

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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sculpture

Lynda Benglis: I choose My Dreams
by D. Eric Bookhardt



The Wave of the World, 1985-84. Bronze, 109 x 82 x 186 in.

Over the course of her long career, Lynda Benglis has defied easy categorization. From her earliest days in New York, where she moved after graduating from Newcomb College in New Orleans in 1964, her buoyantly outspoken personality and boundless curiosity made her a familiar figure in Manhattan's transformative 1960s art scene. Her early circle of friends included Barnett and Annalee Newman, Carl Andre, Gordon Hart, Joan Mitchell, Eva Hesse, and Dan Flavin, as well as her occasional informal collaborator, Robert Morris, whom she met during a stint on the Hunter College faculty. Now, at 75 years old, she remains enthusiastic about the art and artists she first encountered during that rapidly evolving era, when the long reign of Abstract Expressionism finally yielded to Pop, Op, and Process art, colorfield painting, Minimalism, and Post-Minimalism. Yet, even though her life and work sometimes seem to reflect a dizzyingly eclectic array of associations, her elementally intuitive, processbased approach has remained remarkably consistent.

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That may come as a surprise considering her seemingly sudden shifts and swerves, ranging from her unexpected move from New York to Los Angeles in 1979 to her video pieces that, while elaborating on her ongoing explorations of nature, culture, and the feminine, sometimes seemed more closely related to her print media provocations than to her more portentous or mysterious sculptural works. Critics and art historians must necessarily try to tidy up the messy cultural shifts and convolutions that define certain times and places, and their orderly taxonomies typically reflect some artists' efforts more faithfully than others. In the latter 1960s, the emerging new idiom that critic and art historian Robert Pincus-Witten dubbed "Post-Minimalism" suggested a reaction to the cool, formal austerity of Minimalist painting and sculpture. But such overarching labels, while useful as a form of conceptual shorthand, often fail to encompass the nuances and subtleties in the work of particular artists—Benglis, for instance, or Eva Hesse, for whom making art was about probing the murky mysteries of existence in a way that had been largely absent from the prevailing discourses of art history. For Benglis, art-making was quite simply the chosen modus of her rigorous lifelong investigation into the dualities and dichotomies of the experiential world, paradoxes encompassing the tensions between form and fluidity, masculine and feminine, modern technology and ancient mythology, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the local and the global, the chronology of art history and the timeless realm of the eternal now. By referencing her deeply resonant attunement to the sensate dimensions of life as it is lived, she set about exploring the universal within the personal, and vice versa, in a body of work that suggests an epic poem of objects, an oeuvre in which the occluded inner dynamics of the world around us were distilled into alchemical new expressions in the recesses of her complex psyche. Two of her more recent exhibitions have provided insightful perspectives on how her view of nature and culture as an interwoven continuum has defined her vision over the years.



Pink Ladies, 2014. Bronze and cast pigmented polyurethane, 3 elements, 124.5 x 32.5 x 32.5, 95 x 30 x 27, and 130 x 36 x 25 in./p>

Although "Lynda Benglis: Water Sources" (Storm King Art Center, May 16–November 8, 2015) centered around a selection of her fountains, all of the featured works highlighted the notion of fluidity, with its implicit sense of ebb and flow, a dynamic that applies as much to cultural epochs as to the natural world. By exploring the circuitous relationship between the elemental and the cultural, the works on view also highlighted Benglis's tendencies toward both a foreboding sort of viscosity and a tartly colorful vivacity. In the latter category, the gaudy, stacked, conical forms of *Pink Ladies* (2014)—a cluster of three spindly,

oddly botanical fountain towers rendered in intensely saturated magentahued polyurethane—are over the top by any measure. Inspired by the carnivalesque Gujarati kite festival that she observed in Ahmedabad, India, *Pink Ladies* exudes a zany, neotropical sensibility that finds a middle ground between the graphic whimsy of Dr. Seuss and the fleurs-du-mal seductiveness of the richly hued pitcher plants that turn up in bogs and marshes across America.

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On the other hand, the towering and even more spindly, 26-foot-tall cast bronze fountain towers, *Bounty*, *Amber Waves*, and *Fruited Plane* (2014), despite their similarly stacked, conical, and segmented style of construction, convey an oddly august sense of imperiled abundance, as if the imposing gifts of the earth that we often take for granted were more fragile than we imagine. These and the somewhat smaller *Pink Ladies*, despite their very different materials and finishes, share an almost delicate sense of buoyancy that makes them vaguely reminiscent of the looming undersea kelp forests off the coast of California, where Benglis became an avid scuba diver during her Los Angeles years. Their spindly qualities contrast sharply with the portentously avalanching heft of her cantilevered bronze fountains based on cresting wave-forms.



