Artful Commentary, Oozing From the Walls

The New Museum has become a busy place this year, and it is not yet even 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 present Post-Minimalist renegade Lynda Benglis and her gaudy, multidexterous 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 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 diddy.

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.

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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 decorativeness and 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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"Zanzidae, From the Peacock Series" (1970), 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, erotically coiling 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 subversive sensibility. The latex pieces are exuberant, Disneyfied retorts to Richard Serra’s splashing of molten lead. Her narrow, jewel-colored wax paintings from the same time take the waxen 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 the mid-1970s she begins casting some foam sculptures in aluminum, lead and bronze, destroying them while contrastng their comical forms with the sober, more lasting materials of traditional sculpture.

Meanwhile the wax paintings, which 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 knits 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 “FSL.” Later lines are sprayed with metal and then elaborated with Fortuny-like folds.

In one gallery “Mimos,” a simple tarselike wall piece in gilded lead over chiffon and plaster, from 1978, contrasts with the extravaganzas “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 Muriel Brandt or Zeliff’s production of “Turandot.” Also here are more recent excursions into glass and ceramics, moody rubberized foam and pigmented urethane, which has a jellylike 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 Armitage, this exhibition pulls together and elaborates her remarkable career in a thrilling way. It proves her work to be at once 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.