PHONG BUI (RAIL): In the end of one interview, which was included in the catalog for the show High Times, Hard Times: New York Paintings ‘79–’81, curated by David Reed and Katy Seigel, you said that your video works of the early ‘70s were as much about sexuality and humor within the context of feminism as they were a direct criticism of the media. The same can be applied to the controversial 1974 Artforum ad. What were they really trying to say? Do you still care?

LYNDA BENGLIS: They were too early and too soon. The politics of that time were not ready to deal with gender issues. When I made them, I was a young woman just starting a career, and I didn’t really know what I was doing. It was more about being on the edge, and being part of a community of artists who were doing things that were new and exciting.

RAIL: And you’re aware of Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson telling their story of the side of the story in the letter to the editor of the November 2000 issue of Artforum about why they left Artforum?

BENGLIS: Yes, but I didn’t want to read any of it. Actually, I don’t really want to re-experience something that happened in the past. I think what I did, exploring the idea of the artist being a hermaphroditic being that has both genitals and can dance and is essentially the idea of the possibility of sex alongside art and is a very potent idea—one that continues to fascinate me even now. When Linda Nohlin published her essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (ARTnews, 1973), I again asked myself, am I an artist who has been a woman or the other way around? Then I began to think, I need to take on an issue which is a humanist one. My art may be considered feminist, but I didn’t want to describe it that way. I’m involved with a revolutionary socialist, and my body says—so that’s too literal. All I know is that I’m involved with revolution and space, both pictorial and architectural, as much as I’m involved with conceptual ideas that are also in our daily lives and dialogues that are concerned with human affairs.

RAIL: And a little bit of humor can go a long way, I know that in the midst of this controversy, while you were teaching at CalArts, you said that in L.A. artists and people thought the whole thing was funny, whereas those in New York were too serious to appreciate your sense of humor.

BENGLIS: That was true. And I think we’re very snobbish about the Californians. Meanwhile Californians seem to always know what to do with humor. They, in fact, bring it to different theatrical levels.

RAIL: As manifested in their performance scene in the early to mid-1970s.

BENGLIS: Right, you know, during the Minimalist movement we all were thinking about purity and essence of form, and so on. We all forget about humor, which the Surrealists and Dadaists explored with such sophistication. Needless to say, some of us knew that some dye, or color, some image-making, we all did that. Only in the 1970s, we were getting somewhere and I was making art.

RAIL: But that was essential because for painting to survive it needs to be challenged without a doubt, as David Reed said, the most experimental and innovative ideas in the 1960s had always been those which were caught in the middle, and often from both sides, the Greenbergian formalists on one side and the Conceptualists and Minimalists on the other. For example, Richard Serra gave up painting as soon as he graduated from Yale’s MFA in 1966, partly because he had to get away from the seriousness of the independence of the 1960s.

On the occasion of the artist’s traveling survey, currently at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, Ireland until January 24, 2010 (curated by Caroline Hancock), and her current exhibit at Cheim and Read (until January 2, 2010), Lynda Benglis welcomed Rail Publisher Phong Bui to view her new work on site. An extended conversation about her life and work took place in the gallery’s viewing room.

IN CONVERSATION

Lynda Benglis

WITH PHONG BUI
RAIL: In the context of how Serra's "Splash Piece" gave birth to the corner pieces such as "Strike: To Roberto and Rudy" (1969-71) and "Circuit" (1972), I thought of your corner pieces, like "Quarztered Meton", which had been cast and lead from the one previously known as "King of Floit" (1959), made out of poured pigmented black, white and grey polyurethane. They were very striking and humorous at the same time.

BENGEL: Ron Gorchov and I were thinking about corners. Marilyn Lenkowsky, who later married Ron, began to do some corner piece paintings. But absolutely, I got very excited when I first saw a corner piece, which prefigured my own. I remember it took me awhile to figure out how to get the whole piece working with the wall as well as the floor, which eventually led to more gestural pieces that project off the wall 17½ feet. RAIL: But it was the floor pieces that made Marcia Tucker think of your work as being too illusionistic to be included in the show she curated with James Monte at the Whitney "Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials!" BENGEL: Yeah, she said it pops from the floor and I said that’s the idea. They saw my pieces and they knew they were color and no one told me that that show was called "Anti-Illusion." In any case, Eva Hesse came into my studio and she saw that it was good. What was great was my first show at Paula Cooper a year later (1970), which included many of the corner pieces that were shown in the middle of the gallery floor. Greenberg came in and saw all the dimensions that I said you were supposed to do, but as he was walking around the piece he just scratched his head the whole time, and after a good while he left.

