Lynda Benglis

Flow and Flesh

LOCKS GALLERY

Consistently Exciting

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe

It has to be fun to write about an artist whose work you've known for nearly forty years, especially when you wrote about it back then, because it's so easy to sound authoritative. You have to be quite old to have been there, so you become authoritative by default. And on top of that the issues of the time seem so remote that to have embraced them is to be, now, both exotic and out of sync with the present in a way that automatically suggests a kind of lived relationship with the distant past. Except that there is nothing of the distant past about Lynda Benglis who, if there ever was one, is the very incarnation of a persisting and very lively present. The main reason why it's fun to write about her is that she has been consistently exciting for the past forty-odd years. What is more I think she has been consistently exciting because she's been consistently interested in (excited by) excitement. She has always wanted to make work that arouses the senses (rather than, say, only appealing to an idea about where it should be positioned in the dominant version of art history) and has never shied away from using material emphasis and bright colours to do so.

In some respects the art world has now caught up with her, although I don't know whether it has managed to produce an artist yet who can match her for energy combined with unambiguous pleasure. When she was pushed out of a show at the Whitney Museum in New York because she used colour while the other artists in the show used chaste Minimalist white and grey, she was most certainly out of step with fashion. Now she may be seen to be a precursor of the contemporary's quite flippant approach to Minimalist seriousness, although it should be stressed that she didn't start out wanting to undermine anything. She started out wanting to carry forward what she had seen in Jackson Pollock, as she explained to me when I first wrote about her work.

That was in 1973-74, when she did her show at the Clocktower in New York. She had made knots out of tube-like sections of wire mesh and plaster of

Paris, her arm being the armature for the wire form, between which she'd strung Christmas lights. She explained to me that her use of her arm as the source of the plaster form was a reference to Jackson Pollock, and I think she has stayed very close to an idea about the work's relationship to the body that she first developed in response to Abstract Expressionism. This reminds us that Benglis belongs to what is probably the last generation to have that direct of an engagement with Pollock's achievement—and that wasn't that close, Benglis was about three when Pollock died. For that reason alone there must now be others who set the tone for those who want to make work that engages one's senses as immediately as possible, rather than deferring the sensuous in the interests of the intellectual (what can be read but not felt). I don't think it could be Pollock any longer, he was too long ago.

Fig. 1. *Quebec,* 1974, wire mesh, cotton bunting, plaster, and sprayed aluminum, 39 x 28 x 8 inches

Perhaps it is Benglis herself. For lots of people, especially perhaps for lots of women, I'm sure it is. I was always excited by her insistence on immediacy as opposed to deferral (or repression), and now, having come to see the dividing line in contemporary art to be between those who are prepared to work with the involuntary—with sensation and therefore with what the body cannot help but feel—and those who prefer the shelter and security of the voluntary—with reading and ideation and therefore with texts one may choose to engage or not—I have come to see her as an even more visionary artist than she seemed at the time.

Her poured pieces anticipated the need to confront the unformed that a long preoccupation with structure and system had made inevitable, first implied by Pollock but I think first realized in contemporary art by Benglis. Her insistence on using colour not only pointed to a fatuous belief in colourlessness as seriousness endemic among boy artists and the girl artists who mimic them, but also to colour's ability to subvert form. Everything she's done since has followed from the potential of those works in my view. Withdrawing her work from a show at the Whitney in 1969 because they wanted her to put it somewhere else so that the gray and white works of the others wouldn't be polluted by colour allowed her to demonstrate Minimalism's and post-Minimalism's difficulty with seduction and ambiguity as opposed to aggression and purity, in short to blow away Minimalism's failure to address complexity and replace it with something a little more adult. Her relationship to feminism as most generally received in the American art world is likewise defined by her insistence on a complexity that is both explicitly and implicitly generated by her works' deployment of the

Fig. 2. *Omnicron,* 1974, cotton bunting, sculpt metal, and mylar sprinkles, 68 x 24 x 13 inches

Fig. 3. *Odalisque (Hey, Hey Frankenthaler),* 1969, poured pigmented latex, 165 x 34 1/2 inches

terms of the attractive (the beautiful at its most generalized) in the interests of immediacy.

