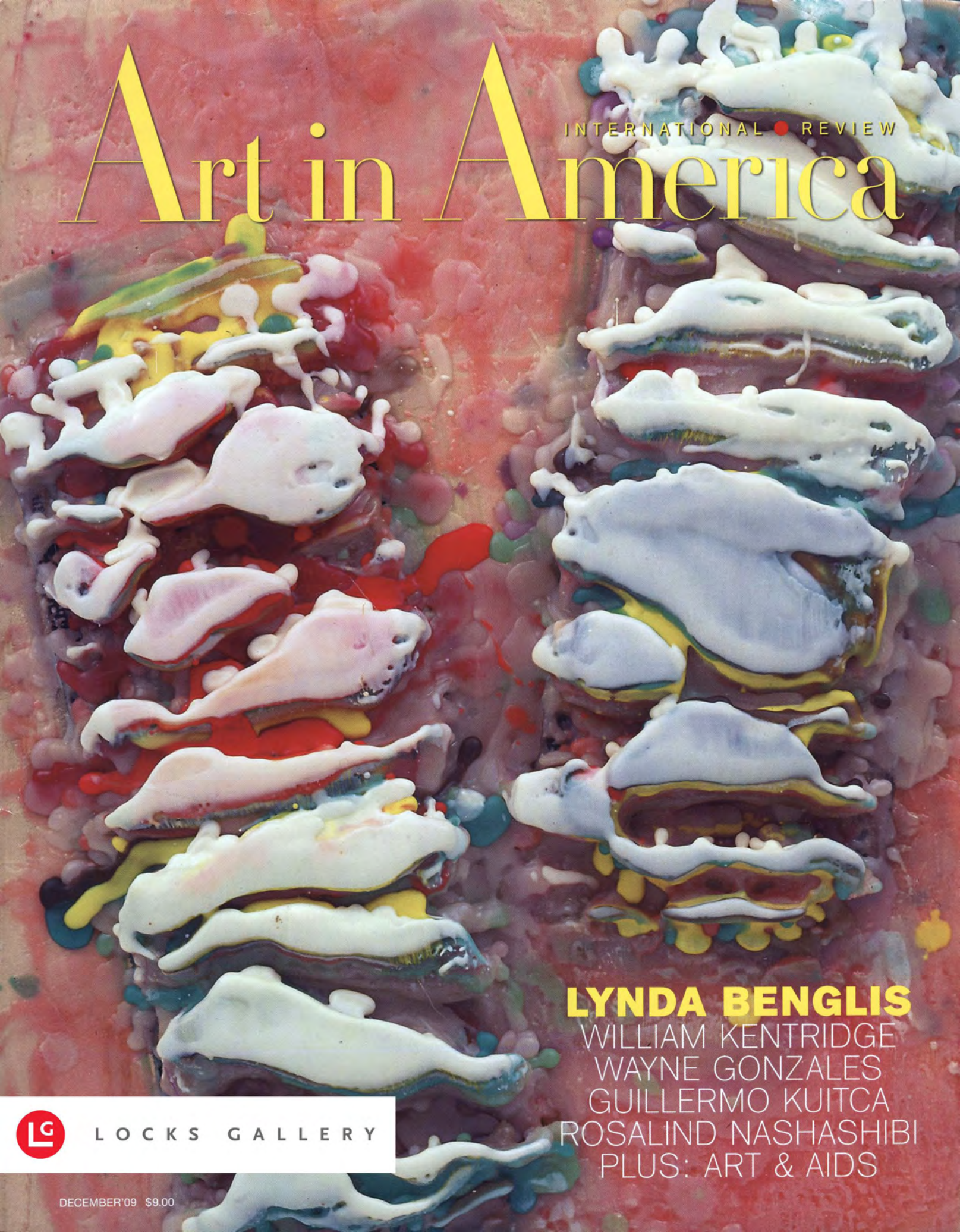

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

LYNDA BENGLIS
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SHAPE SHIFTER LYNDA BENGLIS

A 40-year retrospective traveling in Europe and the U.S. invites a consideration of Lynda Benglis's critical position in relation to the art of her contemporaries, and her continuing significance for younger artists today.

