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ART

## A Life of Melting the Status Quo



The artist Lynda Benglis, in her studio turned office at 222 Bowery, is the subject of a retrospective at the New Museum.

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LYNDA BENGLIS has gone her own way since first taking on the New York art world in the 1960s. She one-upped Jackson Pollock's action paintings in the late 1960s by pouring pools of swirling pigmented latex directly on the floor and obscuring the distinction between painting and sculpture. She challenged the rigidity of Minimalism in the early '70s with her hardened flows of polyurethane careening off walls and bristling with allusions to the body and landscape. She lampooned both the machismo of the art world and the way artists were expected to promote themselves in a market-driven system by exposing herself, with a dildo between her legs, in a 1974 Artforum advertisement that she paid for, earning her as many fans as detractors.

With bravado and humor she has carried her ideas to logical extremes, in a way that's been hugely influential to a younger generation interested in everything from performance to process-oriented art. The photographer Cindy Sherman has described her college-age encounter with the Artforum ad, in all its audacity, as "one of the most pivotal moments of my career."

Laura Hoptman, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, who contributed to the catalog accompanying the four-decade retrospective of Ms. Benglis's work that opened last week at the New Museum on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, said: "There's nobody like Lynda. There's a streak of independence

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Ms. Benglis's office is in a building inhabited over the years by Mark Rothko and William Burroughs, among others. "Frequently lying back on her daybed, she referred to the space around her, packed with old works, as a 'marker of time' and recalled giving Burroughs a wide berth when passing on the stairs. 'I didn't want to cross him,' she said."

that takes her outside the crowd, be it posing naked in the Artforum ad or putting sparkles on her work at the moment the austerity of Minimalism was raging." Her rebelliousness has been at least as evident in her formal experimentation over the years as in that one outrageous gesture.

"She set herself up a project early on, which was to explore materials, whether metal or polyurethane or rubber or glitter, and to test the boundaries of abstract sculpture," Ms. Hoptman said. "She's been doing that till now."

These days Ms. Benglis, 69, moves between homes in Santa Fe, N.M.; East Hampton, N.Y.; New York City; Greece (where her father's family is from); and India (home of her life partner, Anand Sarabhai). Ms. Benglis was warm and garrulous on a recent afternoon at the New York studio turned office that she's had since the 1970s at 222 Bowery, a building inhabited over the years by Mark Rothko and William Burroughs, among others. Frequently lying back on her daybed, she referred to the space around her, packed with old works, as a "marker of time" and recalled giving Burroughs a wide berth when passing on the stairs. "I didn't want to cross him," she said.

Born in Lake Charles, La., where her father had a building-materials business, Ms. Benglis moved to New York in 1964 after studying painting and ceramics at Newcomb College, the women's college at Tulane University in New Orleans.

The New York art world was smaller then, and early on she met artists including Barnett Newman, Andy Warhol and David Hockney. Ms. Benglis has been both a witness to and a catalyst for changes in



the artistic climate of New York, particularly the primacy of Minimalism.

“To me it was so closed and systematic that it had nothing to do with art, really,” she said. She adopted the vast scale and industrial materials favored by Minimalists like Donald Judd and Carl Andre, but let her colorful latex pouring allude to bodily gestures, fluids and topographies, and harden into a kind of skin.

The largest of these works is “Contraband,” streaming for almost 40 feet. It has been added to the New Museum version of the exhibition, on view through June 19, which made previous stops in the Netherlands, Ireland, France and at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. Ms. Benglis originally made the piece for the 1969 show “Anti-Illusion” at the Whitney Museum. She then withdrew it from the show after the curators expressed discomfort with juxtaposing the Day-Glo palette of her piece with monochrome works by Richard Serra and Robert Ryman.



“Wing” (1970), cast aluminum.

It can evoke a view of Earth from a great distance (“We were just in space at the time, looking back at ourselves from the Moon,” she said) or the unnerving beauty of many toxic spills. (Contraband was also the name of the Louisiana bayou where the oil slicks were.) Almost four decades after the public controversy aroused by her removal of the work, the Whitney acquired it for its permanent collection.

Another addition to the United States leg of the show is “Phantom,” one of six environments that Ms. Benglis made in 1971 at sites around the country. For each show she affixed armatures of chicken wire covered in plastic to a wall and poured buckets of vibrantly colored polyurethane foam over them. Once the material hardened, she removed the armatures, leaving forms evocative of lava flows, monstrous crustaceans and petrified tsunamis cascading into the exhibition space.

For “Phantom,” at Kansas State University, the only one of the installations to have survived, she added phosphorescent salts to the pigments. The five cantilevered limbs of the piece have been reassembled at the New Museum in a darkened room, where the radiant forms simultaneously seem to be rising and falling.

Ms. Benglis recalled that the critic Robert Pincus-Witten dismissed these works at the time as theatrical. “I said, ‘What’s wrong with that?’ ” Her garishly ornamented work of the 1970s poked fun at what she considered puritanical aesthetic and feminist theories, but it also embraced her roots. Her love of decoration and bodily flamboyance was part of the culture of Mardi Gras that she grew up with.

“All those things I wore — masks, costumes — later influenced my ideas as I began to think of paint-



ing as a skin,” said Ms. Benglis, who made a series of giant heads cast directly from Mardi Gras floats in the late 1970s. The fun houses of her childhood, where she rode little trains and things popped out from the dark, played into her conception of “Phantom.”

While she said she was pleased that “Phantom” has survived, she sees it as a relic of the time. “To me it seemed the most direct way of doing what I felt I had to do, given the context of the thinking that was going on,” she said. Through the decades, as “theatrical” ceased to be a pejorative in the art world, Ms. Benglis continued to bring a visceral quality to her experimentations with glass, video, metals, ceramics, gold leaf, paper and plastics.

Today, she said, she is most excited about her work with fountains, including “North South East West,” installed in the gardens of the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin in tandem with a version of the traveling retrospective that opened there in 2009. It revives the form of a swelling wave cast in bronze that she used for her first fountain, made for the 1984 World’s Fair in New Orleans.

For Dublin she made bronze waves oriented in four directions that seemed directed inward, with real water spurting from the center and dripping over the frozen primordial forms. “There was something spooky about it in that Irish setting,” she said. “You feel the grayness, the winds, the sea and nature everywhere.”

Judith Tannenbaum, who organized the retrospective for the Rhode Island School of Design, said she felt that the directness of Ms. Benglis’s work has been far reaching. “She’s not a performance artist, but her active making of the work is somehow still apparent in it,” she said. “That’s been really influential on a generation.”

While Ms. Hoptman said she would never term the artist popular, her impact on contemporary art is unquestionable. “Anybody who is using that bodily biomorphism is Benglis,” she said. “Anybody who is being very out with her sexuality is Benglis. The world turned, and Lynda is still here and still avant-garde.”