I never liked the naked girl with dildo photo, as is well known, and the main reason for that is not only that I think that's the only work where she was manipulated by other people into doing it—so much for it as any expression of a self-assertive sort as far as I'm concerned—but because in her work the flesh as a place of excitement and contact with the world is already the whole theme, it doesn't get helped by being turned into a game about plastic and porn. Although I guess one could, or should, note here that the tits and arse work does, if one goes along with the whole fuss about boob-enhancing plastic and such that Robert Pincus-Witten gets off on—and it was after all he who put her up to the whole thing to begin with—anticipate a great deal of Matthew Barney's greasy-stain and other medical references vocabulary. I suppose that's something, although it hardly seems worth the effort. But I should also say something else, which seems more important to me. I think I may have been quite wrong. What I hear from young women artists is that actually what everyone except me says about that photograph is true. Rebecca Norton, for example, talks about Benglis' work being a "reflection on the art (or strength) of being

unapologetically naked and exposed…" and I think she has the photo in mind as much as the sculpture. So I may as well get used to being wrong. This art (or strength) to which Norton refers, which is perhaps what makes Dave Hickey compare Benglis to Hannah Wilke, certainly goes to the immediacy issue. I don't think it goes to the feminist issue. For one thing I don't think the nude with dildo act was as interesting or dangerous as the many other pictures of Lynda looking cute while being an artist.

I think it was those, the photos of Lynda looking totally cute although dressed that defined or determined her relationship to not a few of the feminists of the seventies, or so it seemed from the perspective of a person standing right there. Prettiness—Benglis', or Wilke's, or that of the other woman artist Hickey brings up, Eve Hesse—would seem to be far more of a problem for the world than nakedness, being I think far less reducible to matters of power of a manageable sort.

That said, what relates Benglis' work most directly to a feminist project, I think, is her positive attitude to decoration, with regard to which she seems to have had no more reservations than with regard to nakedness—itself either the absence of decoration or its absolute apotheosis (for example when it is the case that what is decorated enhances and improves what seeks to decorate it). Again, though, the relationship is not straightforward. In a sense Benglis' embrace of the decorative was what placed her outside the mainstream or dominant Feminism in the seventies, I think. For example, she was never a part of the echoes-of-the-quilt school of decorative painting; in fact she was always looking in exactly the opposite direction. I remember how excited she was when she got to do something with Daum (in Paris and Nancy) in the seventies. That was not the sort of move I should have expected Joyce Kozloff to make or to want to make, but it was very good not least because it allowed Benglis to develop the side of her work that has to do with fragility.

This is the side on which I'd put a recent work such as *Swinburne Egg I,* 2009 (p. 19), to which I'll come in a moment. Before getting to that I note that if her embrace of the decorative placed her at a distance from those feminists who saw the decorative as emblematically anti-masculinist only if it emphasized its association with marginalized craft—rather than, for instance, with *haute couture*—it was her use of colour, decoration's close relative or maybe that should be lover—as opposed to absolutely not colour, that placed her beyond the pale when it came to showing at a museum with the denizens of the grey, white, and

black—not generally regarded by minimalists as the indeterminate, the pure, and darkness but that is surely what they are. It is to her attitude to decoration and the body that I therefore plan to devote the rest of this essay.

Clearly that is not only the most central but the most controversial thing about her work. No one any longer thinks that the attractive and the feminine can be usefully divorced from feminism except certain nostalgic creatures who still have lots of power but precious little influence, and likewise no one any longer thinks that colour and sexy surfaces have nothing to do with art as a domain where something unexpected and mind-blowing might happen except certain nostalgic old chaps who still think a thing is a thing and anything having to do with illusion—such as anything coloured automatically does—is very bad because Rodchenko said so and Donald Judd agreed. It's interesting that both factions could always be identified by the gray tee-shirts they wore, oversized for the girls and just right for the boys.

