

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Marina Cashdan and Vivian Rehberg, 'Time & Tide', *Frieze*, October 2010



On the occasion of a major touring retrospective, **Lynda Benglis** talks to *Marina Cashdan* about her 40-year career and *Vivian Rehberg* considers Benglis' legacy and her current retrospective

Organized by the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (IMMA) – in collaboration with the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence (RISD); the New Museum, New York; and Le Consortium, Dijon – the most extensive survey to date of American sculptor Lynda Benglis' work reached the artist's home shores this month, having just opened at RISD, and will travel to the New Museum in February 2011. (On pages 220–1, Vivian Rehberg reflects on the exhibition's Dijon iteration.) The retrospective is augmented in the US with works from throughout Benglis' career, including her monumental five-piece installation Phantom, which has not been seen since its 1971 debut. The show surveys the extensive and influential career of an artist whose work reaches beyond the gesture for which she is notorious (a certain advert in Artforum), and the pour pieces and 'fallen paintings' that put her on the map. It removes her work from the confines of feminism and post-Minimalism, examining the nature of a practice that merges content and form, balancing materiality with spirituality. I spoke to Benglis about her work, the misconceptions that surround it, and her future plans.

Marina Cashdan You moved to New York from Louisiana in 1964. I understand you considered yourself to be an abstract artist. Does that still hold?

Lynda Benglis I realize increasingly that I'm not completely an abstract artist or a so-called post-Minimalist. My work has always been either connected to events in my life, process, subjects or strong associations. It was Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe who first mentioned that he thought of my work as being symbolic or associative.

MC Only a few years after you arrived in New York, you were turning heads with your wax 'paintings' and latex pours, for example *Night Sherbet* (1968), *Contraband* (1969), *Embryo II* (1967), and the 'Pinto Series' (1969–70). What attracted you to these materials?

LB They've all been used as a surface for human skin. Latex and rubber masks, wax effigies and wax in ritual. I was also interested in the fact that most of these materials derive from nature.

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MC You often speak about having been part of a group of artists who were wondering what to do and what the future was. Was

this a response to that same question? Were you inventing, or reinventing something?

LB When I came to New York I was part of a close circle of artists who were asking questions about where art was going and what art could be. For my part, I think I was reinventing a process within painting; I was making my own paints with pigmented rubber and then later with pigmented polyurethane. I had this feeling that I wanted to stretch the image, to have the image confront the viewer rather than have it lie on a surface (i.e. canvas) or a board.

MC You talk about your early works as 'little bombs'. Did these reflect your life experiences then?

LB They were bursting with energy! New York was larger than life for me then, because I had grown up in rural Louisiana, and even New Orleans appeared rural compared to New York. I found myself focusing on splashes on the sidewalk or the power of huge trucks passing as I was on my bicycle. And I absorbed that kind of energy. I wanted to give it back in response to something that was going on in a linear way – ideas that had to do with the development of painting and sculpture.

MC Is Robert Pincus-Witten's term for your work, 'the frozen gesture', a misnomer, because your work feels more like it's living, an act as opposed to a confined object?

LB Well 'the frozen gesture' was something that I think both Yves Klein and Franz Kline had done. Symbolically, Klein jumped out the window: he was involved with gesture, process (his 'women brushes' painting with their bodies) and the symbolic (sponges soaked with his paint on monochromatic blue canvases). Kline took the gesture and made it iconographic. Frank Stella said that Kline was one of his favourite artists, so I think Stella himself took the canvas, the stretcher bars, and turned them on their side to make them painted objects, as did other artists who were using materials and geometry. They were presenting something that was, in a way, rebellious and sometimes simplistic, and it was called Minimalism. I saw that and understood it in the context of where art could go, but for me it was a statement that seemed very rococo. It was way out on a limb. I felt that art had to have more content, a multiplicity of meaning and associations. And even many of those so-called Minimal artists broke out of their own self-created mould!

MC In Dave Hickey's recent essay 'A House Built in a Body: Lynda Benglis's Early Work' (2010), he writes: 'As a friend of mine remarked at the time, foreshadowing the dildo photograph: "If she'd only been a guy, it would have been less intimidating." But she wasn't a guy [...] and male artists have always been welcoming to female artists – except for artists like Lynda Benglis, Hannah Wilke, Bridget Riley and Joan Mitchell whose sheer talent and erotic charisma scared the hell out of everybody, women included.' Do you think there's an alpha female quality to your work that at the time scared your peers, not only referring to the 1974 Artforum advert but in the 'erotic charisma' and, more so, 'sheer talent' that they saw in your practice?

