

The Life Aquatic: Lynda Benglis's Watery Sculptures Delight at Storm King

By Chloe Wyma | June 5, 2015

In the late 1960s, sculptor Lynda Benglis railed against the apophatic austerity of her minimalist contemporaries, opting instead for the messy physicality of poured latex, dripped wax, and polyurethane. Evocative of bodily effluvia, her goopy polychrome sculptures, poured directly onto the floor, inaugurated what is now known as post-minimalism—a reaction against the former movement's austere anti-expressive forms and in favor of the freewheeling poetics of process and unconventional materials. Decades later, Benglis is again confronting the big boys of postwar sculpture. At the Storm King Art Center, which is hosting “Lynda Benglis: Water Sources” through November 8, her gurgling biomorphic fountains are facing off against the stolid architectonics of minimalist heavies Mark de Survino, Sol Lewitt, Richard Serra, and Isamu Noguchi. “Water Sources” is the first exhibition of artistic fountains at the sculpture garden, which is located in New York’s leafy Hudson Valley, an hour’s drive from the city. It is also the first show devoted to this underexplored body of Benglis’s work. Several working fountains and aquatically themed outdoor works are scattered throughout the 500-acre property, while a concomitant indoor exhibition invites viewers to draw connections between the artist’s better-known gallery-scale pieces and her ambitious public sculptures.



Lynda Benglis (right to left) *Pink Ladies*, 2014 *Pink Lady (For Asha)*, 2013, Courtesy the artist and Cheim & Read, New York and Locks Gallery, Philadelphia. Photo by Jerry L. Thompson

Garden fountains might seem something of a frivolity in the arid cultural territory of monumental modern sculpture, but working with water is a natural extension of Benglis’s career-long ambition to capture fluidity and motion in solid form. As curator Nora Lawrence writes in her catalog essay, “The water across the surface of her fountains continues the implied movement of the sculpture itself, extending it from the implied to the actual.”

Benglis’s work with hydraulic sculpture dates back to the early 1980s, when she was commissioned to create a fountain for the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition in New Orleans. Titled “The Wave of the World” by the fair’s organizers, the gigantic bronze fountain — modeled, as the title suggests, on the curvature of a cresting wave — went missing for decades after the exposition went bankrupt. It was recovered in 2013 and is now installed as a freestanding “dry” sculpture in City Park in New Orleans. Benglis, who repaired the damage sustained by the original during its long oblivion, recast it and recycled some fragments from it in “North South East West,” one of four working fountains gracing Storm



King’s grassy Museum Hill. Conceived in 1977 and intermittently reworked until this year, the bronze waterwork is a Frankensteinian creation of recombinant parts. One of its four sculptural elements was originally envisaged as a stand-alone object, titled “Chimera” or, alternatively, “Cicada.” Despite their entomological namesake, the four barnaclelike, mucilaginous figures more closely resemble drip castles or monsters raised from a primordial swamp.



Lynda Benglis, *North South East West*, 2009 Cast bronze fountain and steel, Four elements, each 66” x 7’ 6” x 56”
 Courtesy the artist; Cheim & Read, New York; and Locks Gallery, Philadelphia. Photo by Jerry L. Thompson

While the grotesque charm of “North South East West” becomes irresistible after sustained viewing, the show’s crowd pleaser is undoubtedly “Pink Ladies” (2013-14), a troika of hot magenta spires of semitranslucent polyurethane cones arranged in a shallow circular pond. In a riff on the Acropolis’s Erechtheion caryatids, Benglis’s wonkily stacked blushing columns evoke female bodies standing in contrapposto. The trio motif is amplified in a fountain composed of three 25-foot trickling obelisks: “Bounty,” “Amber Waves,” and “Fruited Plane” (2014). The tallest structures Benglis has built to date, these lanky, slightly crooked steeples look back at “Endless Column” (1938), Constantin Brancusi’s towering achievement of modernist sculpture, refracted through a deliberately askew, almost Dr. Seussian sensibility.

“There’s a quote in an old Storm King book about how we won’t show artistic fountains, which obviously isn’t the case anymore at all,” Lawrence said during the press preview. The curator went on to note that despite the fact that several artists have moonlighted as fountaineers — Olafur Eliasson, Ryan Gander, Noguchi, Alexander Calder, for example, as well as Marcel Duchamp, with his famous repurposed urinal, “Fountain” (1917) — “there is this historical divide between serious art and decorative art, and fountains typically fall on the decorative side. . . . [B]ut Benglis is an artist who has been drawn towards the decorative in ways that have felt dangerous at different times.” Indeed, artistic orthodoxies have never been of great concern to Benglis, who in 1974 parodied the testosterone-laced commercialism of the New York art world by posing in a self-paid “Artforum” advertisement wearing only cat-eye sunglasses and a latex dildo, causing the magazine’s cerebral, theory-oriented associate editors, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, to resign in protest.

Benglis has since moved on to subtler provocations, as the salty, oceanic beauty of her Storm King exhibition demonstrates. While building on the implications of her boundary-breaking earlier work, her joyful and unapologetically strange fountains also suggest happy alternatives to the gigantism and sobriety of much public sculpture. They evoke Brancusi and Greek caryatids, but also the hydraulic architecture of children’s playgrounds and water parks, themselves a genre of fantastic vernacular sculpture. My only complaint is you can’t play in the water.