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Lynda Benglis: going with the flow

Though best known for the 1970s Artforum ad in which she posed naked brandishing an enormous dildo, the American artist, now 73 and the subject of two spring shows, is still experimenting with a novel range of materials

By Louisa Buck. Features, Issue 266, March 2015

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Lynda Benglis achieved early and lasting notoriety when she appeared in the November 1974 edition of Artforum magazine wearing only a pair of sunglasses and brandishing a cartoonishly large dildo between her legs. Two of the magazine's editors resigned and the ad has since become one of the iconic images of feminist art history. Today, the 73-year-old Benglis may be less confrontational, but she has continued to push the boundaries of artistic acceptability and to challenge orthodoxies with her exploration of a wide and often vividly coloured range of materials, from pigmented latex, luminous polyurethane, beeswax and glitter to lead and bronze.

Today the Louisiana-born artist's work is shown in institutions and sold at art fairs worldwide, and her devotion to experimentation has always been admired by her fellow artists. John Baldessari describes Benglis as "one of the most innovative living sculptors in the US", while Cindy Sherman states that encountering Benglis's Artforum ad was "one of the most pivotal moments in my career". The largest UK survey of her work is currently on show at the Hepworth Wakefield (until 1 July), and a major exhibition of her outdoor sculptures—including many fountains—opens at the Storm King Art Center in New York on 16 May (until 8 November).

The Art Newspaper: How does it feel to be having your first solo institutional show in the UK and at the Hepworth Wakefield, which is—appropriately—named in honour of another pioneering female artist?

Lynda Benglis: I'm excited because it's a huge amount of works, 50 in all, and the works are educating me. They remind me of the baby steps that I first took and that you can't just jump into ideas, you have to slowly develop them.

You've used an extraordinary range of materials. Why such a variety?

I'm curious about the material and then I find what it can do; I may go back to it and then find I can do more with it, or that what I've done I haven't developed and I haven't been satisfied with yet. I set up different questions or syllogisms within the context of colour or texture and I ask what are the specifications of that particular material and I push it to its limits. I've always done that—otherwise I know nothing.

In 1968, your first "Pour" paintings were made by pouring coloured latex directly on the floor. Was this a way of throwing down a (rubber) gauntlet to the likes of Jackson Pollock and Carl Andre?

When I was at college [in Tulane University, New Orleans] I was already thinking about where painting could go and testing the boundaries of canvas in abstraction. When I arrived in New York I quickly got to know some of the famous abstractionists like Barnett Newman and we were still thinking about those boundaries and questioning issues of context and what is art, after all? I did some wax paintings on the floor but the wax didn't do what I wanted it to do, so I invented a more physical way to paint, with rubber latex. I intended it to pop up from the floor—to warp the space and gravity, with the body feeling the work and leaving you feeling a little unbalanced. Around this time I saw Carl Andre's Lever at the Jewish Museum (in 1966) and realised how beautifully just some bricks coming out from the wall could change your sense of gravity and space. I wasn't breaking away from painting, I was trying to redefine what it was.

Natural forms and liquid flows run through your work and you've talked

about the early influence of your childhood in Louisiana.

Yes, it all fed in. I had my own boat and I knew all the waterways, and the bayous and the lakes around my town. We'd go for miles, and to the big lake where we'd go waterskiing. We swam with the water moccasins and turtles looking at us and also the alligator gars—they're a kind of prehistoric fish that looks like an alligator. And we were just fine with that—we'd jump out of the water but then we'd get right back in.

Now you live between Santa Fe, Ahmedabad in India, Kastellorizo in Greece, East Hampton and New York City—why is it so important to put yourself into so many different contexts?

I don't think I would have been able to exist always just living in New York. There are some artists who don't need to go out, who don't need to realise anything outside their own world that they make within the context of the studio, or by reading, or whatever. But I really have to be in there. I need to experience the event before I can believe or understand it, so if there's water then I have to go under water, I have to dive, I have to see this in various places.

Do these different places and experiences engender different strands within your work?

Well yes, I'm always thinking: "Where can this go?" But I also imagine it in my mind a lot before I actually do it—I feel it in my mind, I feel it with my body and I go there, and the places give me clues as to where I should be.

I read a quote from you that said, "I like to wake up not knowing where I am."

That's right, absolutely. I long for not knowing. If I think I know where I am, I feel uncomfortable. Let's get on with it, let's go elsewhere!

Even though it was more than 40 years ago, you are still largely associated with your notorious 1974 Artforum advertisement. What do you feel about that piece now?

I wish I had that body now! I didn't think of myself as looking like that, but I wanted to project a God-like feeling of something that was beyond me. I made a large study of Western picture pornography and I understood that it was not existing, this kind of thing—and I wanted something to look back at you, and that was it.

Are you surprised at the attention it still attracts?

No, because I knew it was a provocation. I knew it would be big, in my gut I knew

that, but I had to do it and I knew it would be challenging. It was important for me to present the sexuality of both a man and a woman together symbolically. But now my question is: "How long can this last? And what does that mean about the human condition?" There must be something basic that so far it is still provocative, but I think different generations feel differently. And because I can't answer that, I just throw it out there because I realise I can't protect myself from something that was me, that I felt that way at the time.

Whatever your medium or the form, bodily concerns always seem to be present.

I'm just doing what I have always been doing: trying to find my own way of image-making. I am very attached to both the gesture and the image, as an abstracted symbol of the physicality of the body. Pollock and other artists have said: "I and the material are one." And, in a way, I feel that I am making a body now, I am really making it in the flesh.