future Memory*.

Fighting Stereotypes

Georgian sculptor and installation artist Lia Bagrationi make artworks that she hopes will not be defined by the medium. She is not afraid of dynamic confrontation through her work, indeed her art thrives on it.

By Charles Merewether

Visiting the annual art *Fest i Nova Festival* in Garikhula, Georgia, we walk past a rusted car shell but, notice that it is also partially filled with clay and cement. In fact, it is part of the *2016 Festival Future Memory*, a work entitled *Car as a Wall* (2016), by the Georgian artist Lia Bagrationi. Working with “a Soviet-era automobile and clay, sand and cement,” she notes, “this object defines the Soviet past—[the] rusty, broken car is a metaphor, which became [the] basis of the body of post-Soviet society. To cover it with earth is an attempt to make it meaningless and to forget it.”¹

Similarly distinctive were a recent series of framed ‘paintings’ *Drought* (2016).² Small in scale, they are monochrome cracked surfaces creating an ab-

stract surface reminiscent of an Italian post-war artist. But we read they are made of clay and glue on canvas. They are in fact mock paintings. A form of deconstructive practice, in which the medium belies painting as much as, in Bagrationi’s notes, “depriv(ing) the clay of the veneer of craftsmanship and laying bare its essence.”³

Georgian by birth, Lia Bagrationi (b.1957, Tbilisi) has, over the past 15 years, worked internationally, through exhibitions, residencies, workshops, and symposia. Currently professor of fine arts in the Faculty of Design at the Tbilisi State Academy of Arts, she had always wanted to be an architect, but was introduced to painting by her teacher. She began to study painting but one day she overheard, by accident, a student talking

about ‘firing.’ So fascinated by the word itself, she quickly learnt that the student was referring to the process of ceramic firing and decided to enroll in the faculty of ceramics.

In 1993, she made *Direction*, a series of ceramic rocks. The work was a modest proposal as to how ceramics might simulate another medium, which became a hallmark of her approach. They were reminiscent of a Richard Long’s *stone* installation work. But Bagrationi transposed Long’s idea into a ceramic piece in miniature, laying down a series of various ceramic stones in an unwinding circle. This was followed by another series of small animals entitled *Centaurus*. Bagrationi returned to this series time and again in the 1990s through to 2013. We see influences recalling the art of an-

tiquity, such as Assyrian clay sculpture.

Ten years after *Direction* she made *Money* (2003), her first significant and distinct work.⁴ Using terracotta and gold or, on occasion, porcelain and platinum, Bagrationi produced a series of more than 40 small, plaque-shaped pieces: many are only 23 x 13 centimeters.

At the time, she wrote: "How did the concept of money illusion come about? Why do we empower colored paper with a certain value? Coins and banknotes gain worth when we assign numbers to them and agree they are currency. The same idea is at the core of *Money Illusion* where clay banknotes are inlaid with precious metals. Clay is common earth, while copper, gold, and platinum are held in high regard by all cultures. The combination presents an aesthetic."⁵

Most of what she made between 2004 and 2007 was produced during her residencies in Vallauris in France and Guldagergaard in Denmark.

It was an intense and productive period of some four years. During that time, she traveled and worked making a series of new work. She had already been on a two-month residency as guest artist at the Lakeside Studio, Lakeside, Michigan (USA) in May/June of 2001.



Lia Bagrationi, *Money Illusion*, 2003, smoked terracotta and copper, 13 x 23 cm

In 2005 she took a two-month residency, in June and July, at AIR Vallauris, Vallauris, France. It was a turning point: Bagrationi was in a professional environment of dialogue and exchange of ideas and the possibility of seeing very different kinds of practice by visiting fellow artists and teachers of different ages and nationalities. Among the artists she met was Ingrid Lilligren, an Iowa State University ceramic artist and professor whose ideas

and practice Bagrationi found inspiring.⁶

In November 2006, Bagrationi went to the Guldagergaard's International Ceramic Research Center in Denmark on a one-month residency. There, she met Paul Scott, the artist and writer and professor at the National Academy of Arts, Oslo.⁷ She returned to Guldagergaard on another one-month residency in February, 2008. During this time, she met the Dutch artist Alexandra Engelfriet, again an influ-



Lia Bagrationi, *Money Illusion*, 2011, installation view.

ential artist for Bagrationi and with whom she made a work in Georgia. This experience led to a new body of work with the series *Mirror Reflections of Vanishing Cities* (2008–2009). Made of porcelain, terracotta, and stoneware, the work was a series that appeared as ruined or collapsing building constructions.⁸ At that time, Georgian art critic Khatuna Khabuliani wrote: “The installation *Mirror Reflections* ... tells a story of past and present, everlasting power games, fatal decisions, and their anonymous victims through minimalistic forms. It is small-scale and, at the same time, very expressive drama.”⁹

Bagrationi's *Two Figures* (2012/2013),¹⁰ again small in scale, is simply two pieces of glazed stoneware attached to one another. Tacitly referring to Brancusi's *The Kiss*, Bagrationi noted: “As I started to work on my series, *Two Figures*, I was thinking about the sexual act between two people; as an ultimate contact, you can't get any closer to another human being without violating their physical integrity. Nature provides 'screws and bolts' so the bodies sink perfectly into one another just like two pieces of Lego. My intent[ion] is to pay homage to Brancusi's *The Kiss*, by taking a step further and stripping it down to its absolute essence in order to present the bare mechanics of intimacy.”¹¹

In 2013 Bagrationi participated in the *International Ceramic Festival* of which she was one of the organizers and was part of a bigger *Arts and Craft Telavi Festival*. She performed *Seasaw*, in collaboration with Alexandra Engelfriet and two young Georgian artists, Irina Jibuti and Merab Gugunashvili.¹²

Bagrationi has diversified her practice greatly since 2014. It has not meant letting go of her predominant media of clay and terracotta entirely but more the inclusion of other media. The ironic play to which she refers as a ‘deconstructive’ approach gained in strength.