Benglis' work is testament to the paucity of their ambitions, and her anticipation of the collapse of their preferences nothing more than all that for which one might have hoped. Her work is always carefully made but never about how it was made, which is to say it is concerned to get one's attention but not in order that it might perform a role in a narrative about the art history which preceded it. It always has an aspect of the ridiculous about it to which I shall turn shortly, and it is always exuberant in what I think of as a fleshy sort of way. Benglis seems to me to have quite a lot in common with Rubens and that kind of pretty heavy-duty flesh painter, and less to do with say Matisse or Vermeer. I was in Munich a couple of years ago and in a break from what I was doing went to a museum there which is loaded with Rubens and the whole thing could have been enhanced if they'd had Benglis' sculptures from all periods around the place. The movements were not at all dissimilar, Benglis' being less theatrical and generally speaking a bit more cheerful than classicism in any form allows. Unlike Rubens, I think Benglis can use large rounded forms without it becoming a ballet using elephants.

To be fair Rubens wants to do that. Benglis doesn't, although works like *The Wave (The Wave of the World),* 1983-84 (fig. 4), the fountain she made for the New Orleans World Fair in 1984, can come close because the combination of an image of both speed and weight with both the actuality of a fairly heavy material and the idea of water, which is heavy in the sense that we know waves can knock us over, can give heaviness as such the edge over the colour that under-

Fig. 4. *The Wave (The Wave of the World)*, 1983-84, bronze fountain, 108 x 108 x 204 inches

mines it. But this last is the point at issue when seeking to describe Benglis' use of decoration, or of the decorative as a driving principle. She uses colour to prevent form from getting in the way of either movement or connotation, and I think above all she uses it to prevent heavy things from being just heavy. Her use of gold is interesting in this regard, because gold is at once literally heavy and an image without gravity. Gold leaf lets the Byzantine icon provide Christ's image with a field without gravity (at once a depth and a surface), and I've sometimes wondered whether Benglis' use of gold has anything to do with the Greek Orthodox Church into which she will have been born, where the icon is a picture that's also an object that's carried around.[1] Of course the more general references gold brings to mind, jewelry and the very idea of the decorative, are more important to the affect achieved by her work. Gold is at once heavy but at the same time weightless because it gathers light into itself, and jewelry transfers that ambiguity to the body. That is the sense in which what Benglis does with gold is the same as what she does with colour.

Benglis was always prepared to blur, or perhaps just ignore, the distinction between abstraction and representation. Here too one could talk about her sty-

listic prescience. Her attitude to that distinction is now the norm, but in the seventies it was quite unusual, although it was something she and Joel Shapiro had in common. In both I think it had a lot to do with not wanting to be constrained by categorical imperatives with which they had no sympathy, and that is perhaps the general case today. Few care about the sorts of distinctions between representation and non-representation which were so important then—because it was, to some, important to see whether there was an art that was not just an 'abstraction' of the 'real'—and indeed not very many can remember what they were. Joel and Lynda didn't care about them for different reasons perhaps. He because he wanted to use humanist pathos and you can't do that without incorporating representation into an image however 'abstract' it may otherwise be, because 'abstraction' is itself perceived as being somehow anti-humanist. She because she was crazy about flow and flesh and you can't work with or refer to either without referring to fluids in the case of the one, and there isn't anything like flesh except flesh in the case of the other.

I think, and shall return to this, that in Benglis both flow and flesh are also about force. But first to how her new works develop her use of the figure, to the latest state of her interests in or use of fluidity, and to flesh in Benglis today.

