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Starting with cheerful spills of industrial materials, **Lynda Benglis** has teased the limits of taste, eroticism, and the male-dominated art world

'Getting Paint Off the Wall'

BY ANN LANDI



IN AN ERA OF GLOBE-TROTTING ARTISTS, Lynda Benglis may be one of the most peripatetic of all. In just a few weeks this past winter, the 68-year-old artist was in Ireland, India, France, and New Mexico, overseeing the installation of fountains and working on an international retrospective that will start its U.S. tour at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence on October 1, moving to the New Museum in New York in 2011. "Travel," she says, "is when I can relax."

Benglis's four-decade career has encompassed just about every medium imaginable—including rubber, paper, glass, bronze, ceramics, and video. Lately she has been most involved with the construction of "hydraulic sculptures," such as *North South East West* (2009) in the garden of the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, the first venue for her retrospective. It's a monumental quartet of rearing, clawlike apparitions, neither animal nor inanimate, that "just came cascading off the wall," in Benglis's words. "Structurally these happened because I was thinking, 'How do I get paint off the wall?'"

One way or another, "getting paint off the wall" has been her goal from the beginning, and it was her signature gesture when she moved to New York from New Orleans, in the late '60s. The pieces that first earned her serious critical attention were made of wax, polyurethane foam, and poured pigmented latex. They oozed across the floor in cheerful spills, projected from the wall in startling sci-fi shapes, or puddled in corners like the blobby scat of some gigantic beast. And they were a smart if playful slap in the face to the dominant Minimalist esthetic of the day—a rejection of what she

terms the "puritanical quality of the work ethic" of those times.

Benglis (inset) has lately been involved in constructing what she calls "hydraulic sculptures," like the cast-bronze fountain *North South East West*, 2009, in the garden of the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin.

That rejection culminated in the notorious 1974 ad for *Artforum*, the subject of a show last year at Susan Inglett Gallery in Chelsea, which documented the shock waves the ad sent through the art world. Appearing in the same issue as art historian Robert Pincus-Witten's exegesis of Benglis's

work, it showed the artist naked from the knees up, wearing nothing but sunglasses and diamond stud earrings and brandishing an improbably long phallus between her legs. The ad gave off mixed signals, from the butch haircut to the cheesecake tan lines, and still provokes discomfort today. Was it a feminist statement, a parody of pinups, or a saucy rejoinder to macho culture (and, specifically, to a contemporaneous photograph of artist Robert Morris wearing little but chains and a Nazi helmet)?

Today, the plump and silver-haired artist claims that it was none of the above, but rather the outcome of largely playful thinking about gender roles and the visual nature of

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Contraband, 1969, poured pigmented latex. Benglis sought out “non-art” materials in the stores along Canal Street that sold industrial paints and supplies.

pornography—how it works as erotica and what signals it sends out about our culture. Before the ad appeared, she had Annie Leibovitz take shots of her in a Betty Grable-like pose, jeans dropped around her ankles, as announcements for a show at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York. At the time, she and Morris were exchanging ideas and videos, playing with notions about gender politics. Morris even accompanied her to a Times Square porn shop to buy the dildo. “I got the biggest one I could find,” she recalls.

Of the nascent feminist movement of the times, which was drawing in artists as diverse as Nancy Spero and Hannah Wilke, Benglis says, “I wasn’t particularly interested in the politics until I saw that I was riding this wave of a revolution. I had to make comments, that’s all. And I wanted to put some humor into it.” She was not, she says, a meetings person. “I don’t care who takes out the garbage. I was really interested in real waves in the world—the form, the sculpture.”

Years earlier, Benglis had absorbed some very powerful feminist lessons from her Greek grandmother, with whom she traveled to Megisti, an island 70 miles east of Rhodes, several times as a child and young woman to visit an ancestral homestead (which she now owns). “Greek women own property. Greek women do whatever the hell they want to do,” Benglis says.