RAIL: He had created a monster.

BENGEL: Yeah! I know, I couldn’t have been more satisfied.

RAIL: Was one of the early floor pieces, "Odalisque (Hey Frankenthaler)" intended to be an homage or a satirical gesture?

BENGEL: The truth is both. Greenberg and Frankenthaler were important to me, and many of the artists of my generation. In fact I met her and Joan Mitchell — both artists were important models for women artists—at the same time I met Mike Goldberg, Frankenthaler and I was asked to be on a radio show together with me but she refused. Even worse, one time I had set up a show at Paula’s, Eva Hesse walked in while I was busy pouring and said to me, quite angrily, that she would never use color with sculpture.

RAIL: How did you deal with that remark?

BENGEL: Well, I didn’t. I ignored it. Earlier, before she was taken ill, I knocked on studio door on the Bowery and said to her, "Are you a feminist?" and she said, "No." What was important was that she pointed to a number on her arm which she had had as an infant. RAIL: I think that the issue of feminism was rather complicated to some. For example, Lee Lozano, for a conceptual piece, supposedly took a vow that she would never speak to women from the summer of 1971 until her death in October 1999.

BENGEL: Lee had a beautiful and sympathetic face but she was wiry, athletic, and strong. Her paintings were powerful, but I never really knew her well. Whatever it was it was that one of us had to figure out how to deal with the issue differently. For me the only way that I could deal with it was learning more about it and that’s one of the reasons I went to CalArts when Paul Brach invited me. You could say that the feminist movement was to change the way society perceives women forever.

RAIL: You were born in Lake Charles in 1943, in Louisiana, and you told me when we first met that your father was a first generation Greek immigrant. How about your mother?

BENGEL: She was born in Tennessee, I was the first child and then a sister followed four years later.

RAIL: What were some important connections for you, early on?

BENGEL: Visiting New Orleans as a child was definitely important. The city was very beautiful but exciting and very mysterious at the same time. Also, seeing Yves Klein paintings at the University of Houston after my freshman year at McNeese was wonderful. I experienced the blue monochromatic surfaces with sponges quite early before going to Newcomb. Franz Kline in the show (The World of Art in 1910) at the Isaac Delgado Museum of Art was equally as amazing. In addition I benefited quite a lot because the director of the L.A. County Museum, Tom L. Frederichsen, retired in New Orleans and he took a job teaching contemporary art at Newcomb.

RAIL: And in ‘63 you had a scholarship to go to Yale Norfolk. How important was that experience for you at that time?

BENGEL: Actually I got the scholarship the year before but couldn’t go then. Luckily I got it again the next year, my senior year, and went. Otherwise people were talking about things that I had never heard of, "Greenberg," [turning paintings right side up and down Greenbergian style] and people were putting ketchup on their hamburgers, which I’d never seen before! [Laughter] In fact I didn’t do much of anything, but one thing it did do for me was that I knew I had to be in New York as soon as I graduated. Arriving in New York and meeting Gordon Hart, the Scottish painter who I married, was so exciting.

RAIL: Could you describe what sort of painting you were doing in college or even when you first came to New York?

BENGEL: Like most young artists starting out, my paintings were of the figure and landscape, but they were quite involved with color in a Rothkoesque sense. I was making images through touch and process. I also worked with clay and I made some pots that were very organic, but functional at the same time. Looking back now, I think the Yale Norfolk was significant only in that I left I didn’t have to go to graduate school since I hung around with a few graduate students and they were all talking about moving to New York. Some of them were friends of Brice Marden and his wife, Mimi, who was Joan Baez’s Sister. Brice, who had started showing at Park Place, where in fact I saw a wonderful show of Di Suvero and David, the gallery’s inaugural show. Paula, whom I had met earlier, had a show of Walter de Maria’s beautiful little drawings and also a drawing show of an artist I knew they named Vernon Lock at her brownstone of the Upper East Side. Paula was really beautiful. When I saw her again at Park Place, where I was working as an assistant, she was pregnant. The next important thing was my meeting with Barnett Newman.

RAIL: How did you meet him?

BENGEL: Gordon [Hart] who knew Bob [Robert] Murray, whose work was under the influence of Barnett Newman and knew him well. That was how I finally met Newman and his wife Arnaeke. What was important about our relationship with Barnett and Arnaeke was that Barnett, when I first got to know him, was getting a lot of attention and he always had time for us artists. For the longest time it was Arnaeke who was supporting him. So none of us actually thought we would make a living through being artists. We just did lots of different jobs to support ourselves and our work.