BY JULIAN KREIMER

ASK MANY YOUNG ARTISTS about Lynda Benglis and they will probably mention either her notorious dildo "ad" that appeared in *Artforum* in 1974, or her late 1960s poured pieces. Unlike such Post-Minimalist peers as Richard Tuttle, Eva Hesse and Bruce Nauman, Benglis lacks the bibliographic heft that usually eases an artist's path to widespread, career-long influence. Until this year, the only useful monograph on her was an excellent, if slim, catalogue published by Atlanta's High Museum on the occasion of her first retrospective, in 1991.[1]

In her essay for that catalogue, curator Susan Krane wrote that one of the reasons for her interest in assembling the retrospective was that, with "increasing frequency [Benglis was] being raised as a point of reference in discussions and during my studio visits with emerging artists."[2] That was 18 years ago. Today, Benglis's multifaceted work, in mediums as varied as poured plastic, bronze, glass, neon light, ceramics, drawing and video, seems as connected as ever to the concerns of younger artists. Oil-slick rainbow cellophane and twisted, hand-squeezed surfaces sprayed with glitter and Day-Glo colors look quite contemporary. Like Matthew Barney, Charles Long and Kiki Smith, Benglis chooses materials for both their cultural associations and formal properties. In reviews of Benglis's shows, younger artists are mentioned as indebted to her, but when, in turn, younger artists are the subject, Benglis's name is often missing from the lists of their precursors. It's as if she vaguely prefigured rather than directly influenced them. In addition, she has been so consistently situated in an American tradition of art-making—among the Abstract Expressionists she admired, her Post-Minimalist fellow travelers and adherents of U.S. feminist art, of which she was wary—that it's easy to overlook her connections to shape-shifting artists of European origin, such as Franz West, Sigmar Polke and Louise Bourgeois.

BENGLIS'S CAREER had a meteoric beginning. Born in 1941 in Lake Charles, La., she arrived in New York in 1964 after finishing her BFA at Tulane University in New Orleans. Bykert Gallery was the first to show her work,

Lynda Benglis: *The Graces*, 2003-05, cast polyurethane, lead, stainless steel, left to right: 103 by 26 by 26 inches, 113 by 21½ by 23 inches, 95 by 30 by 27 inches. All photos this article courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

A career retrospective of Lynda Benglis at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, through Jan. 24, 2010, and an exhibition of new works at Cheim & Read, New York, through Dec. 19, 2009.

EACH OF BENGLIS'S WORKS ELICITS A KIND OF PHYSICAL EMPATHY. WE FEEL THE KNOTTING OF A TUBE, OR THE FOLDING AND SCOOPING OF CLAY AND RUBBER.

in 1968; Paula Cooper mounted the artist's first solo in 1970 and represented her for many years. Between 1969 and '74 Benglis had 15 solos and participated in over 50 group exhibitions. She was featured in *Life* magazine in a 1970 article with a double-page photo spread that billed her as the heir to Pollock. In 1974 the *New York Times Magazine* published a cover article about her.

A 40-year retrospective, organized by and currently showing at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), aims to rectify the subsequent critical neglect of Benglis. It presents her as a central figure for contemporary art—not only in the breadth of her work, but also in her willingness to take on charged and conceptually ambitious subjects. The exhibition focuses on the '60s and '70s, when Benglis was most engaged in the linkage between painting and sculpture. The retrospective opens with the skinny, lozenge-shaped wall pieces of built-up multicolored encaustic layers that Benglis began making in 1966; the colored latex pours with which, beginning the following year, she both spoofed and honored Pollock's drips; the knotted and bowtie-shaped wall reliefs of the '70s; and her videos, mostly from the '70s. The '80s and '90s are represented by a few of her twisted metalized pleats (made with a gun that sprays molten metal onto chicken wire armatures) and two videos, one from each decade. There are, additionally, some eight works from the last 10 years, notably the installation *The Graces* (2003-05), three stacks of pink cast-polyurethane cones, each 8 or 9 feet tall, which in their delicacy and translucency manage to suggest both flower petals and smoke billowing from explosions.

Happily, for viewers interested in the breadth of Benglis's work, the stateside versions of the show are to be fortified with more work from the '80s and '90s, including a group of ceramics. (As of this writing the list is not yet finalized.)[3] Benglis treats clay with respectful irreverence. As with so much of her work, the viewer fairly feels the making of her ceramics—the gouging, folding and throwing of the wet, resistant material. Glazes seem to be flung on with a nonchalance that brings to mind both T'ang dynasty tricolor glazes and Abstract Expressionism. Like Rachel Harrison's or Rebecca Warren's sculptures, Benglis's ceramic works have an emphatically handmade quality that conveys a sensuousness both libidinous and abject, while the colors evoke the glitz of commercial culture. Perhaps because these works are not so well known, their bodily and decorative associations still feel fresh; their addition will guarantee Benglis her due as a precursor to the "unmonumental" esthetic that dominates so much current art practice.