I think the figure in Benglis tends to loom, crawl or crouch. When it's free to fly or jump it's not an animal, it's a wave. At first sight her figures aren't necessarily figures. *Figure 6,* 2009 (pp. 40-41), is a swirling line on the wall, recognizable as a figure if it is one by the organic movements out of which Benglis has made it, or which she has made it make. *Figures 5, 4 and 1,* 2009 (pp. 39, 37, 29) are fairly familiar Benglis knots, the arm reference from earlier works enough to link them to the figure as a theme. *Figure 3,* 2009 (p. 35), on the other hand, is crawling up the wall. Dark, these 'figures' are made out of a worm-like, wire-like material.[2] Looking at their surfaces is like looking at one of those programs that come on at supper time on Public Television and show and tell much more than goes with dessert about the sex life of snakes, and I think this is the side of Benglis that should be compared with Robert Smithson, with whom Hickey also compares her in the passage to which I've already referred. It's rare for Benglis to go for the creepy, but when she does she's really good at it. *Chimera,* 1988 (p. 47) is an earlier example of the same thing. Bronze and sixteen feet long, it crouches threateningly in a pool of water in a way that seems to me to be a direct precedent for that in which *Figure 3* climbs up the wall.

She is also really good at the opposite, epitomized in *Swinburne Egg I,* which

brings me to the fragile and the ridiculous, as promised, and to the attractive as an inherent property of the work. *Swinburne Egg I* is unlike most of Benglis's work, although as I've suggested it's not unique. Most of her work, though, is fleshy but not fragile, which is what makes it possible to compare her to Rubens, she does the same sort of thing with quite heavy forms moving in space. Nearly all her early work was heavily dependent on gravity and that probably has something to do with it. The poured work seemed lighter when on the floor (because colour subverted the heaviness of the material) than on the wall, where it seemed much more obviously weighty, regardless of whether it was basically plaster or plastic, or whether it was bronze. I have suggested that *Swinburne Egg I* belongs to that minority of her works in which fragility, actual or just apparent, plays a part in one's reception of the work.

Fluidity is a big factor in the majority of Benglis' works but I think in *Swinburne Egg I* it works differently than in most of her sculptures, where implied movement refers to, or embodies, mass, while here she makes movement be an aspect of the sculpture's surface rather than of its mass. It might be worth comparing *Swinburne Egg I* with *Untitled* (2001), which is made of crystal glass and seems, although I suppose it could be shattered, much less delicate or fragile. *Swinburne Egg I* is a much lighter work, physically speaking, and it substitutes dispersal for density. As one looks at it from the side it looks like a surface with mass, not unlike a wig in some respects. The movements out of which the surface is built are themselves slightly reminiscent of hair in that they are wavy or piled, quite unlike the hard crystalline accumulation of *Untitled* or the squirming mass of the figures. It sits a little bit off the wall, so that it doesn't cling to the wall like the figures but instead seems to be floating just in front of it.

Jackson Pollock made a lavender coloured painting which absolutely refuses to be as brutal as his paintings usually are because it's lavender. Benglis' work is never brutish but pink, which makes *Swinburne Egg I* appear to be much lighter than it is and accordingly more delicate, and helps it to float rather than sit, and the title itself must be said to add to this effect. When Benglis' works are delicate it's never a reference to the kind of fragility that might cause something to be held together only provisionally. Her works are too solidly made for that to be a thought one is likely to have, and there aren't works in which the relationships between components seem to be arbitrary or provisional or in some other manner which might lead one to see the work to be playing with the

Fig. 5. Installation view of *Chiron,* 2009 at *Lynda Benglis,* October 1, 2010 until January 11, 2011, at Museum of Art Rhode Island School of Design. Photograph courtesy of ©Museum of Art Rhode Island School of Design, Providence

intellectually provisional or something like that. *Swinburne Egg I* is about fragility in the sense that one cannot see pink without seeing a field that is both soft and indeterminate, so definitely not about the hard and the clearly determined (the unambiguous), and it's called an egg and floats on the wall.

