Lynda Benglis

FIGURES

Alma Ruiz and Patrick Steffen

ALMA RUIZ: Let's start our conversation with the present. I know that you've been working steadily since the beginning of your career — what are you doing right now?

LYNDA BENGLIS: I'm working on fountains. This is my main focus in the present day.

AR: Where did this direction come from?

LB: Since the early '80s I've been interested in this kind of form. I did a print in Chicago that was called North South East West because it had the four planes, and I finally completed it 30 years later. In 2009, I was influenced by the shape of the Egyptian obelisk. I had already presented the castlevens all over America in different museums. At that time I was working with metals and bronze, and what is in the exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles are the first castlevens pieces with phosphorescent (Phantom, 1971). I don’t like to backtrack, I like to go forward, because what I'm feeling now represents me in relationship to how I view the time and what's happening right now. Each time is interpreted differently, according to the generation, the age, the culture. We are able to historically mark these things as art, to represent culture as writers, painters, sculptors, critics. What survives is the information that represents the time — and then the people.
that are viewing it may see it differently, and you can’t control that.

AR: It’s this print of a fountain enlaced North South East West related to the fountain that you realized in Dublin at the Irish Museum of Art in 2009 is it a different case?

LB: That one was made in the 70s. In the beginning of the 80s I started thinking that I really must do something with water. I grew up surrounded by water. Louisiana is below sea level and very early I went to Greece on a boat, across the Atlantic to a remote island. Water is an element that is in my blood, and I wanted to do something related to rocks and landscape…

AR: After the fountain, did you go back to work on some of the ideas you had previously or did you start exploring new ones?

LB: After that, the idea was to work on smaller sculptures. I had some material leftover in my studio in Long Island that I wasn’t able to use until one or two years later, but I was able to envision it. I showed it then in Miami. I did other little fountains that were based on atomic explosions. The first fountains were poured polyester; the second were thrombolite, linearly built up. Both were very fluent and suggested a natural formation.

Patrick Steffen: What’s your main interest in creating a sculpture of a fountain?

LB: I like the idea of scale; it’s always human. It has to do with texture in relationship to architecture and to the material itself. You can only throw as large as your body allows; the physical gesture needs the confirmation of the material, be it large or small. There is a scale implication, and all my work is very sensitive to that aspect. We all have a body that has an extension within a certain perimeter, and it’s essential to emotionally visualize gravity, weight and the relationship of the figure to the ground. All these things are psychologically very important in my work.

AR: This is a very important notion: human scale and how you use the body in your work. I think this is one of the reasons why we identify with your work. Do you agree?

LB: That’s correct, and there is also a lot of movement that makes it easier to identify. Even animals can relate to my work if there is movement implied.

AR: At the Moca retrospective, your “Figures” series, when they were on the floor, looked like crawling animals (I clearly had this feeling). When hung on the wall, they transformed into underwater formations. To what are these figures related in origin?

LB: They are related to scuba diving. Diving has opened up a completely new visual area to me. In the water we all feel the buoyancy, as if we were in the womb of our mother, and all my art has always involved with that; an ungravity feeling, a confirmation that we have a scene of another special emotive reality in the way we do, see, and feel things.

AR: It’s interesting to see how the water element is important in your work. Geography also seems to be very influential in your research, as you have studies in many different parts of the world — the US, Europe and Asia. How did your relationship with India start?

LB: Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Morris recommended it to me. That was in the late 70s. I arrived there in 1979 and that was an extraordinary time for my growth. It’s like going to a different room in your home. My home is the world.

AR: Did you make specific artworks in India that you wouldn’t do in the US or in Europe?

LB: In India I can easily look at images that I don’t find elsewhere. In relation to certain surfaces and materials, in India they have some of the purest marble; also the idea of working with stainless steel came there as well as that of melting huge pots of was outside. There is a process that is possible only in some places and not in others. I experimented with carving bricks, with large pieces (more than five meters, three meters), a trapezoidal wall integrated in the landscape. Here I would have done it in a different way, more limited. In India I can take certain chances that are not possible here because of our laws and rules.

AR: This retrospective has traveled to six different museums in the Netherlands, Ireland, France and the US. It is taking a lot of your time. Now that the exhibition will end its tour what are your plans for the future?

LB: The show has been going on for two years. I will take a break in my home in Greece, but I plan my work passively, not aggressively. I have to let it come to me. Lately some mixed images have been coming to me, some words. That has never happened to me and it could be a new path. They come to me before I fall asleep, all these images rush in, and this is a way for the mind to unfold itself, to clear itself, to get rid of the garbage. It’s very nourishing. I think an artist has to find this state of mind; you can’t direct it.

AR: Is the exhibition here at MOCA, is it a complete collection of the pieces you’ve made your whole career?

LB: I wanted to do the show with this selection of images that I thought were the most important. I wanted the show to be a kind of personal overview of my career. I wanted to show the different stages and the different influences that I have had throughout my career. I wanted to show how my work has evolved over the years.

AR: Let’s go back to the past. What were your expectations when you moved to New York in 1960, after you graduated from San Francisco College (now part of San Francisco University)?

