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Knots, Glitter and Funk

Though the stages of her career have run parallel to various vanguard movements, Lynda Benglis has firmly resisted all reigning orthodoxies. A recent retrospective, her first, revealed an independent artist whose work ranges from provocative videos and self-depicting advertisements to polyurethane installations and gleaming metal bows.

BY MARCIA E. VETROCQ
Benglis's spectacular but ephemeral poured-polyurethane installations of the late '60s and early '70s were recalled in her retrospective by documentary photographers. Large photo this spread: a phosphorescent installation at the Milwaukee Art Center, For Darkness: Situation and Circumstance, 1971.

Inset: Adhesive Products, 1971, as installed at the Walker Art Center, Minn.
It's been 25 years since Lucy Lippard gathered the renegade activities of a number of young sculptors under the rubric "eccentric abstraction." Lippard noted that most of these artists had been trained as painters, and that the objects they were unleashing on a world then dominated by heroic abstraction and severe primary structures generally shared an unabashedly sensuous appeal, incorporated an astonishing range of materials, bespoke a tolerance for the resurgence of recognizable imagery and testified to a new artistic engagement with the incongruous, the profane and the erotic. Lippard didn't mention a newcomer to New York, Lynda Benglis, who, in that same year of 1966, responded to her own estrangement from the canvas by creating thick wax-on-masonite "paintings."

Over the following decades Benglis's work would fulfill many of the criteria outlined by a prescient Lippard. It might even be said that Benglis added new resonance to the word "eccentric" by forging an independent career that seems to have been steered by a prickly temperament intent upon challenging the reigning conventions of advanced art. During the programatically inclined '70s, her avowed engagement with content set her apart from the mainstream of Process art, while her readiness to shift her imagery from autobiography to nature to vulgar decoration seemed downright promiscuous. And although Benglis spoke with a decisively personal voice—which is, of course, a woman's voice—her delight in the use of glitter, bunting and gold, along with her provocative assumption of stereotypical female roles in videos and self-depicting advertisements, frustrated all efforts to position her within a simplistically defined feminist "center."

For all her nonconformity, Benglis has never lacked for attention from dealers, collectors or the press. Her work has been widely exhibited and discussed, although in a fragmentary fashion. A favorable contextual consideration of her earlier achievements was provided by the Whitney Museum's 1990 survey of post-Minimalist art, "The New Sculpture 1965-1975." The Whitney show placed her in the company of Robert Smithson, Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra, artists who generally enjoy prominent billing in the recounting of recent art history. Still, by focusing on that decade of particularly rambunctious and exploratory activity, the exhibition necessarily left out Benglis's post-1975 work. And it is the later work, with its gleaming metallized surfaces and ornamental imagery of knots and pleats and bows, that has proven problematic, even to the point of being seen by some critics as a retreat from her initial commitment to a provocative and defiantly ungracious art.

It is the achievement of the artist's first retrospective exhibition, "Lynda Benglis: Dual Natures," that early and late works alike were at last presented as logical and progressive expressions of a coherent investigative adventure. From wax and liquid latex through polyurethane, bunting, plaster and molten metal, Benglis has been cooking up alchemical metamorphoses of soft and hard substances. As viewers/voateurs we share vicariously the full range of pleasures—esthetic, erotic, even scatological—inherent in her extravagant manipulation of her materials.

