

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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Glitter, latex and double dildos: art provocateur Lynda Benglis relives her rollercoaster career

She electrified the art world of 1970s New York, savaging its macho culture with what became one of feminism's most notorious images. As she arrives in Britain for Frieze Masters, we meet the radical prankster



'She kicked ass' ... Lynda Benglis. Photograph: Sarah Lee for the Guardian

Lynda Benglis is a feminist icon. "Why do you think that is?" the 76-year-old American artist shoots back at me, showing some of the directness Tennessee Williams noted in a besotted essay in 1977. With bases in New York, Santa Fe, Kastellorizo in Greece and Ahmedabad in India, she's flown into London to oversee a special presentation of her work at Frieze Masters, the fair focused on greats from ancient Greece to now. She has more than earned her place in such a setting. So why is she a feminist icon? Where to begin?

From the start, Benglis resolutely went her own merry way. While minimalism's reduced forms reigned in 1960s New York, her sculptures oozed across the floor, glittering or glowing in the dark. In an art world dominated by men, she made a dazzling ascent, staging 15 solo shows in five years. Life magazine crowned her as "the heir to Jackson

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Pollock” in 1971. A polarising figure within the women’s movement of the time, she made videos and self-portraits that are as button-pushing as ever. And she’s never stopped: to this day, she is still experimenting with glassworks, ceramics, paper sculptures, huge bronze fountains and more.

“I deliberately set up situations with various ideas and materials that no one had done before,” she says matter-of-factly, from behind dark glasses with white rims. “And I put some humour into the women’s movement. It was needed.”



‘When my father saw my work, he just walked out’ ... Benglis’s photos at Frieze Masters, including her provocative Artforum ad and her portrait by Annie Leibowitz. Photograph: Graeme Robertson for the Guardian

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Given that her work seems to reject any fixed style or creed, it's unsurprising that she's ambivalent about labels. "I'm always thinking push this or pull that," she says, "but in terms of play – art's really play." She is, however, responsible for one of feminist art's most enduring images: the advert she placed in *Artforum* magazine to accompany a 1974 article about her work, in which she poses nude but for a pair of cat-eye shades and a slick of body oil. Even if it weren't for the huge, double-ended dildo between her legs, her expression is enough to freeze you in your tracks.

As well as being a ferocious riposte to macho culture, the photo was a send-up of the wild personalities artists were expected to project. In 1967, Ed Ruscha had been photographed in bed with two women in an *Artforum* ad. Judy Chicago then posed with boxing gloves, ready to take on the boy's club. Benglis had been raising the stakes for some time, in a series of invitation cards to exhibitions that included an Annie Leibovitz shot of her taken from behind with her trousers down. In the same *Artforum* issue, her sometime video collaborator, the artist and writer Robert Morris, appeared topless in chains – but it was Benglis's work that caused two of the magazine's editors to resign.

Future generations proved more attuned to her work's radical prankster spirit. Cindy Sherman, the 1980s queen of

gender role-play and Benglis's former student, said it shifted her thinking ("she kicked ass!"). And just three years ago, on the ad's 40th anniversary, 26 artists screamed its praises in *New York* magazine. The image was rumoured to have been used on placards in the recent Women's March on Washington. Did she anticipate the impact it would have?

"My mother said, 'Lynda, they'll never forget.' But I knew then – I *knew* – it would be a challenge to me and my work. I used it as a challenge. Everything I do, I always want to be beyond that. My father, when I showed him, he just walked out. Never mentioned it again. End of story." Benglis isn't actually too keen to talk about the ad, either: it's just one moment, after all, even if it has cast a long shadow across a richly varied career.

Born in 1941 to a Greek father and American mother in the sleepy Louisiana town of Lake Charles, Benglis earned her first degree at the women's college of Newcomb in New Orleans, where she focused on ceramics. "The good thing was New Orleans' history: the riverboats, gambling and strippers," she says. "It was much more fun than anywhere else to go to school in the south." She remembers students climbing out of windows using bedsheets as ropes and being warned against wearing patent shoes, since men could see up your skirt.

Benglis arrived in New York in 1964, finding an art world that was "very open to new ideas. There were more artists than ever before and a lot of energy." She became friends with the sculptor Carl Andre, after meeting him in an elevator sitting on huge blocks of wood. Barnett Newman, a towering figure in the previous



Inspired by the 'shocking colours' of Chinatown ... Benglis at work in 1969. Photograph: Henry Groskinsky/Lynda Benglis. DACS, London/VAGA, New York. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York and Thomas Dane Gallery.

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generation of abstract expressionists, was another friend. Her own creative breakthrough took the form of long wall pieces shaped like giant nail files, using dripped beeswax built up in coloured, visceral layers.

Next came the latex pours that earned her the Jackson Pollock comparison, their lurid oranges, yellows, reds and greens inspired by the “shocking colours” she encountered walking around Chinatown. “Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis were dealing with a contained space, but I wanted to be relatively boundless in form and format.” Soon she was expanding into foam sculpture, creating them in situ in galleries, or casting them in aluminium and having them jut out of the wall like wings.



Night Sherbet, 1968, made of poured polyurethane foam. Photograph: Lynda Benglis. DACS, London/VAGA, New York. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York and Thomas Dane Gallery

While the pours aligned her with the canonised figure of Pollock, her glitter works seem more of an up-yours to notions of good taste. Her Hoofers, named after a tap dance move, were made of long thin skeletons of chicken wire given a flesh of fabric and a glittery topcoat. Thick with sparkles, they’re positively girly and camp. “Yes,” she says, “but they’re also about celebration. I was thinking about flowers and the wreaths you find over doorways at certain times of year in Greece.”

Benglis’s works about the body may be bound up with 20th-century debates about gender and sexuality, but they have a timeless quality. The knowingly tacky-but-gorgeous swooshes of fabric in gold leaf and the scrunched aluminium wall sculptures she made in the 1990s suggest mermaid tails – although discarded sweet wrappers also come to mind. That’s the thing about Benglis: her work confronts you with its bodily reality, the process of its construction visible in every drip and smear, but it still fires your imagination, takes you off on tangents. Like the mermaid, it’s a hybrid.

“There’s a buoyancy,” she says, “a sliding, like if you’re scuba-diving or on a Ferris wheel or a rollercoaster. We feel that at times, in our sleep, this melting, this plasticity. What I’m involved in expressing is that feeling, this formlessness, this abstraction.”

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Benglis is still prolific. In the past few months, she has worked long into the night in her studio fashioning delicate paper sculptures that resemble shed skin. It feels rather appropriate: while her image as the raunchy provocateur has left an indelible mark on our culture, it's clear she left it behind long ago. "When I work," she says, "it's very organic and intense. I don't think about time. I just enjoy it so much. I'm not even aware of my body."

Frieze Masters, Regent's Park, London, ends on 8 October



Thick with sparkles ... Toyopet Crown, 1989.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/oct/06/lynda-benglis-sculptor-feminist-frieze-masters-interview>