



Lynda Benglis: Everything Flows

Anna C. Chave

“How?” and “why?” are the best two questions you can ask.

Lynda Benglis¹

Ever a quick study, Lynda Benglis earned her place in the heady roiling New York art world of the mid-1960s not long after she arrived there from the Louisiana outback as a freshly minted BFA, with honors in painting and ceramics. She garnered attention by her ingenious reinventions of the then-founding medium of painting—realized through a succession of investigations into pigmented wax, latex, and polyurethane foam predicated on jettisoning the canvas—as well as through her game attitude toward new artistic strategies and media, including video. In view of the compelling visual and conceptual turns Benglis made early on, she was taken up by cutting-edge dealers (notably the discerning Paula Cooper, who pioneered the SoHo gallery scene); was acclaimed by *Life* magazine as an authentic heir to the legendary Jackson Pollock; and was invited by venues around the country to do her arresting site-specific works of poured polyurethane form. (The only one extant, the stunning *Phantom* (fig. 2)—whose row of frozen, phosphorescent, wave-like formations surge or fountain uncannily from the wall like explosively liquefying paintings—was lately resurrected at New York’s New Museum in a traveling career survey of her work; and Benglis points specifically to this body of work as having first piqued her desire to design and sculpt actual fountains, starting with *The Wave* (fig. 3) for the 1984 New Orleans World Fair.)

Benglis’s lively, sometimes startling initiatives drew notice from the outset. But her various bodies of work have all along tended to be rich in one or more attributes—such as opu-

¹ Benglis in her Bowery studio, c. 1981



2 Phantom, 1971
phosphorous pigmented polyurethane, 102 x 420 x 96 inches

3 The Wave (The Wave of the World), 1983–84
bronze fountain, 9 x 9 x 17 feet

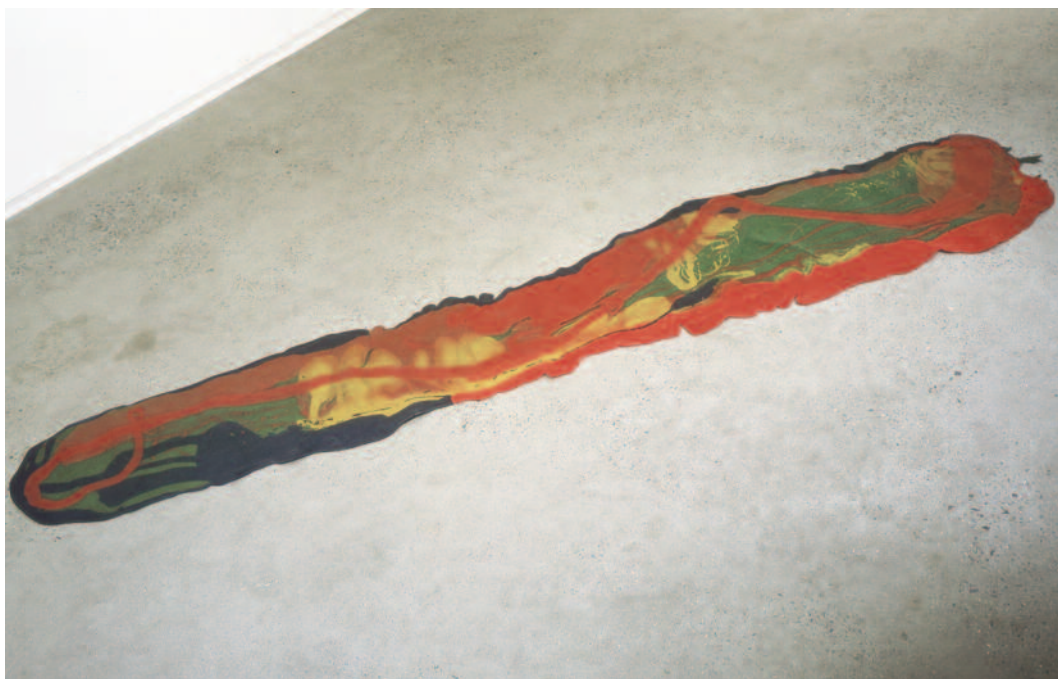
lence, sensuality, theatricality, verve, and a complex sense of play or the carnivalesque—that were looked at askance by critics, at least at the time she plied them. Eventually art world currents caught up with Benglis, much of whose work now looks undeniably prescient, or “consistently, irrepressibly ahead of its time,” as Roberta Smith recently affirmed in the *New York Times*, while *Art in America* saluted (in the New Museum show) “one of the funniest, funkiest and smartest bodies [of] work of the last 40 years.”² Any number of figures in the present-day international art world owe Benglis a significant debt. But as an earlier example, her affinity for miscellaneous aspects of the decorative—evinced by her marbled floor pours of DayGlo-pigmented latex from the late 1960s, say, or by the glittery fabric knots she tacked to gallery walls in the early 1970s—paved the way for the Pattern and Decoration movement that emerged soon thereafter, pressing a partly feminist agenda to rehabilitate or legitimate decorative practices long diminished as “minor” by the West.