RAIL: What sort of jobs?

BENGEL: I was a color slide consultant for Bernard Bothmer, the great Egyptologist at the Brooklyn Museum who would take the little old ladies in the backroom and show them Egyptian pornography and then he would invite them to Egypt. I mean he literally did that. [Laughter] That would involve his field study as well as getting works for the museum’s collection. I remember that I was getting two dollars an hour dusting these slides off and I thought I wanted a fifty-cent raise and he couldn’t do it or he wouldn’t do it since I could easily be substituted. So a color slide consultant I was not longer, and then I decided to get a teaching degree at NYU in order to teach at public schools and it just didn’t work out. Then finally I ended up for five weeks as a Grove Press bargirl.

RAIL: Barney Rosset’s joint?

BENGEL: Exactly. Just before Barney Rosset and Joan Mitchell’s marriage broke up. Meanwhile, Klaus came over to see Gordon’s work just before he opened up Bykert, which had been previously the location of the Green Gallery where I had viewed Ralph Humphrey’s monochromatic bordered canvases.

RAIL: On 57th Street, which must have been in 1966 when Richard Bellamy closed the gallery.

BENGEL: Right. Anyway, while Klaus was over looking at Gordon’s work he said he was looking for somebody to help him two half days a week, so that was how I ended up working at Bykert. Klaus and I really hit it
off. Our tastes were similar. We discussed a great deal what we liked and didn't like quite openly. It was a wonderful experience.

RAIL: When did you first make your poured piece?

BENGLIS: After making my wax paintings for a couple of years I wanted to extend the fluidity of the wax paintings into a larger format, so in the summer of 1968 I sublet Bob [Robert] Daurer's studio on Grand Street. It was a wonderful time. I would have lunch regularly with Ron. I met a lot of interesting people at Grove Press Bar; Stanton Kaye and Jack Smith would come regularly to the bar. Ed Ruda's wife, Marie Antoinette, was performing with Jack Smith. So Klaus and I saw as many of his performances and films as we could, including all the classics like "Flaming Creatures," "Scotch Tape," and "Normal Love," all of which we both thought were most brilliant. That summer was very crucial to me, being on my own and having my own studio led me to decide to move into a loft on Baxter Street, where I worked till the late 70s. It was then that I began to make my first floor pieces while I was still working on the wax paintings. I was lucky with that studio because it was just the right size that I could develop ideas—I had a loft bed, a small bathroom, and a dividing painter-wall, which Gordon had put in; there was practically no heat so I kept myself warm by burning my paintings. [Laughter.] You could live so cheaply then, have a plate of lasagna or eggplant parmesan in Little Italy for maybe 75 cents. The rent was $350; I paid $450, another artist whom I sublet to pay $350. It was a perfect situation. The other artist had many old films in super 8 format and I would project them on my studio wall.

RAIL: Then you had a show at the Clocktower in '73 with the "sparkle knot" pieces.

BENGLIS: Right after Joel Shapiro's show, which was the second show after Richard Tuttle. Mine was the third during Christmas time. And I remember Nixon said, "Do not burn Christmas lights," so I decorated the whole Clocktower with Christmas lights, especially up and down the staircase. And the Clocktower itself was lit up and could be seen from both east and west highways.

RAIL: From what I remember from Jeremy Gilbert Rolle's favorable review of the Clocktower show in "Artsforum", in which he talked about the glitter being identified as color with planar adherence of the surface of a painting, I'm wondering whether artists including Joyce Kozloff, Miriam Schapiro, whom you already had contact with at CalArts, along with Betty Goodman, and Robert Kushner, had any dialogue with you or responded to that aspect of your work before creating their own Pattern and Decoration movement?

BENGLIS: First of all color was definitely in with the artists of my generation. As it was for any feminist artists who were using anything and doing everything with pattern and decoration.

RAIL: As their way of reacting against the minimalism while retaining the same use of the grid system.

BENGLIS: Exactly. As for me, doing the knots definitely had to do with pictorial image and how to bring this image forward, how to take color and make it tactile. And so I wasn't thinking of "Okay, let's do a feminine piece." Although I did have the history of having been a little ballerina with a skirt made of viscose cotton, I didn't connect it then. I literally just fell into it because I had a baton with sparkles and I had this little ballerina skirt and guaze, which I was quite naturally attracted to.