This goes to the way in which attractiveness is a component of this work. Santayana's famous definition of beauty being pleasure as the quality of the thing—usually paraphrased as the property of an object—is to the point here. In most of Benglis' work one has the pleasure of being overwhelmed or knocked out by huge bursts of energy. *The Wave,* which I mentioned already, is a good example of that. A comparison that as far as I know has never been pursued but which seems to me obvious is the one between the works she made in the seventies like *Phantom* (1971) or *For and Against (for Klaus)* (1975) with the polychrome reliefs Frank Stella started to make around 1973. Especially, I think, it would be useful to compare those works of Benglis with the polychrome aluminum reliefs that Stella made later in the decade. Both Stella and Benglis make gutsy reliefs that come out at one, and in the seventies both were still using colour that was indebted to the Pop influences of the '60s—and the influences

inherent in new, plastic, colours that decade produced.

For the most part, I think Benglis works with what in my view may be described as Force with a capital 'F'. That is why some (most, perhaps) of her work could be usefully compared with Stella's: they are both fundamentally concerned with the sublime. In Benglis there are primarily two varieties or definition of Force: Force as formlessness that has direction and perhaps volition, and is formless because a form can neither contain nor express it—perhaps one should say that most of Benglis' works are non-forms that have settled on a kind of form which can embody what is in effect not a body; and Force as the irresistible appeal of decoration or the generally sexy (flesh and references to it falling within the latter category). I have been consistently excited by Benglis' work since the early 1970s because she's always been prepared to work with what interests (excites) me most, affect and the involuntary. The affect is more interesting to me than the discursive effect because it involves the work of art in engaging the aesthetic rather than the merely discursive, the senses rather than mere intellect. The work of art's effect is, actually, its affect. Here that is predicated on two kinds of force, one to marvel at and one you can't resist. Funny how it's the former that's supposed to be the most forceful but that's a traditional prejudice that artists such as Benglis destroy daily. I wrote a book about it.[3]

Swinburne Egg I falls into the second category, not the sublime but the beautiful, irresistible appeal. This is the domain of the decorative at its most obvious. In much of her work, certainly in earlier works like *The Wave* or very recent work like the figure sculptures, the decorative is a matter of colours and smooth sexy surfaces being applied to a, from my point of view at least, relatively burly, Jackson Pollock inspired as I've said, idea and/or experience of the art object as a zone of energy that could be described as forceful and which sought to impose or impress itself on one in the way that high art usually but not always did. An element of awkwardness if not ugliness was essential to the affect: oozing; forms that crouch or crawl; that sort of thing.

Nothing of that sort may be found in or around *Swinburne Egg I*. Or perhaps I should say almost nothing, because there is always—perhaps only nearly always, but I can't think of an exception—a very clever use of the ridiculous in Benglis' work. I mean, just think: Benglis began with wax on panel, so not huge works but works which went straight to one of the most difficult painting techniques, encaustic, which reminded one of Jasper Johns, who, guess, what, did

not make huge works. Having started with that, she has ever since made works which don't look like, or remind one of, anything but her work. I agree with John Baldessari, a mutual friend whom Lynda and I have known for about as long as we've known one another, and who says, "I consider Lynda Benglis to be one of the most innovative living sculptors in the United States." I'll leave the quote as is so I may tease John about the question of how many innovative dead sculptors there are in the U.S., and add to it that I think Lynda is also one of the most consistent artists in America. Not that being consistent is necessarily a virtue—which by the way is an insight I first got from John Baldessari—but it is the case that a Benglis always looks like a Benglis and nothing else. And an important element in that is the ridiculous. A brightly coloured hardened pool of plastic colour that was not a form because it was form undermined, just as its whole constitution could be seen to if not subvert at least offer an alternative to a dominant aesthetic of straight lines, heaviness wherever possible and if not that then almost nothing combined with (only) white, gray, or black. A huge gold thing on the wall, which could be a number of things including a part of the King Tut exhibit that morphed during the night and took refuge in Bloomingdales before deciding to become a dramatic bas-relief. An enormous hardened wave that one doesn't read as hardened because it wants so obviously to be liquid. A figure made out of not gestures or marks but at the same time not shapes or forms, that crouches. Another made out of wriggling lines that combine to give it its form. In nearly all Benglis' work rounded-ness undermines seriousness so that one has to find another way back to the serious, rather than being taken straight there by the official signs of the serious. And usually there's something animal-like about what makes the not-forms with which she works not be serious in the official way. Rounded-ness in Benglis implies movement, as is the case in other artists too, and rounded-ness always has about it an element of Brueghel or Walt Disney (same thing) which the artist either exploits or seeks to repress. I think Benglis has always exploited it by just letting it happen.