Concentrating on the early work, the curators give Benglis a central position in the pluralistic art of the '70s, a period that has come to be seen as laying the groundwork for the vast range of expression that flourishes today. As several of the curators note in their essays, Benglis's willingness to mix up gendered tropes (e.g., heroic scale and sparkly finishes) and to laugh at credos of every ideological stripe set her apart from both the orthodoxies of feminism and the sexism of the mainstream art world. Looking back now, we see that her work, for all its variety, always remains grounded in process and materials. Each piece elicits a kind of physical empathy; we feel the knotting of a tube, or the folding and scooping of clay and rubber. The forms provoke visceral reactions while playfully welcoming open-ended associations and ambiguities.

The show and catalogue place a special emphasis on

Above left, stills from *Now*, 1973, video, 12½-minute loop.

Right, *Untitled C*, 1993, ceramic, 12½ by 8½ by 7 inches.

Benglis's 15 videos—three of the five essayists comment extensively on her work in this medium—in boosting her conceptualist credentials. Benglis made videos primarily between 1972 (when she began using equipment at the University of Rochester, where she was teaching) and 1976.[4] *Now* (1973), perhaps her most widely known video, shows the artist mirroring and otherwise responding to her own image on a video monitor. Benglis ignores narrative but relies heavily on self-referentiality, and again, process is as important as subject matter. Monitors replaying earlier shots feature as backdrops, and sometimes she draws on them with markers. Sound is used almost coloristically. And what we hear is often only glancingly connected to what we see, as in two other videos of 1973, in which an obnoxious Southern California radio call-in show serves as the audio to a close-up of a heavily made-up Benglis licking, kissing and caressing the face and hands of the artist Marilyn Lenkowski (*Female Sensibility*), and to a long, unedited shot of a view out a window to a suburban yard (*Discrepancy*). In these videos, images and sounds are treated as malleably

Left, *Bounce*, 1969, poured pigmented latex, 180 by 169 inches. Williams College, Williamstown, Mass.

Below, *Lagniappe Bayou Babe*, 1977, acrylic, glitter, gesso, plaster, cotton bunting, aluminum screen and polypropylene, 32 by 8 by 9 inches.

as clay. As Julian Myers wrote in a review of a Benglis mini-retrospective at Cheim & Read gallery in New York in 2004, "To present her as a sculptor alone is to miss what made her work so radical in the early 1970s: the productive discourse on narcissism, erotica, feminism, authority and the 'the body' that ricocheted between her video works and her sculptural production."[5]

A FREQUENT TIC in the writing on Benglis's work is the making of lists. Critics list formal properties ("sculptures that drip, twist, billow, and ooze"[6]); materials and processes ("pouring puddles of multicolored plastic, extruding blobs of polyurethane foam, casting massive lumps of bronze, and knotting wads of plaster-saturated fabric"[7]); and evocations and associations ("the tone of bodily excretion: dried puddles of fluid, cupcakes of crystallized ear wax, knots of organs, the surface of skin"[8]). Benglis's material surfeit is a kind of disobedience, and it seems to invite a corresponding cornucopia of descriptive language.

Take, for example, two candy-colored pieces from the '70s, one that's in the retrospective (*Sparkle Knot V*, 1972) and one that's not (*Lagniappe Bayou Babe*, 1977). Both are essentially plaster tubes covered in glittery colors that evoke the props from a Mardi Gras parade. *Lagniappe Bayou Babe* sprouts shimmery, light-refracting polypropylene tufts from either end, while *Sparkle Knot V* loops around in a pretzel-like shape resembling a dancer flinging one leg in the air. Apart from the bright colors in both pieces, there's almost no formal connection to Benglis's earlier poured floor pieces. Reveling in girlish (rather than womanly, or even feminist) associations, they couldn't be further from the chromophobic photocopies and typewritten documents of the conceptualist '70s. Could "Bayou Babe" refer to Benglis herself? If so, that piece might be read as an abstracted self-portrait, a hermaphroditic union as perfect in its own way (the phallic shaft and tutulike extrusions) as the 1974 *Artforum* ad, in which Benglis posed oiled, naked and sporting a huge dildo (the main documents concerning the firestorm that ensued are reproduced in facsimile in the catalogue).

