

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Robert Enright, "Poring and Pouring: The Physical Body and Its Gestures. An Interview with Lynda Benglis," *BorderCrossings*, 9th June 2015

Sculpture is a material occupation. Artists who make sculpture find themselves occupied with the look and feel of whatever material they're working with. In a career spanning 50 years, Lynda Benglis has consistently found ways to exploit the properties of the stuff from which she has made her work.

And there has been a lot of stuff. A partial list of the materials she has employed is itself an expansive inventory: aluminium, beeswax, bronze, chrome, clay, copper, cotton bunting, crystal, Elmer's glue, enamel, encaustic, gesso on Masonite, glass, glitter, gold leaf, hemp, lead, neon, phosphorescent pigment, pigmented latex, plant velvet, plaster, plastic, polyurethane foam, rubber, silicone, oxidized steel, stainless steel, tin, wire mesh and zinc.



Pima, 2013, glazed ceramic, 20 x 16 x 12 inches. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. All images copyright Lynda Benglis / SODRAC, Montréal / VAGA, New York (2015).

The order is not particular, although her use of everything has been. When Benglis refines the surface of a work like *Siren*, 1978, she fashions the gold leaf with a seductive glow. This piece, like so much of her work in metal, drifts towards a special kind of tactile figuration. She is almost never directly a figurative artist but her works almost always insinuate a bodily presence. The sculptures in gold leaf, oil-based sizing and

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdane.com

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

gesso on plaster emanate a particular physicality; the curves and creases of the forms connect to a range of association running from mermaids to Marilyn Monroe's presidential "Happy Birthday" dress. These are very sexy sculptures and they invite, in equal measure, the viewer's ocular and tactile engagement. As Benglis says, "I involve myself with the tactile and that involvement engages our other perceptions."

She also makes work that is breathtakingly beautiful. *The Graces*, 2003–05, a series of pinkish cast polyurethane lead and stainless steel sculptures, can be read through a range of aesthetic and historical layers, from the iconic to the totemic, and from stacked assemblage to rarified glass. Their naming is both a clue to, and a description of, their meaning. Benglis is connected to Greece by blood and sensibility, and her work often embodies a concentrated classicism. The curve in the centre of *Torso II*, 1991, made from hemp and encaustic, flares out from a waist to shoulders and thighs, and suggests the romance of the sculptural fragment.

Of course, beauty also moves in a darker and less lyric direction. Benglis's work in every medium speaks to the more ungovernable corners of the human imagination. The work glitters and then glitches, it is transcendent and excremental, it moves from the curvaceous to the crepuscular. One of her stainless steel and bronze pieces from 1995–96 is called *Raptor* and while it is elegant, there is a sense of entrapment in its overlapping folds. Her ceramic pieces from the early '90s have names like *Slithering Green* and *Deep Swamp* and many of her 1971 polyurethane foam sculptures projected out from the wall like gargoyles in the high church of maximalism. *Phantom*, installed that year in the Kansas Union Gallery at Kansas State University, included phosphorescent pigments in the foam, so these white creeping forms were suddenly sliding down the wall in the form of acidic green radioactive lava.

But it's in her standing bronze sculptures and fountains where she achieves an unparalleled sense of primitive majesty, what the Romantics recognized as sublime. *Cloak-Wave/Pedmarks*, 1998, lurches across the ground like some prehistoric creature covered in skin with a black patina, while *Chimera*, a fountain from 1998, seems to have gathered itself together out of the watery depths and is heading, menacingly, towards land. These large works are what nightmares would look like were they to take shape.

In 2008 Benglis called her exhibition at the Locks Gallery in Philadelphia "Shape-Shifters." It was a name that captured the way her sculpture functions. Individual works are perceptual changelings where, even as we look at them, one meaning shifts and replaces another. They combine a visible trace of strength with a suggestive aura of flexibility. So they resolutely are what they are, and they are just as determined to become something else.

In the following interview, Lynda Benglis remarks how she responds to work that makes a connection to "the forces in life and in the world." In saying so, she is speaking a form of autobiography. What she has made evident over almost half a century is that she herself is an example of the life force that she finds so compelling elsewhere.