Benglis’s recurrent turns to the decorative can convincingly be framed as a form of feminist gesture, notwithstanding her reluctance to sign on to the women’s movement in any programmatic way.³ Maintaining her independence, not just from feminist cartels, but, all the more so, from dominant critical biases or constructs may have cost Benglis to a degree, but it would allow her also to outrun critical currents. Rather than hew to prevailing critical paradigms—say of Post-minimalist or Process art—her work followed instead, in the late 1960s and early ‘70s, from the sharp-witted dialogues she tacitly initiated with the art that specially impressed or challenged her. At first that included the work of her one-time lodestar, Pollock, as well as that of Barnett Newman (who adopted her as his jitterbug partner, as she fondly recalls), and of Helen Frankenthaler—blithely saluted by Benglis in a poured rubber carpet subtitled *Hey, Hey Frankenthaler!* (fig. 4). Then there was Eva Hesse, whose edgy work first persuaded Benglis of the possibilities inherent in latex, but whose aversion to the decorative (which she branded the “only art sin”) left her aghast at the Louisianan’s flamboyant palette. There was Carl Andre—once slyly acknowledged by Benglis with a cornered mound of brownie-batter-ish or poop-like polyurethane foam (fig. 5). And there was Robert Morris—her interlocutor and goad through various sexually-charged ventures in the photographic and performative.

Benglis’s art has all along entailed an intensive, avid, hands-on exploration of a range of materials and processes, but in time those explorations were fired less by implicit dialogues with her immediate forerunners or peers and more by her attunements to selective aspects or

artifacts of world culture and of the natural world. It follows that the multifarious environments where the (semi-nomadic) artist has elected to make her studios and homes have been expressly integral to the evolution of her work. Beyond New York City, it was initially southern California that drew her and deeply affected her '70s work. Her fascination with the car culture there, for instance, would long continue to tell, as in titles such as *Miata* (p. 31), and her eventual openness—highly rare on the East coast—to using clay as a sculptural material no doubt reflects the reverence with which the medium has been treated in southern California throughout the contemporary era.

In time, Benglis—who says, “I depend on other places to give me purpose... You can arrive at something you hadn’t thought of because you are in another space”⁴—put down roots, not only in the longtime artists’ colony of East Hampton, New York (where the spectacular wave action seen on the vast beaches remains an inspiration, in part for her fountains); but also in the island of Megisti, Greece—home of her father’s forebears; in Ahmedabad,



4 **Odalisque (Hey, Hey Frankenthaler)**, 1969
poured pigmented latex, 165 x 34 1/2 inches



