

ArtSeen: Lynda Benglis

by Conor Lauesen



Lynda Benglis, *7 Come 11: Seis*, 1976. Wire mesh, cotton bunting, plaster, sprayed aluminum and copper. 34 x 48 x 9 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Locks Gallery.

Spanning five decades of creative output, Lynda Benglis's solo show at Locks Gallery in Philadelphia is an inebriating—and joyous—encounter with the artist's uncompromising creative practice. A curated selection of early abstract objects, as well as recently completed work from both her two US studios (New York and Santa Fe) and atelier in Kastellorizo, Greece, comprise the expansive exhibition; the two-floor retrospective reveals the critical gamut of Benglis's alchemic praxis.

The artist's lifelong (and life-giving) romance with form (-less, too) and texture drench her visual texts. A luscious vernacular of anti-language and capacious inventiveness teem across these mini-monuments. Shiny phosphorescent forms and molten-wax polygonal sculptures, effusively oozing sap of messy rainbow colors, and glittery polyurethane quasi-paintings (Benglis's reformulated drippings of Abstract Expressionism) are not tongue-and-cheek irony, but rather startling, one-of-a-kind artworks. While the artist's affinity for post-Minimalism's grandeur endures, her oeuvre is more importantly an urgent reminder to viewers: tactility and desire breathe lightest in the in-between spaces of suspension.

Most impressive, then, is Benglis's indefatigable sense of playfulness and imaginative receptivity. The beauty of humor—and its accompanying Eros—percolate across nearly every assembled construction at Locks Gallery. At 80-years-young, the

inexorable innovator's process and *trans* mode of experimental making resounds most in its iconic, camp-like aesthetic.

Take *Blue Pair* (1972) as an origin point. Formally identifying more with avant-garde sculpture than traditional wall painting, *Blue Pair* is a consummate early example of Benglis's foray into the poured vernacular of abstract expressionism. Contemporary conceptual references point to Eva Hesse and Helen Frankenthaler, Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman. However, the quixotic and resinous aqua amoeba form offers an inexplicable confrontation with the unknown. Dovetailing in this outlandish vertical system of wax remnant scrapings is a hybridity of painting and sculpture. The synthesis is primordial life force: in the rippled glare and translucent layers of striated aquamarine, *Blue Pair* unveils a jellyfish mirroscape of both the stars and our selves, the human and otherworldly.



Lynda Benglis, *Blue Pair*, 1972 purified pigmented beeswax with damar resin and gesso on Masonite, 36 x 4 1/2 x 1 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Locks Gallery.

Dipped bows and torqued fans, the flying trapeze birds of *Kearny Street Bows and Fans* (1985) defy gravity. Chronologically ordered, the wall installation is weightless: it is as if the seriality of composition and their rhythmically creased pleats hold hands with memory. Like a murder of crows, the bronze, nickel, and chrome fossils strangely levitate, too, sculpture seemingly ready to launch into flight. Perhaps their aerial trajectory leads toward Benglis's 2013 *Pink Lady (For Asha)*, a formidable installation some 150 miles north at Storm King. Here, metal bows meet pink totems: an ideal nesting place of slumber.



Lynda Benglis, *Kearny Street Bows and Fans*, 1985. Five bronze, nickel and chrome wall sculpture elements, each 50 x 36 inches. Courtesy the artist and Locks Gallery.

Stainless Wax (2007) rests on a non-descript black table. Emerging at waist-level from this horizontal tableaux, a larvic grove of fifteen spindly sculptures announces their own trans-organic, alien presence. Benglis's metallic totem objects stand erect (a unique blend of stainless steel and polyurethane) even in the face of their own crinkling drips and volcanically smoothed crevices. More than mere charismatic bravado, however, the self-effacing phallic objects are at once pitifully demure objects. This kind of hermaphroditic interfold—an oscillation between stoic confrontation and reflexive coyness—is likewise part and parcel with Benglis's renown as a master liquid-pourer. In the wake of 9/11, one can't help but also imagine the stains of tragedy infiltrating her volcanic steel towers—victors and vanquished together humbly stationed on fifteen identical black pedestals.



Lynda Benglis, *Stainless Wax*, 2007. Unique cast polyurethane lead, stainless steel in fifteen elements, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Locks Gallery.



Contingency, for Benglis a highly motivated aesthetic gesture that embraces chance through the liveness of fluid materiality, imbues *Stainless Wax* with creaturely viscera. Most unusual is the way a deep humor dribbles across the polished surfaces of these finished, yet somehow still formless, talismanic swords. Adding to this mutability and glee, just beneath *Stainless Wax* is a flotsam-puddled iteration of Benglis's iconoclastic 1969 *Contraband*—Day-Glo pigmented latex—an ochre rainbow pool of self-contained alchemy and color. The stained swirling ground echoes of not only narcissus, but also the consequently sprouting flowers, *Stainless Wax*, just above.

Last, and one of Benglis's relatively recent creations, *Swinburne Egg I*, (2009) is a voluminous tableau of opacity and incongruity. At once both repulsively vulgar and intoxicatingly desirous, the slippery wall figure feels nearly unapproachable: this aura of brazen passion statically freezes rapt observers. Sexual, rhetorical, and mythical in meaning, Benglis's creamy cotton candy, magenta-pink sculpture is a menstrual forcefield: uncanny and bulbously frightful, a pupil-less eye of femme erotica. Resplendently gripping the wall and viewers in mutual tandem, the uteral object gazes—its orbicular flesh pronounces an ulterior kind of sequel “Fuck You” to naysayers and hecklers, enterprisers and haters alike. Benglis takes no prisoners, and in these *Pussy Riot* times (see Russia) her latest show at Locks affirms this tenacity and hard-nosed artistry.



Lynda Benglis, *Swinburne Egg I*, 2009. Tinted polyurethane, edition 1/3, 41 x 28 x 15 inches. Courtesy the artist and Locks Gallery.