Sparkle Knot V was made before the *Artforum* ad, and *Lagniappe Bayou Babe* after Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, two of the five editors who left *Artforum* in protest, went on to found the theory-based *October* magazine, in 1976.[9] You don't have to know theory, however, to recognize immediately that these sculptures are gendered. And what seems most fresh about them today, so firmly separating them from the academicism that would prevail at *October*, is Benglis's willingness to let messy associations burst forth all at once. Benglis seems irrepressible, playing with materials and responding in a sensorial way to whatever clicked.

IN MIXING UP GENDERED TROPES AND LAUGHING AT CREDOS OF EVERY IDEOLOGICAL STRIPE, BENGLIS HAS AVOIDED BOTH THE ORTHODOXIES OF FEMINISM AND THE SEXISM OF THE ART WORLD.

Her series of wall-mounted bowtie-shaped works from the '70s, like the gilded chicken-wire-and-plaster relief *Siren* (1978), seems to massage abstraction into corporeality. The bulging middle and flared ends of *Siren* create an almost 5-foot-tall double-mermaid tail, the gold leaf of the surface glittering like scales in the sun. In *Minos* (1978), another work from the series, the bottom is cylindrical, and a slight fold added to the top turns the shape into a sort of Minoan figure wearing a headdress. The sculptures are at once gaudy (gilded plaster on chicken wire), archetypal (mermaids and Greek idols) and autobiographical (Benglis's family is Greek), yet they never succumb to the distancing effects of irony. In embracing tackiness with such confidence, Benglis renders good taste embarrassing.

Elisabeth Lebovici, in her essay for the catalogue, argues that Benglis's awareness of the risks of being pigeonholed has led her to pursue what Lebovici calls an "extraordinary undermining operation." The artist switches styles and mediums before a fixed meaning can be ascribed to the work. In a way, Benglis has beaten the system—by eschewing predictability, she liberated herself from the burdens of a single-minded career. This creative freedom would not, in itself, be enough to merit attention. But she used that freedom to remarkable effect, producing one of the funniest, funkiest and smartest bodies work of the last 40 years. ○

Left, *Siren*, 1978, chicken wire, cotton, plaster, gesso and gold leaf, 58 by 19¾ by 9¾ inches.

Opposite, *Chiron*, 2009, cast polyurethane, 51 by 35 by 17 inches.

1 Susan Krane, *Lynda Benglis: Dual Natures*, Atlanta, High Museum of Art, 1991. On the exhibition, see Marcia E. Vetrocq, "Knots, Glitter and Funk," *Art in America*, December 1991, pp. 92-97. **2** Krane, p. 8. **3** As per an e-mail dated Oct. 19, 2009, from Judith Tannenbaum, curator at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, R.I., where the show goes on view Oct. 1, 2010. **4** Elisabeth Lebovici, "Lynda Benglis: All That Matters . . ." in *Lynda Benglis*, edited by Franck Gautherot, Caroline Hancock and Seungduk Kim, Dijon, Les Presses du Réel, 2009, n.p. in galley. **5** Julian Myers, "Lynda Benglis," *Frieze*, Summer 2004, p. 134. **6** Leslie Camhi, review in the *Village Voice*, Mar. 24-30, 2004, p. C86. **7** David Pagel, review in the *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 23, 2005, p. E22. **8** Myers, p. 134. **9** An excellent exhibition curated by David Platzger/Specific Object was mounted at Susan Inglett Gallery, New York, in summer 2009, contextualizing the *Artforum* controversy in light of works by Benglis and Robert Morris, and with contemporary textual documentation.

"Lynda Benglis," a 40-year retrospective, premiered at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven [June 20-Oct. 4, 2009], and is currently on view at its organizing institution, the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin [through Jan. 24, 2010]. It travels to Le Consortium, Dijon [May 14-July 31, 2010], the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence [Oct. 1, 2010-Jan. 9, 2011], and the New Museum, New York [Feb. 9-May 1, 2011]. A 480-page catalogue is forthcoming, written by Caroline Hancock of IMMA, along with Judith Tannenbaum, Diana Franssen, Franck Gautherot, Seungduk Kim and Laura Hoptman.

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