LB It's only a person's interior and exterior that is different. I think we all have both male and female qualities. Even my dog Pi is an alpha female, so she expresses herself in a very positive energetic way and some people like to define it as male or female – aggression is male and passivity is female – but these are both human and animal traits, and the world is made up of that. That's in our psyche and it's a balance in the works and in nature that you can't easily categorize.

MC For those who may not have considered such things, did this confrontation and playfulness challenge even your peers? And has your work moved from that challenging position to one that's more spiritual and contemplative? If so, was this conscious or unconscious?

LB I think that one context in which to explore that particular work is my addressing and confronting

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feminism. I was asking myself: 'What are the questions that I should ask of this movement and myself and what I feel about it?' The ideas that I proceeded to develop are not so politically conscious and have to be experienced on a different level. I'm inventing new processes in the making of sculpture and painting; I'm redefining how we see and think about form, so it's a formal pursuit and not a pursuit about feminism and political thinking. It's about the development of ideas and feelings that have a progression in my personal context. One might see it one way or another according to your time or what you experience when you look at the work – no one can control that. I can't control it. The museums can't control it. If art were so pure that it might have a kind of ultimate control within the context of the artist then it would be just pure thought.

MC Since the 1970s, you've spent a lot of time in India and you have a house in Ahmadabad. Can we talk about your relationship to the country?

LB Robert Rauschenberg and Bob Morris recommended that I visit India. Rauschenberg was very close to Merce Cunningham, and the dancers from the 1964 Venice Biennale were going there, so he went to India after he won the Grand Prize at Venice. The family that he visited was very involved in the arts, dancing and science, and so I was very much taken with the place, because I had a context in which to experience it. Before this invitation I might have been afraid to go to India because I had no context. I wouldn't have gone because it was the 'thing to do'.

MC And the same for Sante Fe, New Mexico, where you also have a house and have spent a lot more time recently. Have these different environs grown into your work, as in your life?

LB They've allowed me to open up the field of thinking because thinking and art, as in science, is open-ended. It's inductive and it allows me to consider other possibilities.

MC Can you talk about your glass works from the 1980s and how they relate to your knots from the '70s? There seems to be a relationship there.

LB I wanted to see if glass could be formed with my hands and tied into a knot. I could do it because of the space-age technology with gloves. Later I developed this idea of the concave/convex form in glass and cast it; it seemed like jelly on the wall. I found that because of this form – this hemisphere – the surface of the images seemed to float and almost disappear. I took this half-round idea and developed it in metal sculpture and in the pigmented polyurethane as well.

MC D'Arrest (2009), shown in your Cheim & Read exhibition last year, was hypnotizing and, as you said, jelly-like. The brilliant orange colour seemed to really take to the material, almost jump out from it, and similarly for the other pigmented works.

LB Yes! These forms accepted the light in an interesting way. This light came kind of within the form; it got absorbed.

MC It was the same with the phosphorescent works from the '70s. The light is in the form, an entirely different quality to when the pigment is elevated.

LB Absolutely. And what was interesting about those forms in phosphorous was that when you looked at them, they were constantly moving. That's the same with the present polyurethane textured forms. We experience something in our bodies that is proprioceptive; we experience it in our whole body – you feel what you see and you are 'charged'. It's an exchange of energy.

MC Yes, you often speak about proprioception ('the unconscious perception of movement and spatial orientation arising from stimuli within the body itself') and I feel that exists also in your early works Pinto (1969–70) and Totem (1971) as well as more recent bronze fountain works. I practice yoga and

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those works make me think of deep breathing, the idea of seeing the colours of breath moving up and down the inside of the body. This brings to mind another work, Phantom, which will be shown at the New Museum for the first time since it debuted at the Union Art Gallery at Kansas State University in 1971. Why was one part of this five-part installation separated?

LB I did it in the context of a wall 15 metres long and there were five pieces. For some reason, one of the pieces was sold and the owner didn't want to let it go. It could not be shown without the fifth piece. But it's only a relic now because it's not within the context of the space that I created it in and it looks less interesting – like digging up an urn. Recently I received an apologetic card from the offspring of the widow who didn't want to part with the fifth element.

MC Speaking of urns, ceramics were a big part of your work in the '90s and 2000s, playing to your interest in how our perception of form changes through texture and surface, and overlaying or casting various materials or textures and surfaces.