Eridanus, 1984. Wire mesh, zinc, copper, and aluminum, 58 x 48 x 27 in

The most iconic of all the fountains at Storm King was surely *Crescendo* (2015), which is closely based on an earlier bronze fountain, *The Wave of the World*, created in 1983 as a commission for an upcoming world's fair. Like its predecessor, *Crescendo* features a cresting bronze wave-form that suggests a lunging predatory beast frozen in time and space. Although broadly reminiscent of Hokusai's woodblock print, *The Great Wave*, Benglis's grasping spray of water springs not from a vast, coiling tsunami, but from onrushing lava-like forms that resonate with something more viscerally earthy, or even chthonic, if no less foreboding. *The Wave of the World* was both her first fountain and her first large bronze sculpture, and its history is no less mysterious than the forces it evokes. In 1982, she submitted a proposal for a fountain sculpture to the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition in New Orleans in response to a competition on the theme "The World of Rivers—Fresh Water as a Source of Life." A jury including Henry Hopkins, director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Otto Piene, director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at M.I.T., and E.L.L. de Wilde, director of the Stedelijk Museum in the Netherlands, selected her as one of three finalists, and the only Louisiana native. For Benglis, it was serendipitous: "I started working on the idea for the piece much earlier, back in the 1970s, but for one reason or another it never happened until this came about."

If the origins of *The Wave of the World* sound fateful, that was just the beginning of what turned out to be something of an odyssey and a mystery. After its six-month tenure as an emblematic part of the exposition, it mysteriously vanished without a trace. **THOMAS DANNE GALLERY** 18-foot-long bronze sculpture weighing over two tons could just disappear, for nearly 30 years no one had any idea where it was, until, suddenly in 2013, it just as mysteriously turned up again, in a shed at a Kenner, Louisiana, waste-processing plant. Explanations for how and why the work came to be there have remained extremely murky, somehow involving a mysterious casino in Monte Carlo, where it had languished on the grounds, hidden in plain sight, for decades. Intact, though somewhat tarnished, its surprise reappearance offers yet another example of the role that chance has played in so many aspects of Benglis's uniquely complex aesthetic.

Probably more than any of her other major works, *The Wave of the World* and its spin-off progeny, *Crescendo*, hark back to her earliest childhood memories in Lake Charles, Louisiana, a small city situated just off the Gulf of Mexico in a marshy region where the usual distinctions between land and sea are somewhat speculative, and where the dense maze of swamps and bayous that intimidate most adults appear magical to children. As Benglis put it, "We lived among rice paddies in a house on stilts surrounded by mud and water; there were lots of floods but we never thought anything of it. We played on the bayous, where we skied among water moccasins and other creatures whose eyes were always watching us, and for a while I went to school on a boat. I even had my own little speedboat with a 35-horsepower Evinrude motor, and I knew all the channels leading all the way out to the Gulf. We had houses on the coast that would get blown away by one." The sense of water as a change agent that renders the world mutable, protean, and ultimately impermanent underlies much of Benglis's work.



Wing, 1970. Cast aluminum, 67 x 59.25 x 60 in.

Her father, whose parents were from the Greek island Kastelorizo, ran a Lake Charles construction supply business that no doubt influenced her mostly pragmatic, yet sometimes wildly imaginative, flair for materials. *The Wave of the World*'s signature formal elements clearly hark back to an otherworldly series of wave-inspired installations (1971)—most famously, *Phantom*—that seemed to gush forth inexplicably from the gallery walls. Rendered in eerie phosphorescent green polyurethane poured over wood, plastic, and chicken wire armatures, the legendary *Phantom* installation at Kansas State University mingled a sense of swamp monster menace with the vertiginous quality of wonder that attends anything making a dramatic yet charismatic break with traditional aesthetic expectations. As radical as it was, *Phantom*

followed on the heels of the no less audacious poured latex floor piece, *Contraband* (1969), which, like the latex rubber paintsculpture *Fallen Painting*, took its cues from Jackson Pollock's drip painting—a technique that Benglis extended into a three-dimensional form. The title was taken from a bayou once famous for pirates and that later became known for its weird iridescence, an ironically colorful by-product of Lake Charles's pervasive oil industry. It was an early memory that appealed to Benglis's fondness for things colorful and carnivalesque. The swirling, contrasting bands of bright primary colors in this wayward, 33-foot-long, floor-hugging, latex lava flow differed dramatically from what most people then associated with Post-Minimalism.

Created for the Whitney Museum's "Anti-Illusion: Procedure/Materials" (1969), curated by Marcia Tucker, *Contraband*'s luridly unruly presence precipitated a tremor of institutional perplexity—not only because its prodigious length posed logistical challenges as it provocatively sprawled across the floor like a vast meandering rainbow-hued tongue, but also because its wild exuberance contrasted sharply with the other, more austere works in the show. Confronted with such thorny installation issues, Benglis opted to withdraw *Contraband* from the exhibition. But as a monumentally free-spirited gesture that challenged the existing boundaries and orthodoxies of the day, it presaged the colorful extravagance of much of her later oeuvre, including the works in her recent show of paper sculpture, "Lynda Benglis: New Work" at Cheim & Read.