India—home of her lately deceased, longtime companion, to whom this show is dedicated; and in a purpose-built adobe studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico, from where she travels to work with Taos-based ceramists, particularly at the Saxe-Patterson workshop. The magical geologic formations of New Mexico, including the spires or hoodoos (sometimes said to have caps or hats), have helped inspire some of the ceramic work with which Benglis began to experiment in the 1990s: “When I first came to Santa Fe in 1993, I responded to the rock formations of the landscape,” she recalls; “This was an inspiration for my sculptures, firstly created in clay.”⁵ The return to clay itself was partly prompted by her experience of the New Mexican environment: “That’s why Santa Fe is so good because you get down to the basics... the studio out there is just mud, you know, and brick, and it’s all kind of very natural. And I did go back to the clay” there, she related.⁶

While the naturalness and “energy” of clay—as well as of wax, rubber, glass, and metals—has attracted Benglis to those materials, she all along also found that “something interests me

5 **For Carl Andre**, 1970
pigmented polyurethane foam, 56 1/4 x 53 1/2 x 46 3/16 inches

about the plastics. The glass was pure, but getting into plastics I could make it look like glass... So that's why I got into the plastics, because there was a certain kind of illusion that I could get."⁷ That attraction to plastic tells, for example, in her latest cast urethane fountain: a constellation of three stacked totems of topsy-turvy cones with gleeful flourishes realized in a morphology that is at once loosely visceral—like the surreally cartoony internal plumbing of some outsized Dr. Seuss-ian creature—and plant-like, as the shocking pink (Schiaparelliesque) hue and the organic articulation of the surface might invoke instead some whimsical topiaries of bougainvillea (if such there could be). The precedents for these madcap, festive structures are the fountains titled *The Graces*—an ironic, yet not an absurd gesture on the artist's part; for in the way the (glass-like) plastic captures the light, especially as the water lightly streams and spills over it, there is indeed a strange loveliness, poetry, or grace.

Not generally given to drawing on paper in the conventional—preliminary or preparatory—way, Benglis nonetheless speaks routinely of “drawing” directly with her materials (“I draw the form”; “Drawing equals form”⁸). The form rendered through her gestures generally emulates the qualities of her materials and the processes that occur in them, including changes of state from fluid to solid. This may involve something as low-tech as clay or as high-tech as the squirted polyurethane foam (annexed from its usage as insulation) with which she has lately been making her luminescent, brain-coral-like, ovoid and hemispheric, tinted reliefs, and from which she cast her recent lava-like *Nugget* (pp. 70–71) fountains. Her love of the underwater universe of the coral reefs is evinced also, for instance, by her occasional allusions to artifacts and creatures of the sea, such as to, what is in India, a totemic shell, the *Kaudi* (a pleated work of 1980 made of gilt hydrocal on fabric; fig. 6) or *Green Turtle Knot* (a glazed ceramic work of 1993; p. 49).

Benglis's longtime production of knots—be they fabric, metallic, or ceramic—is likewise evidence of her idiosyncratic attunements to world cultures. She has variously alluded to the decorative knot-making traditions of China and the functional knot-making practiced in the ancient Americas, besides mentioning the humble knotted pretzel as a reference point. Or, take the case of her likewise long-running (often also knotted) series of pleated works, for which she has mentioned the fan-like palmettes on ancient steles or the flutes of Greek columns as reference points, and which also readily invoke various pleated Greek garments. Those pleated or fanned artworks, realized in successive bodies of work on and off for over a decade (since around 1979), encompass perhaps her most consistently elegant, splendid-