LB: I had no expectations. I was just so excited to learn as much as I could, and I still feel that way today. I was very lucky. Luck has a lot to do with it. Everybody has talent, but positioning yourself, recognizing what your questions are and to whom you need to ask them is essential to achieving a result. I was with Michael Goldberg, Barnett Newman, Joan Mitchell and all these artists. I was young so I could learn. That’s what we need to do today: integrate young and old movements.

AR: You were part of a group of artists that did a lot of significant work in the 70s. It was a very experimental decade. A lot of young artists and curators are trying to go back and analyze that period. Why do you think people are interested in the 70s today?

LB: The 70s were a very open period that began a sense that art could be anything and anybody could experiment in any field. It was contextual — there were artists experimenting in New York, in California, in Europe, and certain movements appeared to gain recognition because of the ideas that they were challenging. My own work was always related to process, material, ideas and vision. How do you make images? What are images? Everybody was asking these same questions, just expressing them differently. Today is still the same, though people seem to be more stylistic. What is happening is a matter of taking objects from the culture, like Joseph Cornell started doing… Alexis Smith has continued that — working on icons. Investigating the deterioration of the time is the genius of art. Other artists passed on to us the facts about human interaction and the lasting quality. As it was wHEN I presented images such as East Mural (1969-75), Quartermoet (1969) and Wang (1970) at the Guggenheim. I really wanted to preserve these.

AR: Was the art market as essential as the “70s as it is today?"

LB: Artists are business people — they are subject to the market. But back in our time the mar-
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leak not thought about the way it is today. I mocked it. When the price of gold went up, I wanted to make a pure gold d'oro. I did a gold-plated one but it didn’t look good. I wanted a solid one, and someone almost bought the idea. At that time it would have cost $200,000, and today much more than that.

AR: During your career you were involved with many movements like minimal art and conceptual art; you were part of the feminist movement too, when there was this idea about pop-culture. But you never really belonged to one group. It seems to me that you’ve remained your own person. You have this very fluid quality.

L: I understood very early by studying philosophy, thinking and logic that to take any particular idea and stick to it for 50 or 60 years is simply boring — really boring! Why should I stick to one idea? Nobody possesses the truth anyway.

PS: In your recent monograph Dave Hickey wrote about your early clay photos placed on cars. I looked back at these photographs today, she seems to be standing naked in the gathering dust, in the last remnants when ‘the magical men’s club’ might seem like a fancy, sexy thing to do.” What connection did these ads have with the abstract, colorful work you were doing at the time? It was, wax, foam and so on.

L: None. For instance, I found the dolly on 42nd Street, and I wanted to make it in different materials and to work with it in gold, then with glass. But no one would buck it because at that time I wasn’t well known. So, I realized that I had to make a statement about the feminist aspect. There was not enough humor, and women were misunderstood as artists and marginalized. I had to place some humor without complaining, and I had to take power by taking a position that did not question the situation but just went on with my ideas walking the line with my ideas. I had to do what I felt was really the right thing to do.

AR: Abstract expressionism was very much dominated. Most of these artists were men, and they were kept separate from their work. When your generation came, the minimalism and conceptualism found themselves with a generation of successful, strong women artists. So for them it wasn’t easy.

L: You should ask them. They will only smile and lie — I’m just joking! For me they were all very open, and I was open to what they were doing and genuinely interested. I asked the right questions and they answered me. I was accepted in that sense.

PS: Do you still recognize yourself in the 1974-1976时刻 Artforum advertisements?

L: That’s me, I remember how I was feeling then. I remember I wanted to project a very tough and perfect male and female image that could end all the ideas of degradable pin-up models. Not everyone understood what I wanted to do. Andy Warhol wanted me to be in one of his early films, and this is what set me off. He wanted me to act with a handsome and cute guy from Scotland. He was blond, I was dark-haired, and Andy Warhol wanted to do a love scene; I began to think about it, resisting the idea of being a groupie. And I thought: I don’t want to be in an object, I want to do something in terms of the feminine situation.

AR: In the 1970s you were dealing with sexual ident- ity a lot. L: The video The Amazing Bow-Wow that I did in 1976, featuring the hermaphroditic creature, was my final statement about sexual identity. I have to thank Ree Smail who played the Bow Wow, and Stanton Kaye; the three of us really did it together. It was a painful piece of art, and after that I couldn’t deal with it anymore — it felt vulnerable. The pain of sex and rejection, the ambiguity, the fear of being silenced in any culture... It took me a year and a half to edit it. I was so painful that I said to myself — “That’s it!”

AR: You had a period, from 1972 to 1976, in which you also made a lot of videos. Have you found any new talents since?

L: That’s, me I remember how I was feeling then. I remember I wanted to project a very tough and perfect male and female image that could end all the ideas of degradable pin-up models. Not everyone understood what I wanted to do. Andy Warhol wanted me to be in one of his early films, and this is what set me off. He wanted me to act with a handsome and cute guy from Scotland. He was blond, I was dark-haired, and Andy Warhol wanted to do a love scene; I began to think about it, resisting the idea of being a groupie. And I thought: I don’t want to be...