In works like *Quartered Meteor*, 1969/75, a huge blob of lead, Benglis rejected the dominant Minimalist esthetic of the time and its “puritanical work ethic.”

Her father, Michael Benglis, was born in Texas and settled in Lake Charles, Louisiana, where he owned a building-supply business. Her mother, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, hailed from Mississippi, and Benglis recalls her as “totally out of Faulkner.” As a child, the artist liked to invent plays and skits with her sister. “On New Year’s Eve we would have all our dolls come alive and perform in a little theater,” she says. More important for her vocabulary as a future sculptor, however, was a passion for “boating all over, almost to the gulf” and finding inspiration in the natural world along the waterways. Later, as a student at Newcomb College, the women’s branch of Tulane University in New Orleans, she discovered “an environment rich in organic matter”—the lush flora and fauna of the bayous and the Mississippi Delta—along with the school’s famous, and inspiring, ceramics department, founded and expanded by George E. Ohr, the so-called Mad Potter of Biloxi.

Before she graduated, Benglis briefly taught third graders in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, and married an aspiring art historian, Michael Kampen, whom she describes as “the only good-looking graduate-school guy at a girls’ school.” Their brief union, lasting just a few months, ended when Benglis threw a brick at their Volkswagen as Kampen was driving off to Philadelphia to continue his studies in pre-Columbian

art. “I didn’t want to kill him, and I didn’t want to harm the car”—which Benglis had bought for herself but registered in his name. The brick bounced off the hood, her husband departed for the North, and soon thereafter Benglis headed to New York with a poet friend, arriving during a summer of tumultuous racial unrest in 1964.

IN HER EARLY YEARS IN THE CITY, Benglis attended the Brooklyn Museum Art School, where she studied painting with Reuben Tam, an abstract painter from Hawaii who was, she recalls, “very in tune with what was going on.” Through him and a fellow student, Scottish painter Gordon Hart, she met a lively group of artists that included Frank Stella, Barnett Newman, Bridget Riley, and Larry Poons. She went to openings, hung out at Max’s Kansas City, and held down a series of odd jobs, including substitute teaching and work as a “color-slide consultant” for Bernard V. Bothmer, chairman of the department of Egyptian art at the Brooklyn Museum. When she asked for a modest raise to her two-dollar-an-hour salary, she was fired, but she landed a job as a gallery assistant at the groundbreaking Bykert Gallery, owned by Klaus Kertess and Jeff Byers.

The elegant *Zanzidae*, 1981, from the “Peacock” series, mixed media, evokes a fan or a ceremonial headdress.

Among the artists the gallery represented were Chuck Close, Dorothea Rockburne, Brice Marden, Ralph Humphrey, and Barry Le Va. By 1968, Benglis had her own studio, on Baxter Street, and was briefly married to Hart, in large part it seems to help him avoid the draft. “I didn’t want him to be killed,” she says, “so I married him.”

The period between 1966 and 1974 was enormously fertile for Benglis. She made vertical lozenge-shaped beeswax paintings, huge flat pours of gorgeously pigmented latex, phosphorescent poured polyurethane lava flows that arced menacingly from the walls (and prefigured her later fountains), metallized knots made with cotton bunting, and the racy announcements and advertisements that, as critic Dave Hickey has noted, “insisted on the erotic subtext of all her work.” Where the Post-Minimalists “put the historical past on a hunger strike,” as Hickey further remarked in his catalogue essay for her retrospective, “Benglis put that past on steroids and let it bubble up.”

And both the art world and mainstream media took note. In five years, Benglis had 15 solo shows and participated in more than 50 group exhibitions.



COURTESY OF B&A READ, NEW YORK (L); LEFT COLLECTION WITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK; RIGHT COLLECTION THE MODERN, LONDON

COURTESY OF B&A READ, NEW YORK

Life magazine featured her, along with Eva Hesse, Richard Serra, and Richard Van Buren, in an article called "Fling, Dribble and Drip" in 1970, billing her as the heir to Jackson Pollock.