This array of handmade paper works reflected an intimate delicacy in contrast with the imposing heft of her more monumental works. Some cocoon-like pieces painted in glittery Mardi Gras colors reveal the underlying harlequin-like patterning of their chicken wire armatures in a way that recalls the picaresque Rabelaisian sensibilities of medieval European carnivals. Their richly hued surfaces provided a counterpoint to more starkly rendered works echoing the bleached bones found in the wild, arid expanses surrounding Benglis's New Mexico studio, where many of these works were made. What they all had in common was the quality of intimacy that has always distinguished her smaller works—from densely somatic, glitterencrusted visceral forms like *Nu* (1974) to the ostensibly decorative, if sometimes unsettling, knotted bow-like forms like *Eridanus* (1984), which have broadly aligned her with the evolution of feminist art since the 1960s. For Benglis, feminism appears to be a deeply rooted, instinctual impetus that encompasses all aspects of her life, including her approach to making and understanding art.

Her lifelong affirmation of pleasure, intimacy, beauty, and the carnivalesque reflects what some view as a critique of certain aspects of Western culture, most notably America's hypocritical Anglo-Puritan heritage. Benglis's interest in the carnivalesque was reinforced during her college years in New Orleans, a city where Dionysian ambiance and Greek Revival structures proliferate on streets named for classical muses, and where many annual Mardi Gras parades are named for mythic deities such as Proteus, Momus, and Bacchus (the Roman name for Dionysus) in a nod to the origins of old European carnivals in Greco-Roman ritual. As a scion of a family steeped in Greek heritage and culture, Benglis could relate. Perhaps more significantly, the emphasis placed by traditional carnivalesque cultures on celebration as a way of imbuing all of life's cycles with a communally shared sense of meaning—the way that New Orleans's mournfully joyous jazz funerals evolved from traditional Kongo burial ceremonies that mandated a celebratory send-off for the dead—probably resonated with her intuitive sense of the world. In a review of her 2011 retrospective at the New Museum, former *Bomb* Magazine editor and longtime Artforum critic and essayist Nick Stillman wrote: "Throughout the '70s, Benglis would return to aesthetics that were familiar in Louisiana, but mostly thought out of place in the dominant art world," noting her tendency to embellish sculptural forms with "sparkles, glitter and Mardi Gras glitz" as a defining facet of what he saw as a militantly, if exuberantly, contrarian aesthetic.

So, it may come as a surprise that, in her early college years, Benglis was fascinated by logic, a subject for which she consistently received high marks and commendations. True to her rebellious spirit, however, she seems to have internalized logic as her way of short-circuiting the cognitive biases of the Western intellectual tradition—for instance, how conceptual verbal constructs reduce multifaceted experiences to a more narrow binary dialectic. Instead, she has employed an expansive experiential phenomenology of the senses as a more directly holistic and organic way of engaging with the world around us. Or, as she put it on a chilly afternoon last November as she gazed over the sun-dappled woods beyond the windows of her East Hampton, Long Island, studio: "I seem to give birth to organic information. I feel like it comes from the very bowels of my being." Whatever its origins, it is a sensibility that enables her to perceive and articulate the underlying commonalities linking things that ordinarily appear only tangentially related, if at

all. Hints of this turn up in her stream-of-consciousness speaking style—in the way that she tosses out a spray of random-sounding references to caves, waves, wombs, and cocoons in verbal fractals that subliminally instill a sense of how the world is a wave-form that, transposed to dry land, becomes an intimate miniature cavern. What unites Benglis with the mystics of antiquity, as well as with quantum physicists of the 21st century, is a sense that everything around us is an integral part of everything else. Wave-forms may simply be the encompassing capstones of the multivalent aesthetic created by an artist whom more than one critic has described as a “shape shifter” for her ability to weave strands of diverse associations and information into a strangely cohesive oeuvre.

Benglis’s sensibility has apparently been with her from the start. In a striking example of how some people appear to have been born to do what they do, she described how her earliest memories as an infant involved the sense of empowerment that she felt when she realized she could shape her blankets into cozy, cocoon-like enclosures: “Caves feel comfortable. I remember as a baby I made cavernous, igloo-like forms from my blankets, which made me feel so secure that I really came to believe that I could choose my dreams...So, I think that is what I do: I choose my dreams.”



Broken Favor I 2015-16. Handmade paper over chicken wire, ground coal with matte medium, acrylic, acrylic medium, and glitter, 36 x 21 x 10 in.

http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag17/apr_17/fullfeature.shtml