

Aesthetica

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Monday, 20 February 2012

Conflations of Form | Lynda Benglis | Thomas Dane Gallery | London



Text by Travis Riley

Lynda Benglis' name has taken on mythical connotations in the art world. Her provocative photographic spread in *Artforum* in 1974, in which she appeared oiled and naked, brandishing a dildo, and sporting a "macherin" pose (Benglis' own term implying a female form of "machismo") sparked controversy at the time, and has subsequently been awarded verbal accolades by countless artists, not least Cindy Sherman and Vito Acconci. The image is undoubtedly a satire on the machismo of the art world, taking particular reference from Robert Morris' own machismo 1974 advertisement, but it is also an attempt to generate a simultaneous femininity and masculinity. This is a recurrent theme in Benglis' art; feeling no need to take sides, she is willing to make a statement that walks the line between the two.

Benglis' show at Thomas Dane Gallery opened in the gallery's two spaces earlier this month, coinciding with a talk at the ICA, in which she historically and conceptually reviewed her past work. On show in the gallery is a slim retrospective of her art, containing 19 works made between 1968 and 2009. On the far wall of one of the gallery's smaller rooms is Benglis' *Hoofers I & II* (1971-2). Named after a tap dancing group at Harvard, the two and a half metre tall, slender sculptures imply a set of oversized spirit sticks. The otherwise minimalistic forms of the thin, wall-mounted lines are coated with drips of paint and glitter resulting in a rough, gaudy exterior.

A shorter, but equally thin piece faces the right of the *Hoofers*, positioned off-centre on the opposite wall. The painting, *Untitled* (1972) is made with beeswax and resin on wood, and in its tones, green merging through yellow into deep orange, it immediately recalls a rich, moist, fungus. Its disjointed, lumpen surface contributes further to this likeness. The matt smoothness of the wax finish creates a very tangible skin, and contrary to its resemblance, the object is impalpably beautiful. Looking back across the room it is hard now not to see these three objects as tree trunks, one old and moulding, two decorated and ostentatious.

Spreading in the doorway between this room and the next is *Baby Contraband* (1969), one of Benglis' floor paintings. Made of brightly coloured, poured latex, it contains the phosphorescence and transience of an oil slick, but also has a fixed skin, an almost human quality. Benglis' beguiling explanation of these paintings' conception at her ICA talk takes us back to moon landings. Looking back at the earth from space, distance is trivialised, and all matter becomes evident simultaneously. The metaphor doesn't need to be laboured, for the fallen paintings quite literally capture the shifting form of the earth at a distance, matter frozen in time, seen from above.


The gallery's second space, just down the road from the first, takes the form of one large room. The pieces within are all set to the soundtrack of *Female Sensibility* (1973), a video work containing two heavily made-up women kissing and caressing against an insipid purple backdrop. The close attention to gesture gives the sense that this

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event is being enacted for the camera, and prevents the women becoming objects of a gaze, male or otherwise. The soundtrack in question is an appropriated passage from an American AM radio station. The music is country, and the talk all uncomfortably stereotypical in its masculinity, made worse by the later introduction of a preacher sermonising on the creation of Adam and Eve.

Two further floor works are shown in this room. Not contented with flatness, these attempt to rise up from the ground. The first, *Night Sherbert A* (1968) is a small heap of polyurethane colours, deep oranges, greens, and reds, simultaneously distinct and touching. The second, *Eat Meat* (1973) is a bronze cast, almost black in colour, piled high and slumped with a much greater sense of weight. Although the resulting forms are quite similar, the distinction between these two pieces is significant in Benglis' art. *Eat Meat* represents a movement away from the action, spontaneity, and consequent expressionist reference contained within the previous, poured floor paintings. The bronze contains a much richer art-historical reference, and the casting process implies an established intent rather than a sporadic gesture. The work is still a result of formal experimentation, but has a sculptural fixedness that pervades the later works in the show, particularly *Scarab* (1990) and *Kajal* (1980). Two, folded and misshapen metal sculptures hung on the walls of the gallery space.

As the exhibition press material makes explicit, Benglis has borrowed from numerous schools of art, especially expressionism and minimalism. What is not made clear in the release is her simultaneous defiance of these traditions. Benglis' sculptural forms are dimensionally and materially indebted to minimalism, but then are polluted by expressionistic markings and bodily references. She created large scale, expressive works, but with the addition of dayglo colours and glitter, the machismo of abstract expressionism is forfeited. There is a deliberate blurring between the two artistic ideologies, and consequently also between painting and sculpture. Benglis often finds herself labelled as a feminist artist, but in her Artforum ad she did not pose as a defiant woman, but a representation of both genders. Using the language of feminism she did not only defy the male gaze, but any construct of gaze. In her experiments with form Benglis walks a continual tightrope between structural conventions, creating an art which stands above categorisation.

Lynda Benglis, 10/02/2012 - 17/03/2012, Thomas Dane Gallery, First Floor, 11 Duke Street, St James's, London, SW1Y 6BN. www.thomasdane.com

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If you only read Aesthetica online, you're missing out. The February/March issue of Aesthetica is out now and offers a diverse range of features from an examination of the diversity and complexity of art produced during the tumultuous decade of the 1980s in *Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s*, opening 11 February at [MCA Chicago](#), a photographic presentation of the [Irish Museum of Modern Art's](#) latest opening, *Conversations: Photography from the Bank of America Collection*. Plus, we recount the story of British design in relation to a comprehensive exhibition opening this spring at the [V&A](#).

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