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Review: Lynda Benglis Celebrates the Fluidity of Nature at Storm King

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A detail of "Pink Ladies."
Chang W. Lee/The New York Times



"Pink Ladies," made of cast polyurethane in a hot pink inspired by India.
Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

The most compelling temporary exhibition produced by the Storm King Art Center in recent years, "Lynda Benglis: Water Sources" focuses on a heretofore unfamiliar but important dimension of Ms. Benglis's distinguished career: creating working fountains. The show's main attraction is a quartet of gorgeous fountains rising from temporary, circular pools embedded in the lawn outside the center's home building.

Ms. Benglis became known to the New York art world in the late 1960s for her flat, brightly colorful floor sculptures made of poured latex. They were a joyful riposte to the dour Minimalism of Carl Andre's gridded floor sculptures. She produced her first fountain, which also was her first major work in cast bronze, to fulfill a commission for the Louisiana World Exposition of 1984. That piece, "The Wave of the World," an abstraction resembling a surging eruption of mud, was lost for many years and then recovered. Now, slightly altered, recast in bronze and retitled "Crescendo," it's the most prominent of three elements in one of the pools. Rising to over nine feet and with water falling down over its luxuriantly crusty skin, it seems as if it's leaping like a breaching whale. It's accompanied by a smaller, two-part piece called "Double Fountain, Mother and Child, for Anand." Both of those elements are extravagantly gnarly forms, one of which seems to be exuberantly jumping out of the water while the other calmly watches. They're further enlivened by rivulets of water spouting from and trickling down from holes in their surfaces.

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Since much water comes from recesses deep below the earth's surface, it can bring with it scary, infernal associations, as does Ms. Benglis's "North South East West." This fountain has four similar parts resembling hulking, prehistoric swamp monsters emerging from a primordial bog with water spilling over their hideous hides. Like "Crescendo," they suggest an upsurge of perhaps dangerously irrational psychic energies from some dark underworld.

In a brighter mood, the two other fountains involve forms resembling large, horn-shaped flower blossoms stacked up into vertical columns. Water spills from the tops, filling the lower flowers, which overflow into yet lower ones. From one pool rise three stacks all cast from the same original and rising 24 feet. They're called "Amber Waves," "Bounty" and "Fruited Plane" after the patriotic hymn "America the Beautiful." On sunny days, their bronze surfaces shine like gold against the blue sky.

Brancusi's "Endless Column" comes to mind, but there are some significant differences. Brancusi's monument consists of stacked geometric elements — conjoined, truncated pyramids — and as such suggest an ascension toward abstract infinity. Because her units resemble flowers, the upward movement in Ms. Benglis's sculptures suggests rather an organic attraction to the sun and its life-giving light and warmth. They play feminine nature to Brancusi's masculine abstraction, in the conventional senses of those gender terms.

Ms. Benglis makes the feminine more explicit in the exhibition's most recent and most beautiful fountain, "Pink Ladies," a trio of flower stacks made of cast polyurethane pigmented to a rich magenta. Ranging from about eight to 11 feet tall, they introduce a startling, hot color to Storm King's coolly green, northern landscape. They were inspired by Ms. Benglis's extended stays in India, where she met her life partner of three decades, Anand Sarabhai, who died in 2013. A label notes that the title "Pink Ladies" and the pink color refers to Diana Vreeland's quip that pink was "the navy blue of India."

The sculptures' intense, almost erotic sensuality is amplified by the water falling from their tops and flooding the lower blossom shapes, creating an oasis of tropical hedonism and a striking contrast to the industrial-style sculptures by Alexander Lieberman, Mark di Suvero, Richard Serra and numerous others punctuating the Storm King landscape.

Nora Lawrence, the center's curator and the show's organizer, writes in her catalog essay that Ms. Benglis "sees a natural connection between people and water. We are buoyant in the womb, she has noted, and upon our exit, 'we are walking water



vessels ourselves.’ ” Cosmic implications may be further extrapolated along the lines of a theory that the universe is always in flux. Everything is flowing, circulation is all. Consider, too, that the first fountains were natural springs where people went to get the substance without which there can be no life. For Ms. Benglis, the fountain isn’t just an amusing sideline; it’s an expression of an essential intuition that we all are the offspring of the Great Mother.

Near the summit of a low hill about a quarter mile away is “Hills and Clouds.” It’s not a fountain but its two parts represent a feeling for the fundamental fluidity of nature. The main element, cast in stainless steel, is a mountain-shaped shell that looks as if draped by tendrils of Spanish moss. It’s supported from below by a construction of slender slats. Attached to the mountaintop above are clouds made of large clumps of pale-green resin like dollops of lumpy tapioca pudding. Infused with phosphorescent dye, they glow at night as nocturnal ocean waters often do.

It might seem a paradox of Ms. Benglis’s art that, while proffering a holistic fantasy of all things being naturally connected, it does nothing to hide the modern, non-natural materials and processes of its making. If that’s a contradiction, it’s one that is practically impossible for humans to escape, and for many of us distressingly so. To metaphorically balance and even wed the two sides of our nature — the animal and the intellectual — in vigorously embodied forms is Ms. Benglis’s regularly achieved, inspirational goal.

“Lynda Benglis: Water Sources” runs through Nov. 8 at Storm King Art Center, New Windsor, N.Y.; 845-534-3115, stormkingartcenter.org.



Three 24-foot-tall fountains, “Bounty,” “Amber Waves” and “Fruited Plane.”
Chang W. Lee/The New York Times



“Hills and Clouds”
Chang W. Lee/The New York Times