Lynda Benglis at Cheim and Read

Lynda Benglis, UNO (SHY FIVE) 2016, Cast glitter on handmade paper over chicken wire, 55 x 15 x 14 inches, 139.7 x 38.1 x 35.6 centimeters, © Lynda Benglis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York
Lynda Benglis
Cheim and Read
September 8th to October 22nd, 2016

By PHOEBE HOBAN, SEPT. 2016

“I’m not a surfer, but I feel the waves,” Lynda Benglis said last Thursday, as she sat by the entrance to Cheim and Read, at the packed opening for her new show, which runs through October 22. Her latest work features dozens of large, lighter-than-air, colorful, sometimes sparkly, wall-mounted paper sculptures that could be butterfly larva; kites merged with Chinese lanterns; the shed garb of a fairy princess. As gallery director Adam Sheffer aptly put it in a post-opening toast, “Lynda Benglis is the ultimate Material Girl. Madonna has nothing on her!” Or as the artist herself has said, “I am the material, and what I am doing is embracing it.”

The show vividly supports that, ranging from two rooms of gem-like wall pieces so airy they nearly levitate, to two rooms of works heavier than gravity. One, Elephant Necklace, is an inspirational burst of matte-black ceramics resembling roadkill merged with tire tracks, a series of jagged curls that Benglis created at her Santa Fe studio in just the last few months, arranged on the floor in a circle, like mysterious ancient runes. The other, The Fall Caught, standing alone in the gallery’s entry room, is an imposing aluminum cascade that both echoes the bronze water fountains Benglis created for her 2015 show at Storm King, but can also be seen from an anthropomorphic slant, as a giant slender, silvery silhouette leaning against the wall.
Benglis will probably never live down her first major claim to fame; the naked-but-for-a-
huge-dildo parked between her legs full-page ad that ran in Artforum in 1974. “My mother
told me when she saw it, ‘Hey, they will never forget it!’” That’s pretty much been the case.
But from the moment that she emerged in the 1960s with her three-dimensional answer to
Pollock’s drip paintings—her exuberant, brilliantly-hued poured latex pieces—her work has
made its mark purely on its own artistic merit.

In the new work, the hand-made paper is stretched, like the skin of a drum, over chicken
wire, in some cases covering it, in others exposing bits of armature. “I’m drawing with air,
wire and paper,” Benglis says. “What I like about these pieces is that they have content, but
you can see through them, the wall, the wire itself, all the process is revealed as part of the
form.”
Influenced both by the kite “fights” she saw in India, where during kite festivals, competing box kites are illuminated with candles, and by the kites her father made during her Louisiana childhood—he sold building materials, and traveled around with a trunkload of samples, one of the artist’s earliest inspirations—the new pieces are an exuberant extension of Benglis’ lifelong dance with different media, from poured latex to polyurethane foam mounds to cast bronze.
With fanciful titles like Bee Sting, Sparkle Flag Fern, Butterfly, Storm a Comin,’ and Little Silver Spirit, they range from snake-like squiggles to ornate shapes reminiscent of some of her past work involving ties and knots. “My challenge was to make the form without creating any ties,” Benglis says. The resulting, undulating forms share something with marine-life—sea anemones and coral reefs, and with the extraordinary cloud formations that festoon the desert sky near the artist’s Mexico studio: “The most complicated clouds I have ever seen!” And, it being Benglis, their negative and positive spaces also readily evoke male and female body parts. As gallery co-founder John Cheim puts it, “She, more than anyone I have ever encountered, brings to mind the Whitman poem, ‘I sing the body electric.’
Lynda Benglis, SPARKLE DEVIL 2016, Cast glitter on handmade paper, over chicken wire, 52 x 18 x 18 inches, 132.1 x 45.7 x 45.7 centimeters, © Lynda Benglis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York

“It’s exciting, because I create these bodies,” Benglis herself says. “I am a sculptor, so when I paint, I’m always thinking form, whether its poured on the floor, latex rubber or pigmented and put over wire. So these paper pieces extend my interest in surface, which is about painting, but also in form. What I am trying to do is really push the form where I haven’t been. It’s a challenge every time,” she says, seen working, in a recent studio video shot by Burill Crohn. “This is one of my favorite things--putting the skin on, which I think of as fleshing the form out….I’ve had this experience before making pie, but I am not making a pie now, I am capturing form. It’s really sexy!” WM