Benglis's sense of measure always derives from the body, whether the thickness of a limb or the sweep of a swinging arm. Just as consistently, the outcome of her efforts transcends the basic facts of physical matter and completed processes. With a quality of animation that can rightly be termed "narrative," Benglis's works are pleasing or revolting, vulnerable or threatening, reassuring or perverse. In retrospect, the first funky efforts seem ingratiating and mischievous rather than gaudy and impudent. And upon consideration, the poufs and bows of the recent and more superficially decorative reliefs grow irascible and menacing precisely for their "unnatural" metallic sclerosis.
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“Lynda Benglis: Dual Natures” was organized by Atlanta’s High Museum of Art and subsequently traveled to New Orleans and San Jose. The retrospective was fortified by an excellent catalogue prepared by Susan Krane, the High’s curator of 20th-century art. In two comprehensive essays that balance the biographical and the analytical, Krane reaches beyond the narrow monographic scope of the exhibition. She argues for an understanding of Benglis as an essentially romantic artist who maintained a position of firm resistance to the rival orthodoxies of Minimal, Conceptual and Process art. Krane carefully assesses Benglis’s collaborative relationship with her friend and sparring partner Robert Morris, with whom she explored the erotic component of artistic control in a series of videos, performances and exhibition ads in the early 1970s. From these activities arose the notorious Artforum photo of a defiantly nude, oiled, dildo-wearing Benglis which Krane uses as the basis for an even-handed consideration of Benglis’s aloofness from the women’s movement in the 1970s and for an analysis of how promotional media (ads, videos, gallery announcements) have functioned as another “medium” in Benglis’s artistic arsenal.

By any yardstick this was a small show. The digestible scale, while making for a humane museum experience, was achieved by subtly downplaying the aggressive presence of the early works. With only 40 objects, 14 of which were metal wall reliefs executed since 1980, the survey gave the impression of a far tamer Lynda Benglis than the record might show. To be sure, there is no way to recapture the full impact of her temporary polyurethane installations of the early 1970s. The bold spatial thrust of those shaggy, clawlike forms that lunged outward from the gallery walls was evoked wanly by a grainy photomural of the Milwaukee Art Center installation, For Darkness: Situation and Circumstance. Yet with only four pieces on the floor—one latex pour, the corner foam piece For Carl Andre and two metal casts of Eat Meat—the exhibition served up an uncharacteristic wall-bound Benglis.

The problem was compounded by the presentation of certain works in the idiosyncratic spaces of New Orleans’s Contemporary Arts Center. The latex pour, Fallen Painting, was corralled in the oval chamber at the base of the center’s spiral ramp. The view from above showed only a wavy bacon-stripe of color, and visitors were barred from entering the chamber so their shoe tips could never test the rubbery lip of the stream of pigment. As if to compensate for that loss of immediacy, one wanted to see Eclat, the largest of the recent metal reliefs, with its splayed sheets and insectlike segments, off the wall and prone. The fantasy was fed by a video view of Benglis at work, which disclosed that the preliminary knotting and forming of the wire mesh substructure are done on the floor or on a low table.

Viewers in New Orleans, a city that has particular affection for the Louisiana-born Benglis, enjoyed the additional benefit of a small survey of works from 1972 to 91 at the Tilden-Foley Gallery. The show was paired with some forgettable tempera-on-paper exercises that the artist worked up two-listedly, with a brush in each hand, but in several key instances the gallery’s works handsomely complemented the museum show. Knot, an early plaster-on-linen form

The gleaming surfaces and ornamental forms of the knots, pleats and bows grow irascible and menacing with unnatural metallic sclerosis.


sprinkled with glitter like a salted pretzel, presented a horizontal composition at variance with the CAC’s systematic display of vertically oriented works. *Lindos* is far more lithe and sensual than the two comparable gilded torsos of the late ’70s shown at the CAC, while *Tasco* (1991) develops more of the predatory menace hinted at in *Eclat*.

Two small relief “Masks” of 1991 at Tilden Foleys showed Benglis reprising an old signature theme in her new medium of choice. In each, an armored billow of pleated metal is provided with the smallest of holes or slits for sight and smell. The form evokes the mystery of a shrouded head as well as the impenetrability of a fencing mask or helmet. The imagery is both romantic and troubling, evidence that the tough-tender power of Benglis’s art has lost none of its punch.

“Lynda Benglis: Dual Natures” was organized by the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, where it showed from Jan. 29 to Mar. 31; it traveled to the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, with the New Orleans Museum of Art as cosponsor (June 1–Aug. 4), and the San Jose Museum of Art (Sept. 15–Dec. 1).

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