

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

John Baldessari, "Lynda Benglis," *Interview Magazine*, 1st of April 2015



THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Evolve or die. The old biology and business byword is just as true of art, and in the endgame practices of abstract painting in 1960s America, one artist, a young Louisiana transplant named Lynda Benglis, jettisoned the canvas—or any concept of a stabilizing vertical support—and began to experiment with pouring color directly onto the floor. These works—made from vats of latex, which she pigmented—became her iconic "pour," or "spill," pieces. They had all the formal intrigue of her abstract predecessors, but they were gusty, unleashed animals, projecting into space, literally spilling over, and creating curious hybrids between Greenbergian abstraction and a sort of manic postminimalism unafraid of chaos or quick movement.

Throughout the 73-year-old artist's career, Benglis has made painterly sculpture, or sculptural painting, or perhaps it's simply Benglisian forms: works that range in material—fabric, wire mesh, bronze, steel, cast aluminum, polyurethane, beeswax, phosphorescence, glitter, handmade paper—but always carry the process of their creation on their surfaces. The pours evolved into foam and mounds, lava-like protrusions or waves, and eventually into an ongoing series of large-scale fountains begun in 1984, which included working plumbing. But Benglis, ever the material experimenter, was a free-floating radical. She worked in video and film, and her famous "pin-up" in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*—perhaps the most famous page in an art magazine of all time, which resulted in resignations and art-world schisms—was a nude photograph of the artist in sunglasses and wielding an extra-large dildo. The mock centerfold not only played with the tropes of porn and the male gaze, but in many ways predicted the future state of the young artist as cynosure, fantasy provider, or pop-cultural agitator. In certain respects, without Benglis's influence, it is hard to imagine the careers or artists as diverse as Cindy Sherman and Rachel Harrison—many artists owe something to her deft, idiosyncratic fusion of formal and social concerns.

Benglis, today, is still working and experimenting—in New York City (she was recently working on *Crescendo*, a new version of her 1984 World's Fair fountain, *The Wave of the World*, at Modern Art Foundry in Queens), in the Hamptons, in New Mexico, in Ahmedabad, India, among other places. And it's proving to be a busy year—not only is her original World's Fair fountain, which was lost for decades, returning to public display in New Orleans, but now Benglis has her first comprehensive, career-spanning museum retrospective in the United Kingdom at the Hepworth Wakefield (running until July 5); works ranging 50 years will be in the same location for the first time, offering a true examination of Benglis's humor, precision, and physicality. Also, in May, the Storm King Art Center in upstate New York will show a survey of the artist's outdoor and indoor sculptures, many of them fountains.

This past January, Benglis spoke to her good friend and onetime CalArts colleague, the artist John Baldessari. As they said, they've both been working long enough to know where to find their sources of inspiration-and know when they're on to something right. -*Christopher Bollen*

JOHN BALDESSARI: The first thing I want to say about you, Lynda, is how much you've been an influence on me, all the way back to when I first started going to New York in the late '60s and '70s and I saw your work at Paula Cooper Gallery. They were showing your poured pieces. And jumping forward to today, I know how much of an influence you are for younger artists. I have a young protégé, a student of mine, who is very much influenced by your idea of materials, rather than art as some abstract thing. And I know when we both taught together at CalArts, what a huge impact you had on the students. For that time, you were a real Angeleno. [*laughs*] You went to all the openings.

LYNDA BENGLIS: I think the only time I went to your house for a little get-together, I thought my Porsche was a bumper car. I banged up the front and back of it getting to wherever I was going. Now, I was

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

trying to think of when I first saw your work, John. It was before I met you. Was it your first New York show at the Feigen Gallery?

