**“Lynda Benglis”**

This show reveals the artist behind a notorious ad. By Anne Doran

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In 1974, 32-year-old artist Lynda Benglis took out an ad in *Artforum* magazine—a now-famous double-page spread that depicted her oiled, naked and holding a gigantic, double-ended dildo between her legs. (The ensuing art-world rumpus, during which five of *Artforum’s* editors resigned, was recently the subject of an illuminating—and highly entertaining—exhibition at Susan Inglett Gallery.) Despite Benglis’s stature as a pioneering contemporary sculptor, that “object of extreme vulgarity” (to quote the departing editors) has, until recently, eclipsed the rest of her oeuvre.

This traveling retrospective, organized by the Irish Museum of Modern Art and making its last stop at the New Museum, represents a long-overdue reassessment of Benglis’s 40-year career. The *Artforum* piece here seems no longer an isolated gesture but perfectly in keeping with a body of work bewilderingly multifarious but remarkably consistent in its aims—above all, a refusal to accept limits.

Ten years earlier Benglis had arrived in New York from Louisiana, just in time for the heyday of Pop, the solidification of Minimalism as an art movement, and the advent of postminimalist practices such as process, installation and performance art. Trained as a painter, she almost immediately began to synthesize all of these forms into an output that was unique in its simultaneous celebration of materials and process, sexuality and kitsch, color and image making.

The earliest works in the show are “zips” (Benglis had met Barnett Newman almost upon arrival in New York) created by building up layers of pigmented beeswax and resin on long-shape Masonite panels. Each layer of melted wax, applied with a brush the same width as the work’s support, reproduced and exaggerated the drag marks of the first brushstroke, resulting in a broken surface whose patterns call to mind macerated skies or ripples on water.

The wax paintings were followed by massive spills of red, green, yellow and blue latex that continued Abstract Expressionism by more psychedelic means, succeeded in turn by works in polyurethane foam—blobs of brightly colored froth puddled on floors, mounded in corners and projecting off walls. A suite of five such pieces colored with phosphorescent pigments are among the few that have survived. Installed in a dark room under black lights, they manage to look both cheesy and wondrous, like garishly lit stalactites at a tourist attraction.

This kind of allusiveness—more pronounced over time—sets Benglis’s sculpture apart from contemporaneous process art in which the sole content was the trace of the artist’s activities or the nature of the material itself. Even as they serve as a record of pouring, folding or knotting, her works invariably conjure images, energies and presences—waterfalls and oil spills, memory and desire, phantasmic hierophants and revelers.

In a gallery devoted to Benglis’s media works of the ’70s, the *Artforum* image is contextualized as one in a group of photographs, collectively labeled “Sexual Mockeries,” that she used on announcements for her exhibitions. (The series also includes pictures of the artist as pinup girl, with her jeans around her ankles, and as avatar of bad-boy cool, complete with sports jacket, shades and Porsche.) In these assembled media insertions, Benglis appears as an androgynous being. Hermaphroditism resurfaces in a video titled *The Amazing Bovine Woe*—an alternately hilarious and disturbing occipital drama (starring Benglis and Stanton Kaye as sideline operators Rexina and Babu, and Rena Small, in a furry suit, as their dual-sexed dog) that anticipates Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy’s film collaborations, as well as Nathalie Djurberg’s animations.

Also from the 1970s are Benglis’s chthonic “Sparkle Knots,” dangling “Hoofers” and plump, frivolous “Lagniappes.” Embellished with paint and dusted with glitter, they prefigure the work of such artists as Isa Genzken and look fresh, strong, and contemporary. The late ’70s and early ’80s saw ever-more-decorative pieces, including the fan-shaped “Peacocks” and bowlike “Plaets.” A handful of ceramic flourishes from the 1990s leaves one wanting more of them; paper-lantern-like sculptures from 2009, more high-end home furnishing than art, disappoint.

Benglis’s eschewal of a signature style or medium may be, as it is with certain younger artists, a strategy intended to disrupt the locating of the artist or her art in any hierarchical or market-oriented system. More likely, however, it is the result of refusing herself nothing. As seen in this exhibition, the hermaphroditic state stands in for having it all: Masculinity and femininity, nature and culture, intentionality and chance, object and image. Showing Bow Wow’s grossly enlarged genitals to an assembled crowd, Benglis’s Rexina asks, “Does anyone have any important questions?” Confronted by Benglis’s category-dissolving art—some of it as good as it gets, some of it dreadful, nearly all of it fascinating—the answer is: No, we do not.