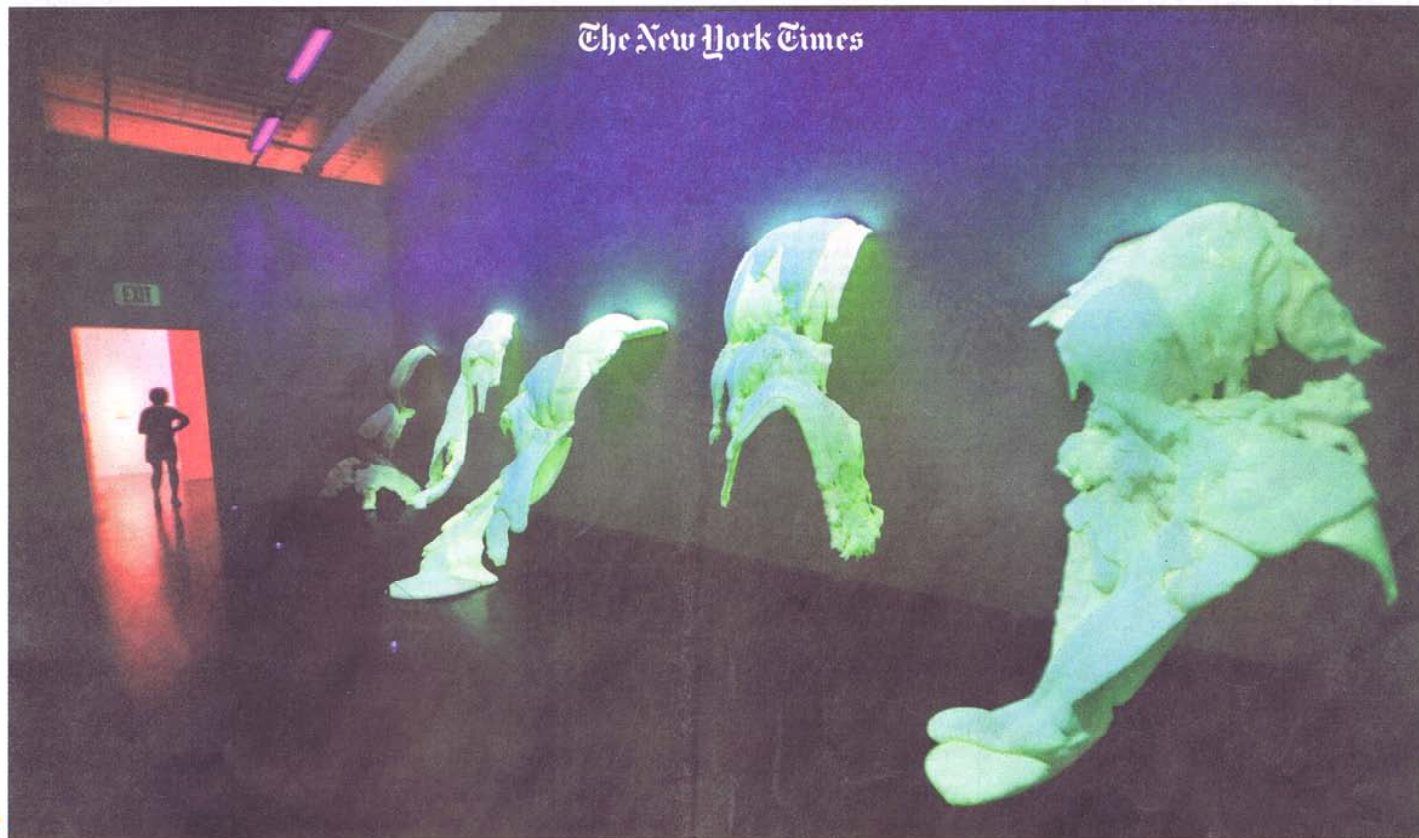


Smith, Roberta. "Artful Commentary, Oozing From the Walls." *The New York Times*, 18 February 2011, p. C23, C25.



SUZANNE DECHILLO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Lynda Benglis embraced the move to flowing forms among artists of her generation but rejected the drabness of the period. Her "Phantom" (1971) is part of an exhibition at the New Museum.