**I
COULDN'T POUR
WAX ON THE FLOOR
AND MAKE IT
WORK, AND I
WASN'T
INTERESTED IN
STRAIGHT
CANVASES... I WAS
MOCKING THE
WHOLE ISSUE OF
FIGURE GROUND.**

—LYNDA BENGLIS

BALDESSARI: You're right. They had a small space downtown. About that time, in the late '60s, I was in New York very innocently going around to the galleries, trying to get interest in my work. But nobody was interested. [*Benglis laughs*] I was going about it the wrong way. Then I went into the uptown gallery of Richard Feigen. Michael Findlay was running the downtown location, and he asked if he could have one or two paintings to show to clients. He showed those downtown. And that's what you saw. They were text pieces. I couldn't give them away! He was the first person to give me any courage, to care about what I was doing other than myself.

BENGLIS: But wait, John. I just want to say one of the strongest works you made—and it made me a little angry at you—was this nude painting you did of your wife. She was quite beautiful and quite shy. And it made me so angry that you put her through that, you know? [*laughs*]

BALDESSARI: Well, you never know how you influence other artists.

BENGLIS: Exactly. And I began thinking about the male gaze, I suppose. But there's one thing that I wanted to say, actually—and that's about the way you draw. When you drew over that photograph of a Le Corbusier sculpture that's in the

Sarabhai house in Ahmedabad, this large mosquito right over it, you pulled off such a beautiful piece. I thought, "What chutzpah." [*laughs*] I have often wondered why you don't draw more.

BALDESSARI: I don't know. I guess there came a point when I've just been into photography and trying to blur the distinctions between photography and painting. I'm making sort of hybrid situations.

BENGLIS: Have you ever done a self-portrait?

BALDESSARI: I think only a few. Every artist does a self-portrait at one period. So maybe we should hear about how you started making those poured works.

BENGLIS: I think I started doing the pouring because I couldn't pour wax on the floor and make it work, and I wasn't interested in straight canvases. I had made these sort of popsicle-stick paintings that was limited in format. But I was mocking the whole issue of figure ground.

BALDESSARI: That's important because Paula Cooper, as far as I was concerned, was the place you look at paintings. And then when I saw your work, I thought, "Wow, this is fantastic. You don't have to have a stretcher bar to do a painting."

BENGLIS: They were directly on the floor. In the beginning, I poured onto polyethylene and linoleum,

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

and I had to get it out of my studio—I had a small studio on Baxter Street, down from the police station and across from a school playground. It was just an on-the-floor project. The latex paint was pigmented, and I soon moved into using foam, because the latex was flat and didn't look back at you, so to speak. But there really wasn't any ABC logical process about how I was doing it. You had to walk around it as you worked.

BALDESSARI: What were some of the early reactions to the poured works?

BENGLIS: I can remember going down to install a piece for a museum in Dallas, Texas, where I was approached by a collector—the Murchisons. He founded the Dallas Cowboys. They actually proposed I do a piece for them. But the minute I learned he wanted me to do tunnels for his choo-choo train, I refused. He had a train that he would ride around his estate, and they wanted my piece to be these foam tunnels. When I said no, Mrs. Murchison said that my next pour should be in Germany. "Why don't you go to Germany where you belong?" She didn't know that I was a Southern girl from Louisiana. [*Baldessari laughs*] I guess it would have been worse for a Texas lady to tell a Louisiana girl to go to hell. Maybe Germany was her idea of hell. I don't know. But, in fact, I did go to Germany to do a installation there not long after. My gallery there was Galerie Hans-Jürgen Müller, and he had borrowed some of the poured, semiflexible pieces, but then I wanted to do an in situ exhibition of foam works. I took them in kits, in big, five-gallon containers, water-blown polyurethane, a lot of pigment. I took over the gallery. I pigmented each pour separately, making these piles in the corner, around the corners, up the wall in a wing. And there was a lady working in the building, and she was appalled. She thought I was messing up the building. She said, "In Hitler's day, this never would've happened!"

BALDESSARI: You know, I always see you and your work in a constellation. And that constellation occupies Jackson Pollock and Robert Ryman, and there was a young artist in Germany, Rosemarie Trockel, too, who did knitting.

