Lynda Benglis

by Federica Bueti
There is something unapologetic, irrelevant, and uncompromisingly bold in Lynda Benglis's work. Her practice radiates the joy of living and making art. Whenever I encounter one of her works, I imagine her dancing, having a chat, or sometimes even wrestling with her favorite steamed chicken wire, rubber, paper, clay, and glitter. When I first met Benglis last spring, at the opening of her multisite exhibition in Bergen, Norway, she was deeply immersed in a conversation with a young artist about molding, twisting, cutting, and gluing. She didn’t seem to bother about the crowd waiting to congratulate and greet her. All her attention was directed at the artist and their discussion of form and process. Benglis is an artist who thinks through materials and draws on her in-depth knowledge of Yule, the same kind of knowledge as Native American potters.

I recently mentioned Benglis's work during a studio visit, and I found myself describing it as open, unguarded, and conscious, yet also prickly and aggressive—like a Kathy Acker novel. Like Acker, Benglis has committed herself to a form of art that can make rather than resolve all the binaries and contradictions that shape a life.

—Federica Buetti

FEDERICA BUETTI: Your new works seem like parts of the puzzle to me. The geometric pieces are more earthly—you have Taurus, Capricorn—and the paper works are more airy—like Aquarius.

LYNDA BENGELIS: What a nice way of putting it! With the paper pieces, I thought of them as noses, but open at either end. My first wall pieces were all kind of open. I thought of spirits crawling in or moving through them. The interiors are also very much about that interior space and their relationship to the wall. They're handmade paper over chicken wire, so there are all sorts of openings in the material, too. They're porous, like skin.

FB: You use a lot of chicken wire. What do you like about it?

LB: I like how it can take on these curvy shapes. I stretch the wire while I make a shape—it takes two people, four hands, to control the material, to counter the tautness and the original curvature of the wire. Then I put paper on it, and that’s how I find the forms. For me, it has always been related to the canvas in the broad sense. I’m making my own surfaces. So these pieces are about being what they are—chicken wire and paper—but also about the illusion of form.

FB: Do you feel that the material has a life and an intelligence of its own?

LB: Absolutely! I’m making the bones, the steel is the flesh. Or I could say I’m making the surface that the skin rests on. I’m beholden to gravity so I have to work over several days, constantly turning the form in the air, in space. Then I hang it on the wall according to how I like to look at it—the form tells me where its front, back, and sides.

FB: You have spoken of your works as “frozen gestures.” There is a certain element of life in them. But it seems as if you are actually more interested in the process—

LB: I called them “frozen gestures” when I was pouring with polysulfone. Prior to that I poured with latex rubber, but the gesture got lost in the flow because I was sometimes thinking it down with water. Rubber has a memory; it bounces back like a rubber band. When I threw the rubber, I felt like it was alive.

FB: You were a pioneer, inventing a new way of using rubber. Where did you get the rubber?

LB: I discovered this man, M.J. Pekel, through the yellow pages. He had invented all kinds of plastics and urethanes and was a factory. He had a lab at his home,

34 [ii] Birken, Favor (2015-16), handmade paper over chicken wire, ground coal with matte medium, acrylic, acrylic medium, and glitter; 36 x 21 x 10 inches. (ii) Doo (Glyf Psychiat), 2016, cast glitter on handmade paper over chicken wire, 36 x 18 x 9.5 inches. Images courtesy of Oven B Read, New York. © Lynda Benglis/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

35 [i] Fan Farbade, 2016, handmade paper over chicken wire, 56 x 31 x 19 inches. (ii) Font/Wine/Port, 2016, cast glitter on handmade paper over chicken wire, ground coal with matte medium, 35 x 8 x 5 inches.
I became the material—much like Pollock and Frankenthaler described it, or any of the artists who were physically involved with the viscosity of their materials and how they went onto the surface. My surface was the floor, or the wall, or the room.

FB: And you understood what you were doing?

LB: Yeah, he also made materials at my request. It was interesting for both of us.

FB: You've described your practice of engaging with matter—your process of molding, pouring, and shaping materials—in terms of ritual. Can you elaborate on this?

LB: Well, I became the material—much like Pollock or Frankenthaler described it, or any of the artists who were physically involved with the viscosity of their materials and how they went onto the surface. My surface was the floor, or the wall, or the room. The ritual happened through knowing a lot about my material, and how I was to display it within the space and context offered to me, whether it was a gallery or a museum. When I did one of my first poured pieces in Dallas-Fort Worth in 1970, Henry T. Hodges was head of the Modern Art Museum, and he allowed me to pour directly on the floor in the corner. I called the piece For Carl Andre because in 1969 Andre had done a brick work at the Jewish Museum, titled Later, which came out from the wall. This drew attention to the fact that it was a simple material, red clay, and it warped the space. The next time, I began to think about the rubber taking the floor and changing the space. The floor bounced up of you, the piece bounced up at you, and it warped the space, too. Whenever I did a piece in or around a corner, it would stick up in the corner. My first corner piece was shown at the Fair College Museum's Art in Process/W:1940. Mel Bochner had invited artists to show their work there. But all the museums, they were afraid that somebody would step into the poured rubber so they had me put on a piece of plywood. To me, it was the equivalent of a pedestal. I never did that again. I had to do it in a box.