In these early years, Benglis—along with most of her peers—found many of her materials along Canal Street, mining the stores that sold industrial paints and other "non-art" materials. What she couldn't find in the neighborhood, she located through the Yellow Pages, even tracking down a man who had been a rubber consultant for factories during World War II and had a polyurethane lab.

In his appraisal of her work in *Artforum*,

D'Arrest, 2009, a translucent orb of tinted polyurethane, approximately 4 by 4 feet, seems to glow from within.



Pincus-Witten wrote about Benglis's "fascination with vulgarity," an aspect that reached its apex in the dildo ad and in her video *Female Sensibility* (1973), which shows the artist kissing, licking, and caressing the face and hands of another artist, Marilyn Lenkowsky. (Benglis made 15 videos between 1972 and 1976, at a time when this was not yet well-trafficked terrain.) Yet the ad and video were part and parcel

of her wide-ranging output during these years, which teased and tested the limits of taste, eroticism, materials, feminism, and the largely masculine hegemony of the art world. As for Pincus-Witten's statement about vulgarity, Benglis dead-pans, "That's his idea, not mine."



The jagged-edged *Figure 5*, 2009, might be a sketch in bronze of a dancing woman. Benglis's works often refer to the gestures and draperies of classical sculptures.



The three elements of *Black Ice*, 2009, each about ten feet tall, suggest ancient idols. Benglis acknowledges her Greek heritage as an influence on her work.

THROUGHOUT THE ARTIST'S CAREER, her impulses have veered between weirdly tacky and unabashedly elegant. Some works from the late '70s and early '80s, like the "Peacock" series, evoke ceremonial headdresses or fans embellished with beads and candy-colored doodads, while others from that period—*Lagniappe Luck* and *Lagniappe Bayou Babe*, for example—made of glittery plaster tubes sprouting polypropylene tufts like crushed plastic wrap, give off the festive and cheesy air of New Year's Eve party favors. Yet around that same time, she was also producing an austere series, made from gold leaf over chicken-wire armatures, that paid homage to the sinuous torsos of Greek statues, and throughout the '80s she made "pleated sculptures," with such frankly classical titles as *Perseus* and *Pleiades*, that referred to the movement and draperies of ancient art. The two impulses coexist in the garish, gorgeous poured-paint pieces, one of which was recently acquired by the Tate. (She is represented by Cheim & Read in New York, where prices range from \$150,000 for wax pieces to \$750,000 for large early works.)

No matter how abstract, Benglis's works take their points of departure from aspects of the artist's history—her Greek heritage or her Louisiana girlhood—and places she has visited. The desert outside Santa Fe, where Benglis has two

studios, served as the inspiration for some small fountains that vaguely resemble atomic clouds, and for a time she was an avid scuba diver, an experience that seems to inform some of her works in glass.

With studios in New York, Santa Fe, and East Hampton, along with the ancestral home in Greece, Benglis is seldom in one place for long. She travels to India frequently and is a big fan of the novelist V. S. Naipaul, whose works she reads on planes, and of classical Indian music. She is also fond of all kinds of jazz and of the zydeco rhythms of Louisiana's bayou country ("It's great to dance to," she says). Though by now she has friends all around the globe, her preferred companion is a long-haired dachshund named Pi. "I really was never meant to be married," she says. "It just happened by accident those two times."

When asked if she has a favorite medium, Benglis responds, "We don't eat the same food every day. To me it's a matter of recipes and a matter of taste, of processing certain kinds of information. And then it's a matter of structuring that information." The restlessness in her work seems to be echoed in her life: "When I'm in a place for long enough, when I've finally got everything together, then I'm ready to move on and be inspired by something else," she says. "The idea of being frozen in one place horrifies me." ■

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