Lynda Benglis has two major shows currently on exhibition, a 50-work retrospective at The Hepworth Wakefield, UK until July 1 (curated by Andrew Bonacina), and "Water Sources," an exhibition at the Storm King Art Center in New York's Hudson Valley, which includes 12 outdoor fountains as well as smaller sculptural works installed in six galleries in the museum building (curated by David R Collens), and running from May 16 through November 9.

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

The following interview was conducted by phone to New York on March 23, 2015.



Installation view, "The New Sculpture 1965–75: Between Geometry & Gesture," 1990, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Border Crossings: I want to bring the past into the present and ask you about *The Wave of the World*, your commissioned piece for the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition in New Orleans. I understand you've been reworking it.

Lynda Benglis: I do things on the spur of the moment and I happened to be down in New Orleans. Sometimes it seems as if somebody is guiding me. I was very lucky to be there. I have a little dachshund and like a hound I was looking for any information about the world's fair sculpture. It had remained in New Orleans and I knew it needed some work, so I set out to find it so that it could be repaired on my terms. I said to myself, "I don't need to do another copy." I had essentially signed a contract with the world's fair that it would be the only *Wave of the World*, which it is.

Your fountain sculptures make me think of chthonic figures that have been dug out of the earth. They're like primitive gods or something.

I love the way you describe them because that is the way I feel about them. Something entices and also drives me to do this large sculpture. It's beyond me. I can't tell you exactly how I feel but I feel I must do it. I love art whose proportion speaks to me, art that means something specific to a feeling about what are the forces in life and in the world. They are the natural forces that drive us.

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdane.com

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

So some kind of devil makes you do it. You have no volition in the process?

It's not exactly a dervish but I feel entitled to do my activity and I have goodwill in doing it. I'm forced to make the work out of all sense of my own reality, or anybody else's, and I'm lucky to have good people who seem to believe in them. They take a lot of money but there are people willing to take a risk in doing something they never thought of.

You said your first real connection to art happened at Tulane University in 1960 when you saw your first Franz Kline painting and became interested in Abstract Expressionism. Were those significant encounters?

I saw Kline as dealing with something very significant. It was a gesture that was meaningful because you read it as a real mark. It wasn't just about decor and it wasn't about Cubism. It was something original. It wasn't even about drawing; it was about an image that had a purpose and meaning. It was a symbol and I make meaningful symbols that I feel proprioceptively. My body feels it organically. We all feel gravity; we all feel buoyancy when we're in the water; and when we go underwater we have a different feeling. Our whole brain reacts differently and when we do art, I think our brains react differently as well.



Tosanna (Toscana), 1995, stainless steel, wire mesh, zinc, aluminum and silicone bronze, 49 x 63 x 14 inches.

What interests me about Kline is that he made marks that added up to a structure. They are so intensely visceral.

Absolutely. It is sculpture. I also responded to other artists when I was in school. Noguchi came and gave a talk and I responded to his being and what he did. Larry Rivers came too and it was a whole different thing, even though it wasn't my thing.

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdane.com

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Was Alex Katz a visiting artist when you were there?

Not at that time. But what he did was absolutely beyond cartoon. He also wasn't about chiaroscuro or anything like that. I think he brought a kind of reality about painting that was very American and at the same time very European.

He said he looked at painters like Picasso and Matisse to see what they couldn't do. He said Picasso couldn't paint a landscape to save his life and he was lousy at larger paintings, so large-scale landscapes were a place Alex could go. As you were developing as an artist, were you aware that you had to find a way of making art that didn't belong to other people?

I felt that strongly from the very beginning. But artists also love other artists and they are engaged in a conversation about what went on throughout history. There is a beautiful show on now about the Plains Indians at the Metropolitan. It is extraordinary and a lot of the collection comes from Europe because that's where the art was taken after it was purchased. It is interesting how it relates to the East and to India. We have a world culture and we have a world culture historically as well.

You would be especially aware of that. You have studios in more places than any artist I know.

I don't think of them as mine. I think of them as a kind of habitat that I'm drawn to. They are places where I can work and I make it so that I can work wherever it is that I like. I sometimes collect doors and then build a place around them. In other cases, I find the place and just move in...

To read the rest of the interview, order a copy of Issue 134 here.

<http://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/poring-and-pouring-the-physical-body-and-its-gestures>