Installation view of **Megisti II** (1984), **Scarab** (1990), **Toyopet Crown** (1989), and **Trippel II** (1989)



looking works. Made ultimately from various types of metal meshes (an industrial filter material) that she accordian-pleats with the aid of a metal ruler and then knots, ties, twists or “draws” into distinctive configurations, before unfolding or opening them out and metalizing them (with the aid of a technician wielding a gun spraying small beads of liquefied metal: a process normally used to re-coat machine parts). Benglis explains that the bronze mesh used for *Megisti II* of 1984 (fig. 7; p. 25) folds in a square, planar, or “cubist” way, whereas the stainless steel mesh used for *Scarab* of 1990 (fig. 7; pp. 28–29) better yields curves and volume when the pleats are opened out, an effect she maximized by folding the mesh on the diagonal. Both works were then sprayed with aluminum before being filed and ground, yielding a matte surface for *Megisti II* and a mostly shiny surface for *Scarab*. (Scarab beetles, whose bodies may be ridged, were symbols of immortality, associated with the early morning sun in ancient Egypt, and as such were often made of precious metals and worn as amulets.)

Sprawling across gallery walls as lavishly decorative reliefs, Benglis’s expansive, shimmering, pleated works appear buoyantly, ebulliently, kinetically fluid—like giant, artlessly tied, crinkled bows undergoing their various twists and turns. By contrast, her later, modestly-scaled clay works—earthy, weighty, grounded, and resisting any accessible rhetoric of the decorative—might at first seem to be the undertaking of another artist altogether. “For me,” Benglis observes, “the surface is primary and the surface describes the form. ...[Y]ou’re describing the form through the process. So I think I’ve always done that, and I’ve allowed myself to get freer as I knew more or allowed myself to interact more.”⁹ The surface, in the case of the ceramics, returns Benglis to her beginnings in painting. (For that matter: “I think of myself as a painter,” she still says, of her art in general; “these ideas have come from really painting ideas, yet they’re dimensional.”)¹⁰ In the case of her ceramics, the ‘painting’ in question entails a freely applied, complex and subtle palette of glazes—black, brown, green, and, more sparingly, blue and gold—that range from shiny or metallic to matte. And, whereas in college Benglis had worked in a traditional way with coiled clay to make vessels, here her coils are incongruously python-thick and there is no question of functionality. She manages to layer, stack, “squiggle,” and even at times to knot the muscular-looking extrusions of clay, combining them with pressed or rolled (sometimes imprinted) slabs of the same clay, which fold, sag, collapse and tear as they get positioned. Julian Kreimer refers aptly to the “emphatically handmade quality that conveys a sensuousness both libidinous and abject,” in Benglis’s ceramic works; “Each piece elicits a kind of physical empathy; we feel the knotting of a tube, or

8 **Cantilevered Forced Bunch**, 1993
glazed ceramic, 27 x 17 x 15 inches



9 **Contraband**, 1969
poured pigmented latex, 388 x 111 inches

the folding and scooping of clay.”¹¹ And Kelly Klaasmeyer notes that, “Ceramics is one of those ‘craft’ materials that you can do incredible things with, but hardly anybody ever seems to”; with Benglis, however, “The clay feels fluid, seemingly writhing and erupting.”¹²

What connects Benglis’s metalized pleats and ceramic works, besides the sometimes shared device of the knot, is the gestural aspect and the spontaneous directness of her methods, as well as that affinity for fluid materials, which so readily articulate directness. “Matter can and will take its own form,” as the artist once said, though in the case of the fluid materials she favors, that often entails a kind of free-form or formlessness.¹³ In the late 1960s Benglis effectively joined a nexus of female artists who pressed fluid materials into the service of, what I call, a crypto-feminist strategy. Playing off of a longstanding association, in the West, of the female body with the leakage of fluid—including primal, viscous or gooey fluids, which may threaten entrapment—this nexus of women (most notably including Louise Bourgeois and Hesse, as well as Benglis) elected to occupy an invidious stereotype with a proverbial vengeance, and proceeded thereby to disrupt an almost monolithically male contemporary art field. Benglis observes now of her early works that, “I wasn’t a banner-carrying feminist but I did think they were erotic and suggested fluids... It scared the hell out of male artists...”¹⁴