## Artful Commentary, Oozing From the Walls

The New Museum has become a busy place this year, and it is not yet even

**ROBERTA SMITH**

**ART REVIEW**

March. In January it opened a popular tribute to the market-hardy paintings of George Condo. Now it is offering a startlingly excellent resurrection of the prescient Post-Minimalist renegade Lynda Benglis and her gaudy, multi-dexterous and often gender-bending segues among Process, Performance and Body Art.

Ms. Benglis is something of a mythic character, as many female artists of the 1960s and early '70s are by now. Working in pigmented latex, beeswax or polyurethane foam and even glitter, she made daring, often ephemeral or fragile works that have plenty of historical weight but little market presence.

Permanence seems to have been the last thing on her mind, at least in the early years. Many pieces were temporary installations that did not survive; others had the kind of willful fragility

### Lynda Benglis

**WHEN AND WHERE** Through June 19; New Museum, 235 Bowery, at Prince Street, Lower East Side.

**MORE INFO** (212) 219-1222, [newmuseum.org](http://newmuseum.org).

that makes collectors nervous. One of her most famous works is nothing but a brilliantly orchestrated magazine ad: a performance-slash-photograph that ran

in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum* for which she posed, taut and well-oiled, wearing only a pair of rhinestone-studded cat-eye sunglasses and wielding a dildo.

Ms. Benglis was born near New Orleans in Lake Charles, La., in 1941. Her father was the American-born son of Greek immigrants who returned to their homeland, and she visited her grandmother in Megisti, on the Greek island of Kastellorizo, several times as a child and young woman. The decorative

bravado of New Orleans Mardi Gras and the figurative tradition of Classical Greek sculpture are two points on the aesthetic compass worth keeping in mind when encountering her works.

After studying art at the H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College for Women at Tulane University in New Orleans, she arrived in New York in the mid-1960s and proceeded to become something of an art star. In 1970 she was

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUZANNE D'ACHILLO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Benglis works, from left, on floor: "Blatt" (1969), "Night Sherbert A." (1968), "Untitled (VW)" (1970); on wall, from left: "Hoofers I" and "Hoofers II" (1971-72) and "Karen" (1972).

## Artful Commentary, Oozing From the Walls and Floors

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anointed by Life magazine, with an article that compared her to Jackson Pollock. It showed her pouring big, bright, irresistible slurps of latex on the floor, making a resolutely abstract installation piece that spoke loud and clear of its own making. Borrowing variously from Abstract Expressionism, Color Field painting, Pop Art and Minimalism in their embrace of process, vivid, physically intrinsic color and nontraditional materials, the poured-latex pieces look these days about as bona-fide Post-Minimalist as you can get.

But while Ms. Benglis embraced her generation's devotion to soft, unstructured materials that had minds of their own, she abjured its predilection for gray-on-gray drabness or, at most, real-world color. She was on board with the concept of making art that didn't look like art, of avoiding traditional forms of painting and sculpture by knocking their heads together. But she had no intention of relinquishing an iota of the visual power or immediacy staked out by preceding postwar art movements.

The New Museum organized this exhibition in concert with the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands; the Museum of Modern Art in Dublin; Le Consortium in Dijon, France; and the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. Given this broad-based genesis, the catalog is suitably profuse, full of essays, reproductions of long-lost installation pieces and series of works not represented in the show.

Usually this would be irritating. Ms. Benglis is a restless artist always trying new materials and techniques, undeterred by the prospect of diluting her brand or making works that don't necessarily scream Benglis at us. But the show's 50 works — including videos that predict the work of Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley — span more than 40 years and touch most of the important

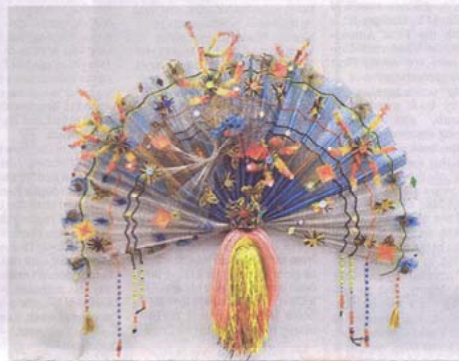
bases. They have for the most part been elegantly installed by Massimiliano Giuni, the New Museum's chief curator.