Swinburne Egg I should live in a museum. It is a Benglis which stops you in your tracks and unfolds as it sucks you in, where most of her works grab you and then sweep you up and away. It is a work that is calm and exciting at once. It should live in a museum because museums need works that aren't only about the heroic and the sublime—or about not being about the heroic and the sublime, which is the same thing. One wants Vermeer as well as Rubens, that is to

say, and *Swinburne Egg I* is I think a brilliant example of how in Benglis' practice the one informs the other. *Swinburne Egg I* does not, as is the case with most of Benglis' sculpture, use the decorative to supplement and qualify the opposite of decoration. Instead it uses the decorative to intensify one's sense of decoration as the superfluous articulated, embodied and experienced as an end in itself, at least in so far as it is not there to give way to something that is not decorative.

John Hyman's famous statement, an aphorism actually I think, that "A painting is illusionistic to the extent that a spectator is unable to see its surface *as* a surface,"[4] is equally applicable to Benglis's sculpture *Swinburne Egg I*. I should want to modify Hyman, as I have lots of times. I think the question is that one cannot see a painting's surface as *only* a surface, and that is what I think may (should) also be said about *Swinburne Egg I*. *Swinburne Egg I* is a self-contained shape that's full of movement, delicately positioned so as to seem to float and at the same time shaped like an egg, its colour filled with air—robbing the object of one sort of density but replacing that with another, so that while it's about lightness at the same time heaviness never goes away, so that it could crash to the floor like Humpty-Dumpty—its surface and structure lumpy but at the same time elegant, the ridiculous subsumed into the irresistible.

Lynda Benglis has consistently taken a different approach to Minimalism, feminism and the decorative than other artists in the United States and Europe. Unlike most artists of her generation, she has worked with the immediate, the involuntary, and the exciting instead of (for instance) the deferred, the consciously and carefully controlled, and the conventionally cool. The involuntary is more interesting to me because what you can't help being excited about is by definition I should have thought a more pressing and complex experience than some feeble sign that you may choose to engage or not (such as, say, a urinal or a soup can).[5] Her willingness to go for it, and to keep going for it, over a long period throughout which she really hasn't received as much attention as she ought to have, is great.

Notes:

1. Elsewhere I have suggested that the portability of the icon in Orthodox Christian services may also have had an influence on Malevich and Russian abstract art in general, where the idea of the painting as an object seems never to have been controversial, which is not the case in the West.
2. It looks like wire but actually it's the result of a process which has Lynda first making a wax mold, then casting that and re-working it before finally casting it in urethane.
3. Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime (New York, 2000).
4. John Hyman, The Objective Eye: Color, Form and Reality in the Theory of Art, (Chicago, 2006) p. 207.
5. Perhaps I should say that while I see that there must be some people whose senses are aroused by urinals as sculpture and labels as paintings, it seems to me that to say that is to refer to 'senses' that are the products of heavy acculturation, while I'm speaking of more narrowly visceral and maybe animal sorts of involuntary sensation.

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe is a painter who also writes about art and related matters. He is represented by Alexander Gray Associates in New York where his next exhibition, which will include a collaboration with Rebecca Norton, will open in January 2011. He is the author of Immanence and Contradiction (1986), Beyond Piety (1995), Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime (2000), Frank Gehry, The City and Music (2001) and many essays and lectures. A recipient of Guggenheim and NEA Fellowships, the CAA's Mather Award and a Francis Greenberger Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts, Gilbert-Rolfe is Chair of the Graduate Art Program at Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California.

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