Louise Bourgeois made notes in the late 1960s about deploying “a language understood by a few,” while citing by way of example:

the oozing out of milk (mother) water (spring in mother earth)—saliva in snails—lava in volcano... Content is a concern with the human body, its aspect, its changes, transformations, what it needs, wants and feels—its functions... All these states of being, perceiving, and doing are expressed by processes that are familiar to us and that have to do with the treatment of materials, pouring, flowing, dripping, oozing out, setting, hardening, coagulating, thawing, expanding, contracting...¹⁵

For her part, Benglis once observed that, “the liquid was an ‘unformed form’, and I was looking to it to emerge as a primal form.”¹⁶ Her on-going predilection for using endemically formless, fluid materials—not only latex and foam, but fabrics, mesh, plastics, liquified metals, glass, and clay, not to mention water itself (spilling over her *Nugget*, *Graces*, and *Pink Lady* fountains, for instance)—in ways that expressly enunciate their fluidity made her positively central to avant-garde investigations of the formless (though her contributions went oddly missing when a 1996 museum survey on the *Informe* was mounted at Paris’s Centre Pompidou).

Ever conscious of her Greek heritage, Benglis has adopted almost as a catch-phrase a saying attributed to Heraclitus, namely: 'everything flows'.¹⁷ Willfully occupying the role of the immoderately oozing woman, defined (paradoxically) by her lack of containment, she flamboyantly leaked her *Contraband* (fig. 9), as the title of a 1969 work had it (a work notoriously ejected from the Whitney Museum exhibition for which it had been made due to its flagrant excesses).¹⁸ Benglis, who grew up on the bayous and later became a dedicated scuba diver, has come to speak of the experience of being underwater as central to what she means to capture through her art:

When I went down under the water for the first time, I realized that my art really is about that floating, that feeling of being inside the womb, that feeling of, like, being isolated and suspended... So that suspension, that state that we all feel when we're in the water... when you get the rapture of the deep, it really has to do with what that does to your brain... And it really has to do with something that we have all experienced before we were born but we have the memory of it.¹⁹

The age-old tropes of “the fluidity of the feminine” and “the femininity of the fluid” at once derived from and had long served to perpetuate misogynist stereotypes.²⁰ Tied by the experience of menstruation to the cycles of the moon and the tides, women had long been consigned to the realm of Nature as against that of Culture. But Benglis and others helped vacate that hoary binary by purposely deploying material flows, investigating the natural precisely as a cultural endeavor. Female corporeality might have insidiously augured a “formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order.”²¹ But given that order had historically, tacitly meant patriarchal order, it would occur to numerous women—who proceeded to embolden one another—that the prospect of formless flows that threaten all order could spell less a calamity than an outright feminist coup. Or, as the French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray mused in 1981: “Might there not exist a fluid, some deluge, that could shake this social order?”²²

Bourgeois (for a short while), Hesse, Benglis, and some others seem to have discerned a subversive potential in the role of the leaking, formlessly flowing woman. The usage of the formless “consists in undoing logical and categorical thought,” Elisabeth Lebovici observes.²³ This breakthrough generation of female artists, who aggressively violated medium boundaries, effectively anticipated the 1970s French feminists’ call for a distinctively fluid form of

female expression: “a *new insurgent* writing” that Hélène Cixous poetically imagined could be inscribed in the white, maternal ink of the *mère/mer* or mother/sea.²⁴ The prospect that some brave women willfully precipitating “some deluge” might “shake this social order,” as Irigaray mused, may sound outlandish today. But women deploying fluid in a kind of sub rosa lineage of art practice, effectively did shake the cultural order, dissolving or destabilizing age-old protocols of art practice and broaching new vocabularies of art-making.

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Notes

Warm thanks to Lynda Benglis for taking the time to help educate me about her working process.

