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## Lynda Benglis: TOP FORM

By Emily Nathan

Nearly every work of art in Lynda Benglis' travelling retrospective, which opened on Feb. 9, 2011, at New York's New Museum, looks like a body part or the product of a bodily function. There are photographs of penises, sculptures that look like penises, labial mounds of colored wax and piles of foam coiled together in the manner of -- dare I say it? -- feces. Then you have works like the lesser known *Phantom* (1971), which consists of five glow-in-the-dark polyurethane sculptures that literally seem to squirt out from the wall, radiating yellow and frozen mid-stream. They are visually shocking, vibrant and raw, and we would expect nothing less from Benglis -- artist, pioneer, provocatrice -- who is certainly no stranger to controversy. [Click here to find out more!](#)

Having arrived in New York fresh off the bus from Tulane University in 1964, she was one of two women invited to participate in the iconic 1969 exhibition "Anti-Illusion: Procedures / Materials" at the Whitney Museum (the other was Eva Hesse). When the curators tried to sideline her work because its bright colors threatened to outshine the material drab of similar floor pieces by male artists, she withdrew from the show. Five years later, with the fires of feminism, performance and identity politics heating up the art scene, she sparked a notorious scandal by running a naked self-portrait-with-dildo in the pages of *Artforum* magazine.

That double-sided dildo -- or a cast of it that she made later -- is displayed at the New Museum as though it were a run-of-the-mill canvas, hung on the wall like a horizontal boomerang and lit so that it casts a heart-shaped shadow. Also on view are two framed series of Polaroids from the same period that feature a semi-clad Benglis, the artist Robert Morris and their pal Ray Johnson in some playful positions suggestive of a ménage à trios. These are on loan to the exhibition from the collections of Robert Pincus-Witten and of Benglis herself, and have been rarely seen since their 1975 debut as Video Polaroids at The Kitchen in New York.

But Benglis was first and foremost a sculptor, and she



Lynda Benglis, *Smile*, 1974, Collection Paul Walter



Lynda Benglis, *Phantom*, 1971, Copyright Lynda Benglis. DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2009



Installation view of "Lynda Benglis" at the New Museum, New York



was soon done with her “artist-as-pin-up” moment (which now can be seen as a precursor to the “Pictures” photographers who came several years later). Her earliest works as a practicing artist were oblong wax landscapes featuring irregular, stalactite-like surges of the stuff -- a surfboard “made exactly wrong,” writes Dave Hickey in the show’s catalogue.

In the late '60s, she began pouring large quantities of colored latex onto the floor in flat expanses of swirling color. Her spill sculptures translated male-dominated Color Field painting into something that breathed, embodying the more feminine notion of flow in its seeping, sensuous drips. Of all the Postminimalists and Anti-Form sculptors, generally a male group as well, she alone gave her work an outspoken, even ribald, female gender.

Contraband (1969), the largest spill piece she ever made -- and the one that would have been her contribution to the Whitney exhibition -- is featured in a glass-walled room in the New Museum foyer. Upstairs, a few similar floor works from the late »60s are displayed throughout the galleries, though they seem somewhat worse for wear, their vibrant colors muted by dirt and time. Around them are examples of her well-known pour sculptures --oozing, lava-like agglomerations of polyurethane foam, some colored, some metallic, some slate gray, that conform to the corners of a room.

In another gallery, a sculpture from the '70s series that Benglis calls “Torsos” juts out from the wall as if it has sprung a leak, a waterfall of silver cast aluminum that resembles the shell of a lobster, or human armor. The show also contains several “Knots,” hanging in the galleries like petrified ribbons. The artist fabricated them in a variety of colors and materials -- some are painted in bright acrylics and decorated with glitter, others are simpler in muted hues of brown and gray, and one is done in pleated, golden red copper. Tortuous and tortured, the “Knots” suggest anthropomorphic figures with long appendages that join a tangled, writhing belly.

Her more recent work includes glazed ceramic and glass objects that simulate organic structures like trees, or knotted wood. In the last decade, she has experimented with rubberized foam, urethane and bronze to create serpentine wall sculptures that resemble gnarled sea coral, and these too have a place in the New Museum’s comprehensive survey.

Clearly, Benglis’ art is as much about color, texture and substance as it is about gender, power and sex. Regardless of media, her works share a vigorous interest in the promiscuity of forms -- be they abstract or figurative, confined to a frame or let loose upon a wall -- and an almost scientific pursuit of the potential of material.

“Lynda Benglis” was organized by the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin in collaboration with Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, and has also appeared at Le Consortium in Dijon and the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design. The exhibition is accompanied by a 450-page catalogue, published by Les Presses du Reél and priced at \$60 retail.

“Lynda Benglis,” Feb. 9-June 19, 2011 at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, New York, N.Y. 10002.

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Lynda Benglis, Wing, 1970, Courtesy of the artist and Cheim & Read Gallery, Copyright Lynda Benglis. DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2009