From the beginning nothing was beyond the pale when it came to making a visual statement. Not even glowing in the dark, thanks to phosphorescent pigment. This is exemplified by the eerily glowing five-part "Phantom," seen in a darkened gallery. Unexhibited since it was created on the spot at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kan., in 1971, it is the only intact survivor of six or eight ambitious foam-pour installations that Ms. Benglis made during these years. Its melting, cantilevered (and self-supporting) cascades of iridescent whiteness spring off the wall as if determined to escape all conventional art categories while burning holes in your visual memory — both of which they still do.

In the 1970s Ms. Benglis was constantly out there on her own, stopping traffic and irritating people with her innate sense of personal flamboyance, her penchant for formal excess and her calculated manipulations of art-world standards, the most extreme instance of which was of course the Artforum ad. It precipitated irate letters to the editor, the resignation of several longtime writers and the forcible separation of ad from magazine by various college librarians. (The catalog includes a photograph of an exfoliated magazine.)

To this exhibition's credit the Artforum ad — which remains almost picture perfect in its heady confusion of gender, Hollywood and camp — is displayed in a vitrine in a back gallery, beside the Life magazine spread and across from five little-known grids of Polaroids from the same time that echo its overheated eroticism. It is but a small part of a much larger and more complex picture in which deviation, volatility and the body are explored along largely formal, abstract lines, with eccentric, often liquid materials reigning supreme.

There are two latex pieces — "Blatt" and "Contraband," both from 1969 — at



"Zanzidae, From the Peacock Series" (1979), a wall piece that incorporates glass and plastic in various forms, at the New Museum exhibition.

the New Museum. Slightly wrinkled and dusty, they still communicate an implicitly bodily, erotic juiciness. These works unleash Pollock's drips from the rhythmic ordering of his looping gestures, bypassing his famous "dance" for a more visceral, unruly conjuring of the body, almost turned inside out and reduced to a kind of puddle of slithering color.

This exhibition stresses Ms. Benglis's dual role as innovator and commentator, adept at extending ideas of her mostly male contemporaries while also skewing and skewering them with her own implicitly libidinous sensibility. The latex pieces are exuberant, Disneyfied retorts to Richard Serra's splashings of

molten lead. Her narrow, jewel-colored wax paintings from the same time take the waxy surfaces of Brice Marden's early monochrome panel paintings to extremes: a brush width across and a brush stroke long, they maintain the integrity of each new layer of color with mouthwatering clarity, while building up a surface that feels dangerously (which is to say erotically) like skin itself.

From the foundation of the wax paintings and the latex pieces, this exhibition follows Ms. Benglis as she improvises her way from one series to the next. She adds foam and dimensionality to her floor pieces and then makes them leap off the wall in works like "Phantom." In

ONLINE: **LYNDA BENGLIS**

More photos of the artist and her work:  
[nytimes.com/design](http://nytimes.com/design)

the mid-1970s she begins casting some foam sculptures in aluminum, lead and bronze, destroying them while contrasting their conical forms with the sober, more lasting materials of traditional sculpture.

Meanwhile the wax paintings, which here span from 1966 to 1972, give way to works like "Hoofers I" and "Hoofers II," thin columns of aluminum screening covered with cheesecloth dipped in plaster that she swabbed with glitter. Next she knots these columns, evoking Pollock's dripped skeins in three dimensions and then adding Pollock-like drips of paint and glitter, as beautifully exemplified by the 1973 "PSI." Later knots are sprayed with metal and then elaborated with Fortuny-like folds.

In one gallery "Mimos," a simple torso-like wall piece in gold leaf over chicken wire and plaster, from 1978, contrasts with the extravagant "Zanzidae, From the Peacock Series," a 1979 wall piece that incorporates glass and plastic in various forms and wouldn't look out of place at Mardi Gras or in Zeffirelli's production of "Turandot." Also here are more recent excursions into glass and ceramics, mossy rubberized foam and pigmented urethane, which has a jelly-like translucence.

Whether you have been watching Ms. Benglis's varied career for decades or know her primarily from the latex pieces and her star turn in Artforum, this exhibition pulls together and elaborates her remarkable career in a thrilling way. It proves her work to be all over the place and very much of a piece, as well as consistently, irrepressibly ahead of its time. This would seem to be every renegade artist's dream.