LB Working with clay was a big part of my understanding about what I wanted to achieve with form – basically a more organic form. I was also playing with the idea that surface and texture can also describe form: we see the surface and the texture of things and we complete or feel the form. I thought that sculpture had begun to imitate life too much and sculptors had forgotten about the life of the surface and the life of the form itself. They weren't asking questions anymore and often people were just working too logically: we do this, we do that, we react this way and we get a sculpture. And are we just imitating a form? And I did some of that, too, in question. But for Migrating Pedmarks and Cloak-Wave [both 1998] I made a form underneath with plaster and burlap and then made these undulating clay forms over it, as if I was water or earth finding my sense of balance on another kind of surface. And that's what I did with the polyurethane when I did the installation for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis [one of six monumental pours made for various institutions in 1971]. Those were largely made with plastic and an understructure made of chicken wire and wood covered with polyethylene.

MC But isn't there also an element of divine intervention, so to speak; allowing something other than what's intended to intercede, especially in using some of the materials that are less rigid and so not as easy to control?

LB I think Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis were really playing with this idea of the accident. They were just more responsive, or maybe Pollock was. But actually it's really a marriage between the conscious and the unconscious that occupies the creative mind. I find what the materials can do and within that context there is that decision-making. In the beginning I romanticized it; and you can say what you want, it is still confined by the format. I saw visions of clouds yesterday; you couldn't imagine how complicated they were on all horizons. That's one reason I love New Mexico! The kinds of images of the clouds are infinite. I think we deal with an infinite imagination! This is how the artists must get the God-complex! However, the artist is always dealing with the bounds of the material and the unbounded nature of the universe and of the imagination – and trying to mark the time. Whether you comprehend it or not, you don't understand it all. It's infinite.

MC You've spent much of your career outside New York in the last three decades (even though you still have your apartment on the Bowery). I wondered if you feel that New York is insular?

LB I think ideas generate and regenerate when artists are with each other and I think these are very important moments of an artist's life. I still feel that New York is a great city for seeing and hearing things. Those moments in time that I had as a growing artist I couldn't have had anywhere else.

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MC So when Hickey talked about other female artists who challenged the art world in the 1970s, like Wilke, Riley and Mitchell, was he also talking about a particular type of work that marked a time?

And is this time lost? Is this underground nature, so to speak, gone nowadays?

LB I think people are definitely drawn to nature, even until death. These works were not popular but people are always drawn to the questions that life offers. I think the Internet is a waste of time. The computer can be non-functional. And just the fact that you're constantly battling something and you think you're in communication but you're really not ...

MC And how do we use all this information available to us?

LB Exactly. How do you use it? Hickey's really asking how do you use it in a way that's a personal gesture? How can it be recognized? Everybody has his or her own handwriting but how do you develop it in a way that's communicating? It's about focus and communication.

MC What are you working on at the moment?

LB I've recently made some African masks in glass. The African mask has supposedly long been of interest to collectors and artists since Cubism, which was a proposition that New York's Museum of Modern Art expounded in the 20th century. From the time I was doing the knots, I was making an organic Cubist statement; the planes were in a sense not planes. It was a linear organic statement, one of curved planes. These particular masks that I bought from the man who sells them from a truck in front of the Whitney Museum are classic images of what might be thought of as an African mask. They interested me not so much for their complexity but for their statement about the African mask: they were for the ritual and about the ritual, created by the tourist industry, and the seller was very cognisant of the Cubists referencing African art. I find that art is made about art and continues to develop certain ideas and what gave me pleasure about these forms was that they were both classic and simplistic at the same time. So I said: 'I'll take these classic, simplistic forms and make something else from them'. Why not? Why not regenerate the tribal, you know! [laughs] And so I did that with the glass blowers at The Museum of Glass at The Tacoma Museum.

MC For visitors to the show at risk or the New Museum, is there something you hope they will take with them?

LB I hope when someone looks at or feels the work they take with them a kind of physical moment that becomes a special kind of confrontation in time, that's all. When art speaks to you it's both a physical and mental exchange that the viewer has. It's a pure moment, it's a transition of time, it's timeless, don't you think? True art and the response is timeless.

The legacy of Lynda Benglis and her current retrospective

by Vivian Rehberg

It's impossible to avoid it so let's get it out of the way: Lynda Benglis achieved great notoriety at the age of 33 for an advertisement she placed in the November 1974 issue of Artforum, in which she posed naked, wielding a dildo. But this publicity was hardly her maiden voyage as an artist. Benglis, who was already very active on the New York and Los Angeles scenes, originally conceived of this spread as an accompaniment to Robert Pincus-Witten's article 'Lynda Benglis: The Frozen Gesture', which was published in the same issue. She offered to fund the publication of the work, but the editors of the magazine refused to cede editorial space for money. The resulting advertisement consists of two adjacent pages: the one on the left is black, with the photo and gallery credits in small white print in

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the upper-left corner. On the right is a photograph of Benglis, sporting nothing but cropped hair, cat-eye sunglasses and bikini tan lines. She angles her naked, oiled body toward the camera and places a hand on her hip, while the other hand brandishes a gigantic, flesh-coloured dildo (double-headed, it turns out) between her legs.