1 Linda Yablonsky, “Not a Material Girl” [interview with Benglis], *The Art Newspaper*, no. 222 (March 2011).

2 Roberta Smith, “Artful Commentary, Oozing From the Walls,” *New York Times*, February 17, 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/18/arts/design/18benglis.html?pagewanted=all>; Julian Kreimer, “Shape Shifter: Lynda Benglis,” *Art in America*, December 2009. <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/features/lynda-a-benglis/1/>.

3 The most conscientious argument to this effect can be found in Susan Richmond, *Lynda Benglis: Beyond Process* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

4 Yablonsky, “Not a Material Girl.”

5 “Lynda Benglis and Seungduk Kim in Conversation,” in *Lynda Benglis*, ed. Franck Gautherot, Caroline Hancock, Seungduk Kim (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2009), p. 188.

6 Oral history interview with Lynda Benglis, by Judith Tannenbaum, Nov. 20, 2009, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, p. 27. Unedited version.

7 Ibid.

8 “Culture Now: Lynda Benglis,” interview by Gregor Muir, Director of Institute of Contemporary Art, London (uploaded to YouTube 21 Feb. 2012); oral history interview, p. 37.

9 Ibid.

10 Cited in “Boundaries” segment on Benglis from PBS’s “Art in the Twenty-First Century,” Season 6 (2012). <http://www.art21.org/videos/segment-lynda-benglis-in-boundaries>.

11 Kreimer, “Shape Shifter.”

12 Kelly Klaasmeyer, “Lynda Benglis: Wax Paintings and Ceramic Sculptures,” *Houston Press*, Aug 2, 2007. <http://www.houstonpress.com/2007-08-02/culture/lynda-benglis-wax-paintings-ceramic-sculptures/full/>.

13 Cited in “Fling, Dribble and Dip,” *Life*, 27 Feb. 1970, p. 62.

14 Yablonsky, “Not a Material Girl.” In context, Benglis is referring specifically to an audience of male artists at “CalArts” (the California Institute of the Arts) in the early 1970s.

15 Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, eds., *Louise Bourgeois: Destruction of the Father/Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923–1997* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), pp. 75–6.

16 Cited in Jeanne Siegel, *Painting after Pollock: Structures of Influence* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1999), p. 108.

17 Catherine Conybeare, Professor of Greek, Latin, and Classical Studies at Bryn Mawr College, kindly informs me that, “there’s no evidence that Heraclitus did actually say or write ‘everything flows’ (‘panta rhei’ in the Greek). But there are various fragments that seem to be exploring the notion both of continuity of identity in flux, and of flux being a crucial constituent part of identity. The most apt is Fragment 12, which reads ‘Upon those who step into the same rivers, different waters flow at different times.’”

18 The show was “Anti-Illusion,” curated by Marcia Tucker and Jim Monte. (The work was included in the catalogue, however, and the Whitney much later acquired it.) Contraband Bayou was a feature of the Lake Charles, Louisiana area where Benglis grew up, so-named because of its legendary use by a pirate to stash his loot. Lake Charles is a center for petro-chemical processing, and Benglis has mentioned also the specter of oil spills in connection with this work. See Hilarie M. Sheets, “A Life of Melting the Status Quo,” *New York Times*, 13 Feb. 2011.

19 Oral history interview, p. 52.

20 Naomi Schor, “Previous Engagements: The Receptions of Irigaray,” in Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford, eds., *Engaging with Irigaray* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 68.

21 See Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 203. In context, Grosz is phrasing this as a hypothesis.

22 Cited in Schor, “Previous Engagements,” p. 67 [my translation]. To Irigaray, female expression potentially represented something subversively other: “that woman-thing speaks... ‘fluid’”; “That it is continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductible, dif-fusible... That it is unending... [with] resistance to the countable;... it changes—in volume or in force... [and is] easily traversed by flow,” in Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter ([1977] Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 111.

23 Elisabeth Lebovici, “Lynda Benglis: All that Matters...,” in Gautherot, et al., *Lynda Benglis*, p. 88.

24 Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” [1976], in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle De Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), pp. 250–51.