LYNDA BENGLIS
by David Rhodes

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Three contrasting types of work comprise Lynda Benglis’ current exhibition at Cheim & Read. Standing alone in the gallery’s first room is a towering cast aluminum piece: The Fall Caught (2016), a vaguely anthropomorphic form leaning against a wall, large enough to stand beneath. Up close, the material process is clear: spray foam, over and into manipulated chicken wire sheets, then cast in aluminum. It is both visceral and beautiful in the way Pat Steir’s paintings are—both manage to register the flow of process in a bodily and optical sense. For decades, Benglis’ mastery of painterly issues in sculptural form has been expressed in an intellectually astute and formally pleasing way, analogous to other physical pleasures that involve skin, touch, and sight. The new works here appeal to our sense of things, concretely as much as by association.


In the main space of the exhibition, many variously sized pieces made by stretching handmade paper over chicken wire are arranged across walls at different heights. The form of each piece can vary enormously; with such a range of applications, so does the surface. The elegant or blunt contortions performed render conical, lantern-like shapes that also feel like they refer to something residual or discarded —like snakeskin or animal bones long exposed to weather and sun. All the works were fabricated by the artist at her studio in New Mexico, and so given the landscape there, the associations here are apt.
Handmade paper is applied to the chicken-wire wet, and kept moist to allow for continued adjustments. When dry, it is brushed with isolated gestures of acrylic medium, paint, ground coal, glitter, and gold leaf, evincing the texture of the paper and the supporting wire underneath. The wire is visible in some pieces, and in others is a hidden structure of hexagonal pattern under the paper surface. The results are extraordinary. Take Something Else (2015), positioned diagonally on the wall, Baroque in its swirl of complex curves and turns of space. The raw brushing of black ground coal in medium at three sides joins the general energy of turning, animating the three-dimensional structure, like a gorgeous fragment from a Jackson Pollock painting. Feminine Fork (2016), a glitter-covered rust orange, violet, and pale blue spikey form, stands vertical like a shattered tutu on a splintered branch. The same kind of glittering surface on another piece, Swift (2015), recalls the sheen and iridescence of fish scales, as its shape recalls a bird in flight.

In the final room, Elephant Necklace (2016) comprises a sequence of black ceramic sculptures arranged in a circle on the floor. Each sculpture folds and bends into itself in a subtle and compact form. The contrast with the preceding works is dramatic; it’s unexpected and great to see this bold change. In each case there is reference to nature, as if the forms arise from a continuous process of observation and enquiry that is always responsive to the particular material, and its qualities, at hand. The works in this exhibition are delicate, powerful, crude, and refined—not concerned with a particular characteristic or outcome, but rather with what happens in play, following one result to the next. It’s all trial and error, intuitive exploration. This is an artist with a long history of working with process, of finding dimension in surface, letting the gesture in painting become unbound. In this, the artist’s sixth exhibition at the gallery, there is no sign of Benglis’ rigorous openness to exploration diminishing.