RAIL: The reason why I'm asking is because to the concept of taste, especially vulgarity in art, an issue central to Pop sensibility, has been frequently brought up in your work. Do you think that the use of diverse materials such as, for instance, gold, silver, pigmented urethane foam, or pigmented latex, was your way of distinguishing your work, at least from the surface orientation like the Pattern and Decoration artists, from the masculine, often monochromatic and severe palettes of Richard Serra, Barry Le Va, and Joel Shapiro, just to name a few. If not, could you tell us why?

BENGLIS: The truth was that I was interested in everything that everybody did. I was drawn to the enigmatic marks of Ron Gochov, and the way he laid color on to his surfaces, which is so beautiful. I love Joel Shapiro's small sculptures of animals. The art world then was our own fantasy. Everybody was sort of open to the other's ideas. We each recognized that it was a time of individuality in which we could each kind of develop our own language. It was just so exciting for all of us to watch each other grow. That's basically what happened.

RAIL: This was before the era of intense professionalism, which set people against one another.

BENGLIS: I can say that I felt competitive just like anyone else. [Laughter.] But it was also fun. I can't explain it. I guess it was the nearest thing to high school that I've ever experienced. [Laughter.] If you think about it, we were all in our twenties or thirties, so as developing artists those years were an extremely meaningful time to our lives.

RAIL: It seems to me that there are as many concerns with the formal issues as there are alchemic exercises. In your case, these are tied in with your sense of playfulness in the process of making. Would you say that the playful aspect has always been your strength?

BENGLIS: Absolutely. It's very much about being at one with the material but also thinking about how and what you're doing and shaping a larger communication. I think that all of these things can be formed and be symbolic in the larger sense of something else that is not always easily described or written about.

RAIL: Well, to me your sense of being playful means humor, which is how you were able to maintain the balance between critical interest and controversy, between gesture and mass, between abstraction and content, and all of those different things over all the years.

BENGLIS: I think so, but humor can be described as being very contextual within the culture itself. What may be too sweet to one person may be sour to another. In other words, the sweetness is also contextual, as is humor and what is serious. There's maybe a certain kind of delineation of gesturing that may not be humorous. That's why often I'll go from one color to the next in a monochromatic situation. Or in doing an all-over color, or any of those combinations interchangeably, in the end what I actually want is to constantly challenge the material and the way I'm using the image and the process.

RAIL: After so many years wrestling with all those issues—what is considered painterly and what is considered sculptural—with the new work I feel the drawing element is very pronounced.

BENGLIS: That's true, except that if I lose myself in the drawing the delineation of the singular image can easily get lost; the drawing therefore becomes saturated, especially with the bigger pieces, for example "Figure 6" which is the most complicated piece in the show, and then the large black sphere, "Tolkien."

RAIL: Even though the act of drawing seems to rely on a fairly slow pace from the squeezing pressure of Touch'n Foam the fluidity remains constant.

BENGLIS: Absolutely. I'd qualify your statement by saying at some point the drawing builds up in such a way that it can take on a different and surprising form, and in addition to the form being discontinuous, you don't often know what that form is.

RAIL: There is an interplay between lightness, in that the form is fragmented—they look as if they are pieces of unfinished knitting suspended on the wall—and the density of their bronze surfaces and black patina, at least in "Figure 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6". As for the tinted polyurethane pieces like "Tolkien" or "D'azur" the way the light coming through in the middle, from beneath the surface, makes them very eerie and alive.

BENGLIS: And that light changes according to different conditions of light whether natural or artificial.

RAIL: And here it is again, the notion of all artists being hermaphrodites. I thought what Annette Messager said of your work in the survey catalogue, referring to the "Artsforum" ad, was quite compelling and still remains central to who you are as an artist: she claimed you were not afraid to deal with both the masculine and feminine aspects in your work. Maybe it comes full circle in the recent work, particularly with the oval embryo-like form, which is basically a female form, along with light which comes from inside, which is almost like fire, which is a male attribute. This is essentially not different from your earlier flirtation between man and woman.

BENGLIS: Well, I very much agree with you—it's called humanism because the intellect itself has no sex.

TRAVELING SURVEY ITINERARY

Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands (curated by Diana Franssen)
20 June – 4 October 2009

Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland (curated by Caroline Hancock)
4 November 2009 – 24 January 2010

Le Consortium, centre d'Art contemporain, Dijon, France (curated by Franco Gheo and Seung-Duk Kim)
2 April – 20 June 2010

Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), Providence, USA (curated by Judith Timson)
October – 19 January 2011

New Museum, New York, USA (curated by Laura Hapman)
9 February – 1 May 2011