FB: Because you were interested in the work's relationship with the architecture. And maybe in disruption—

LB: Totally. I was also interested in getting it off the ground. Even when I was just using the rubber, I kept thinking, How do I get this floor painting onto the wall and express this thing about skin—casting your body out and away from you and testing yourself physically, like a rubber band? How do I get "me" skin onto the architecture? It was like birthing in a sense when I pulled up those huge tar paper pieces—forty feet long, nine-and-a-half feet wide.

I did two very large floor paintings, and they were chosen for the Whitney Museum's Anti-Illusion show in 1968, but I had to pull out at the last minute because they didn't understand that the works had to be flat on the floor. Also, Richard Serra and Robert Rauschenberg, who were also in that show, didn't want my color piece near them.

FB: How did they justify that?

LB: Well, the show was called Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials, and my pieces were not about anti-illusion, but illusion. It was the wrong title for me, and I finally just withdrew because it didn't make sense. Even though it was the only other work invited to the show.

FB: You grew up in Lake Charles, Louisiana. How did Louisiana's rich and multicultural history affect your work?

LB: That's for others to decide, but there was a definite sort of rhythm—my mother used to call it chickens hawk, referring to the French folk music that was, when danced, a two-step. And then there were the local blues and country-western music and the Grand Ole Opry every Saturday night from Nashville. There was a remarkable radio station, KPLC, with a show called Senator Stump. I used to listen to Elvis, and other blues, and country-western music.

A lot of the blues came from Lake Charles as well, right from my back door. I was on the west side of Louisiana, so there was the rodeo influence. The local college, McNeese, had an arena, so it was a state-supported agricultural college. It happened that the reason our Presbyterian Church was the head of the agriculture department and was active in the community judging the local cattle show's best beef was...}

36 Detail of Baby Contrafa, 1969, poured pigmented latex, 1.5 x 79 x 20 inches.

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Robert Pincus-Witten writes, “Lynda Benglis contributed to new options in American art—my reluctance to allow this to be tied to her extravaganza!” Extravaganza to him seemed like a minus.

LB: We were surrounded by minimalism and I shied Pincus-Witten, “What’s wrong with excess?” So that’s probably why he put that in there. I was interested in boundlessness, the idea of flow. It’s a very feminine notion, too. I spent a lot of time at the ocean in the Hamptons, and I was thinking of the sea and the way waves get imprinted in the sand, and then another wave comes in, you know. That got me excited about the flowing of the large paintings.

FB: Eileen Myles writes, “I form has an almost incestuous engagement with content and therefore might even need to get a little beldy with it, suggesting it step early or get too far. How can you stop from winding, to do that?” To me, you and Myles are very close in spirit, the way you trust matter to find its own form while being hamstrung to content.

LB: It’s about finding the flow, finding the rhythm. All of these things have their own organization in a way.

FB: What are you working on at the moment?

LB: I’m making my own paper now, but I’m totally saturating the paper with metal or plastic sparkles. These pieces are brilliant, they’re reflecting light, and visually they appear to be moving. They kind of float in space although they are deployed on the wall, where I can control the light and the viewing. I’m very excited about these sparkling works. They are big, not monstrous, but because we’re not used to seeing such things at such a large scale, they seem kind of outrageous in a nice way. They are attractive, like shiny, colorful lace.

FB: Are there any roles in letting content find its own form or form find its own content?

LB: I set up the rules, the format, so to speak. The material is there and I invent the situation. It’s a matter of contact. It’s a rather scientific approach, open-ended. In the 1980s and ’90s, many artists were talking about closed systems. There were a lot of rules that the critics forced on artists. But I’ve always said, “Art is an open system.” You arrive at certain truths using both artistic and scientific ideas.

FB: I’m very interested in what made you question feminist discourse?

LB: I’ve always thought of women’s rights as a humanist issue. Unless these rights are recognized and accepted by both men and women, they’re meaningless. We’re made up of both genders really, nothing is black or white, you know. It’s of no interest to me to put labels on things.

FB: So you think you need more theater? Or what sort?

LB: Well, you know, when we lived in more closely knit families, when we were clans and smaller communities, we had all this vibration within our society. We knew the names of our clan members, and we had our defense systems. Now we invent these systems, we invent the space, we invent ourselves. I’m not saying it’s bad or good, I’m not passing judgment.

FB: I think we live in a time—it’s a phase—when we have the liberty to invent and do all kinds of things. It’s theater, it’s something that people can talk about.

FB: Yeah, and you can decide whatever you want to take part in this play or not. Or you can invent a different one, like you did by carving out a space for yourself.

LB: Exactly, I think we’re always moved by our times. We represent our times. I was consciously searching for symbolic iconic imagery that could potentially reach both sexes. And to match means to allude to both sexes and leave the meaning ambiguous. I had women pose for me. I had women pose for me. I was trying to find out what sexuality is.

FB: Certain, what I did when I did it was new, but it’s not new anymore. It’s all accepted now.

FB: But there is still the potential within the work. It doesn’t disappear, it’s there, it’s up for grabs.

LB: I agree with you. In my work, and now, I’m dealing with realism, with real failings and questions. It’s open-ended. We’re all of the same planet, and there is a language of humanism. And that’s exactly how I think of feminism—it’s a humanist issue. I am a woman, and I wouldn’t want to be anything else, but I also know I have a strong masculine side in me.