By today's standards, Benglis' overtly sexualized photograph is not terribly shocking. This was not the case 36 years ago. In the letters section of the issue of *Artforum* that followed the advertisement, five of the associate editors decried the photograph's inclusion for its 'extreme vulgarity', its 'mockery' of the feminist movement, and for its derisory commentary on the tangled relationship between artistic self-promotion, art criticism and commerce. Two of the signatories, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, left the magazine the following year to create the quarterly journal *October*.

There are still arguments about whether this controversy helped or harmed Benglis' career, but it's fair to say the episode still overshadows much of the critical record of her work from the mid-1960s to the present. Indeed, Benglis' last retrospective before this one was held in 1991 at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia, so occasions to reassess her career as a whole have been few and far between. Fortunately, her first solo show in Europe allows us to move beyond the scandal, but only ever so slightly. For despite the useful contextualizing monograph (edited by *Les Presses du Réel*) that accompanies the exhibition, it's somehow still a struggle to get around over-determining (and somewhat dated) issues of gender politics and questions of taste instigated by her nude photograph when writing about Benglis' work. It's not necessarily a problem – but if it is, it's the critic's rather than the artist's. That single photograph, shown only as documentation in the exhibition, has become thoroughly anchored in the discourse around postwar American art in a way her other works, even other photographs from the 'Sexual Mockeries' series (1970–6), perhaps unjustly, have not. Due to Benglis' reputation as a maverick, it is fitting that the French leg of her show would be hosted by *Le Consortium* in Dijon, one of the most historically significant and independent-minded contemporary art centres in France. Benglis' work was displayed in the neutral, nondescript architecture of the street-side space (an ambitious new building project, designed by Shigeru Ban, is underway at *Le Consortium's* warehouse site, 'l'Usine') and the rapport between the scale of her wall and floor sculptures and the proportion of the galleries felt just right. In the entrance, the fierceness of *Wing* (1970), an alien-claw-like cast aluminium wall piece whose poured layers beckon toward the viewer, was tempered by *Minos* (1978) and *Siren* (1978), softly abstracted shields of burnished gilt, hanging opposite. Traces of Benglis' Greek heritage recur in her titles (*Chiron*, 2009; *Heraklion*, 1978; *Omicron*, 1974) more than they do in her forms, but these works (excerpted from a larger series) bring to mind a clash between two civilizations, their artefacts the vaguely corporeal fragments of ancient gold treasure and some oversized foil candy wrappers that are more Koons than Knossos.

Benglis indulges in a kind of play between the serious, arty reference, the primordial psychological jolt and a more base, material posturing (or a base posturing of materials). Such play has a magnetic effect, in that it charms as well as repels. This is evident in the almost ludicrously gorgeous 'Pinto Series' (1969–70), wall sculptures resembling giant tongue depressors or miniature surfboards, their surfaces encrusted with an uneven accumulation of multi-coloured beeswax, as well as in her signature pigmented polyurethane foam sculptures, like *Untitled (VW)* (1970), and her poured pigmented latex pieces, such as *Blatt* (1969), which are bulbous in places or ooze over the floor, the latter like the deflated remnants of the former. Benglis was working through the legacies of Abstract Expressionist painting and American postwar sculpture in these works, and whatever she was after, it was definitely not a refinement of one aesthetic or a further reduction of another.

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Asserting that Benglis' radicality lies in her negotiation of the traditional habitats of painting and sculpture (the wall, the floor) does her a disservice, not because it is untrue, but because it is perhaps not commensurate with the impulses behind and the impact of her work. That Benglis wrestles with her materials is undeniable, but one wouldn't want to claim it is all about process either. The work as a whole is a testimony to movement: poured canisters of latex, cast and sprayed polyurethane foam, shaped chicken wire and twisted, pleated and knotted metals. This retrospective demonstrates that much of it is decorative, expressly, if not ironically so. Primary Structures (Paula's Props) (1975) is a hip-high row of plaster Ionic columns, one topped with a miniature cast of Benglis' Porsche, another with a potted plant, installed on a plush river of midnight blue velvet that ridicules the eponymous 1966 exhibition of Minimalist sculpture. But what else can one say about Hoofers I and II (1971-2), long vertical tubes fashioned out of wire and cotton cloth, spotted with vivid girly pigments and patches of glitter, or about Sparkle Knot V (1972)? What else can one say about Lynda Benglis, without lapsing into cliché? It's time too for us to move on.

<http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/time-tide/>