For a solo show entitled *Vice Versa* at Gala Gallery in 2014 she wrote: “My latest artistic research focuses on deconstruction experiments that take place in different media. The show unites seven objects, which are made through deconstruction of easel paintings and demonstrate transformation of the picture and the frame. Very often we unconsciously follow the stereotype that a painting has to be placed in a frame. My latest works debate this stereotype and allow framed paintings to overcome the



Lia Bagrationi, *This is a Pot*, 2015, height 40 cm.

boundaries and become part of infinity. The main object of the exhibition, *Mona Lisa* (2014), serves as the guide of the concept where Leonardo's painting—the sacred attribute of the Western culture—takes its journey in a new context.¹³

During this time, she was invited back to Garikula to make a new work. She made a major work *Construction Transformations (Stairs)* (2014–2015), which was composed of what appears as

a small open archaeological site of interconnected trenches with a concrete staircase leading down and up higher than the ground surface. She cites the poet T.S. Eliot, who wrote in *The Dry Salvages*: “And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back.” She was to write for the catalogue the following: “Ceramics with its long tradition is densely attached to the human being and the earth. Clay is one of the pillars of the

human existence. As an artist the working process with clay is truly an interesting challenge for me For the cognition of the substance of clay I used the imitation of archaeological dig. Going down to the ground gives the feeling of touching the layers of the civilizations where the clay, as a memory vessel and deliverer of the creative potential, begins.”¹⁴

Bagrationi also made *Construction Deconstruction* (2014) for *Artisterium7*. “The installation represents raw clay construction with medical IV system on top of it with water dripping constantly from it and it creates a self-renewable visual system. With drops of water, dry clay collapses and then turns to its original substance, which is ready and eager to become a new form. This characteristic of clay acts as ‘an author’ in the work. It leads the process in such a way that becomes a creator of itself.”¹⁵

The range and diversity of Bagrationi's engagement with ceramics has continued over the past two years with, for example, *A Mad Tea Party* (2015), composed of a table with a row of smashed



Lia Bagrationi, *This is a Pot*, 2015, height 110 cm.



Lia Bagrationi, *A Mad Tea Party*, 2015, installation view.

clay cups, saucers, teapots, and on the wall a group of coiled ceramic rings *On Point* (2015).¹⁶ In 2016, she made *This is a Pot*, an installation of four pots. One of the four pots is a traditional vase; the others appear either unfinished or in part destroyed with pieces on the ground. Again, as before, she called it “This is not a pot,” thereby expressing the sentiment that her work should not be defined in terms of medium.

Bagrationi has now diversified her practice even more with *Marveled to Find the Grave* (2016), made for an ‘eco friendly’ exhibition *Green*. She collected the polyethylene bags she had used at home over two months, then heaped them together in the gallery corner.¹⁷ For her participation in *Artisterium 9/ Kill the Buddha!* (October 3, 2016) at Karvasla, she showed a piece of bread covered with fungi, titled: “*Metaphoric consideration of the extremely sad finality of the visible world, in favor of a fictitious world built upon the agony of bread, that fortunately can’t feel it.*” Δ

Notes:

1. See catalogue *Fest i Nova 2016, International Festival of Contemporary*

Art, in honor of the Zdanevich Brothers, to be published 2017.

2. The artist exhibited in a group exhibition *Clay Wall Piece* curated by Lali Kutateladze in the Dimitri Shevardnadze National Gallery in Tbilisi, 2016.
3. *Clay Wall Piece*, catalogue, 2016.
4. Bagrationi returned to the series in 2006 and then in 2011 showed *Money*—also called *Money Illusion*—in a solo show at Baia Gallery, Tbilisi.
5. See Sophie Kilasonia, “Money Illusion,” *24 Saati*, Georgian newspaper, June 11, 2012.
6. Lilligren later invited Bagrationi as a Guest artist for a two-week residency to the Iowa State University in May 2007.
7. Scott was to later include her artwork in his book *Ceramics and Print*, Bloomsbury Publications, 2012.
8. See *Fest i Nova 2 a row of clay G-of Contemporary of Contemporary Art in honor of Zdanevch Brothers*.
9. Khabuliani, “Money Illusion and Vanishing Cities,” online, *Artaarea*. tv-Blog, June 23, 2014.
10. Together with another series *Decadence*, it was exhibited in the exhibition *Clay as a Memory Vessel* at Gala Gallery in 2014. Bagrationi wrote

at the time: “Clay is a matter eager to become a form. Forms of nature, forms ever shaped by a human, forms never created rest in the infinite memory of its substance. My task is to let these forms free and bring memories of clay to life.”

11. unpublished.
12. The Festival was organized by TRAM in collaboration with the Telavi municipality.
13. “Bypass Road – Without Rule/Lia Bagrationi,” Georgian newspaper, *Rezonansi*, May 7, 2015. This article also appears in Gala Gallery catalogue, 2016.
14. Catalogue *Fest i Nova’15 G-Force, International Festival of Contemporary Art in honor of Zdanevich Brothers*.
15. Catalogue *Artisterium8*, 2015.
16. The exhibition was made within the framework of *Artisterium8* at Artarea Gallery. Curated by Nestan Abdushelishvili, the exhibition included video and sound installations.
17. The exhibition was curated by Ketii Shavgulidze at the Dimitri Shevardnadze National Gallery.

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