BENGLIS: Oh, yeah. There you go. You've traveled a lot more than I have.

BALDESSARI: Do you see that constellation? Who were some of the artists you met when you first moved to New York in the '60s?

BENGLIS: I came to New York when I was just 22, and I thought I knew everything at that stage, as all 22-year-olds think. But I learned a great deal. I accepted any time I had an invitation to travel and to talk. I was lucky that there was a feminist movement, and I rode that wave—still riding that wave. I was just very lucky to be included. But I kind of grew up in the center of art activity because I worked at an art gallery, and I worked for the Brooklyn Museum. I met Bridget Riley. Later I met Barnett Newman. I just kept meeting artists. Had Pollock been alive, I would have met him. I wanted to know those artists who were part of what I considered art history. Helen Frankenthaler and I were asked to be on a TV program in the early '70s, to be interviewed together, but I don't think she wanted to do it. I had liked her work. I was very involved in the sort of Greenbergian mess, and I was involved in taking on some of the things that I felt Pollock would have done. Indeed, I learned later from Elayne Varian that Pollock had shown paintings at her gallery and had wanted to put them on the ceiling—I think they were done in phosphorescent.

BALDESSARI: Have you seen the new painting show at MoMA? It's called "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World." Your comments would be interesting because they are billing it as new directions in painting.

BENGLIS: I haven't seen it, but I'll run out tomorrow so then we can discuss it.

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

WHEN MY MOTHER
SAW MY ARTFORUM
PIECE, SHE SAID,
'THEY'LL NEVER
FORGET THAT!'
AND MY FATHER
SAID 'EGAD' AND
WALKED OUT OF
THE ROOM.

—LYNDA BENGLIS

BALDESSARI: It's not a very good show. But take a look. MoMA is pushing it as something new.

BENGLIS: Well, where are they showing something new? Is there anything you've seen that you feel is really new?

BALDESSARI: Not really. It's just people using tropes—one trope here, another trope there—and making the best they can of it. But, to be honest, I haven't seen much interesting stuff going up.

BENGLIS: Well, that's good because then we can keep doing what we like to do. [*laughs*] I am interested in what's going on in the art world, but I find, at this point in my life, I'm not usually influenced so much by something out there. It does come from the outside, but it doesn't always come from something new that's going on; it could come from some quirky thing that happens to me because I happen to, for instance, be making paperworks at the Brodsky Center and working with that and trying to figure out what I want to do with that material.

BALDESSARI: Well, Lynda, we're at the point in our lives where we are our own influences.

BENGLIS: Exactly. It's a horrible feeling to see your own death ahead of you. But then I feel like I'm always racing for time. I'd rather be in my studio all the time. That's not a great feeling, but it's a great feeling to be in my studio, I have to say.

BALDESSARI: Yes, that's where the artist belongs: in a studio. The worst thing right now is the confluence of art and money. One gets inseparable from the other. People think art is money or money is art—it's the same thing. And that's really unhealthy.

BENGLIS: I've heard that a lot. It's hard to believe because I know I didn't think about money when I got started. I think about money now only when I buy things that I need for the art. I spend quite a bit of money just on materials. I've always been excessive when it comes to spending on that. I remember when I was working as a waitress in New York at the Black Cat Bar. Helen had been there, Brice Marden's wife, and she was quitting the job. I came in around holiday time, and I didn't know a thing; I couldn't mix a drink. But I remember I saved up \$500, and I blew it all on Day-Glo pigments, big, 500-pound vats. I always needed money to buy the latex and the pigments, so I worked to get them. But, in those days, you could have a loft in New York for \$75. I remember I shared my loft on Baxter Street with somebody who was never there. He brought in his work—doors that he would cover with fabric—that weren't bad, and it wasn't distracting. I'd walk into the space and see all these nice fabrics and doors. [*Baldessari laughs*] So it didn't bother me. He didn't make a mess. I had one shower and one toilet, and it was all exposed. Paula Cooper spent the night there once. I had the dildo from the *Artforum* piece hanging in the shower. When

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Paula heard some people up on the roof, she said she thought she could grab the dildo and crack them over the head with it! I got that dildo up on 42nd Street. I invited Robert Morris to come with me, but he didn't want to.

BALDESSARI: I've got to say, *Artforum*, probably the leading art magazine in the world, your page is the best they've ever run. They'll never surpass it!

BENGLIS: Well, maybe that piece was a result of how upset I was that you exposed your wife in that portrait! The hair on my head stood straight up.

BALDESSARI: Well, that's a new one to me. Maybe that piece was a reaction to you! It went back and forth.

BENGLIS: When my mother saw my *Artforum* piece, she said, "They'll never forget that!" And my father said "*Egad*" and walked out of the room.

BALDESSARI: That ad probably sold more *Artforums* that month than any prior.

BENGLIS: For the most part, when I look back at work I've made in the past, it's as if I'm visiting another time, another place, and sometimes another artist.

BALDESSARI: That's well said. Sometimes I think, "I did that?" But I know that the job of an artist is to get people to look in a new way, to get people to use their eyes and to get them to notice the things they don't pay attention to. I have a question. Do you still have your place out in New Mexico?

W
HEN I LOOK BACK
AT WORK I'VE
MADE IN THE PAST,
IT'S AS IF I'M
VISITING ANOTHER
TIME, ANOTHER
PLACE, AND
SOMETIMES
ANOTHER ARTIST.

—LYNDABENGLIS

BENGLIS: Yes, outside of Santa Fe in the desert, and I love it. I have about 150 acres. That's because I didn't want to see any other buildings close to me. I put my studio in such a way that you're not aware of anything nearby, just the landscape. That's where I've been rubbing my fingers raw on paper. I love paper. It's like skin.

BALDESSARI: You've been working on a series of paper forms.

BENGLIS: Yes, but I don't have any plans to show it. That's what's so nice, too. Right now, I'm just kind of floating in the paper. We get the pulp, we make the pulp into paper sheets, and then I make some forms, and I stretch paper over the forms. I think I always had the feeling in my work of stretching things over things. That's kind of a painter's thing, a surface thing. But I also like to wrestle with forms. I'm not a planer person, as such. I create planes. I'm more of a physical proprioceptive—more like a dancer.

BALDESSARI: I've been working on computer rendering and printing on canvas. It's all kind of mechanical, but I do bring my own hand into it, where I paint onto the printed

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

canvases. I sometimes think maybe I'm just an old painter at heart. I started out as a painter.

BENGLIS: I long for you to do some paintings, John, because I love that mosquito.

BALDESSARI: And you've been working at the Modern Art Foundry, too, on a new fountain?

BENGLIS: I have several foundries I work with. Modern Art was the first one where I did my first fountain. And I'm just finishing repairs on that World Fair's piece, the one from 1984 that disappeared for a while and I didn't know where it was. I was frightened that maybe the hurricane had taken it away. It was basically lost for decades to the public. It was being stored in a pile of rubble that wasn't intended to be thrown away. But it wasn't functioning as a fountain. It's owned by the city of Kenner, in Louisiana, but now this spring it's going to be borrowed for four years by the city of New Orleans and put in this marshscape that they've built. So it will be on display again as a working fountain. It's exciting to have it up. Fountains came out of the idea of the way water moved, and they were additions to the way I was thinking materials could flow—that they're alive.

JOHN BALDESSARI IS AN INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED ARTIST BASED IN L.A. HE CURRENT HAS A SOLO SHOW AT MARLAN GOODMAN GALLERY IN LONDON, AND IN NOVEMBER WILL DEBUT NEW WORKS AT STADEL MUSEUM IN FRANKFURT.

<http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/lynda-benglis#page4>