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Little Resistance to Gravity: On Lynda Benglis and David Hammons

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In 1974 Lynda Benglis told the critic Robert Pincus-Witten that when she started to work with video, it was in response to what she saw as “a big macho game, a big, heroic, Abstract Expressionist, macho sexist game. It’s all about territory. How big?” In those days, one video would have been shown on more or less the same size monitor as any other—no one was projecting video at mural scale, as is common today—and what appeared on the screen would be just as large or small as any viewer’s imagination of it. In retrospect, it’s clear that Benglis wasn’t withdrawing from the macho artists’ territorial contest, nor from a way of working that had a lot in common with Abstract Expressionism; rather, she was redefining them in order to win on her own terms. With her work now packed inelegantly onto a single floor (plus the vest pocket–sized lobby gallery) of the New Museum in New York (through June 19), which has simultaneously devoted two floors to a bloated retrospective of the (sometimes pseudo–Ab-Ex, more often pseudo-Picassoid) paintings of George Condo, Benglis might be thought to have lost the battle for territory. But she’s still winning the war: even in the somewhat clipped form encountered here, the imaginative reach of her work remains unmatched.

The New Museum has billed the show as Benglis’s first New York retrospective, but it can be labeled as such only by the impoverished art history now practiced by many curators, which dims the aesthetic it purports to illuminate. The view is that potential counts more than realization, that artists are truly important only during the brief period when they emerge onto the art scene; the remainder of a career is an exercise in crossing the t’s and dotting the i’s. In Benglis’s case, the result is that nearly forty works at the New Museum, some three-quarters of the pieces on view, date from 1966 through the ’70s; there are just five works from the ’80s and ’90s, and eight from 2007 through 2009. Needless to say, there are artists who make amazing work early on and then seem to spend the rest of their careers playing catch-up with themselves, or worse yet, coasting. Benglis is not one of them. Her art has never stopped being raw, elegant, contrary and sometimes excessive; and she’s always managed to pull it off, thanks to an innate formal daring. If the New Museum offers only the most partial account of her career, at least the curious viewer can learn more from the catalog, edited by Franck

Gautherot, Caroline Hancock and Seungduk Kim (Les Presses du réel; $60), which is more comprehensive. In an interview with Kim, Benglis seems particularly concerned to ward off the possibility that all her work might be interpreted through concepts essayed earlier and subsequently abandoned. “The ability to contradict oneself is inherent in the nature of art,” she insists, which means that certain works may always remain unassimilable to the presumed shape of a career.

I’m starting to notice a pattern: the New Museum makes me want to rant, something I’m otherwise not inclined to do. But the reason is clear: disappointment. On paper the museum’s program is smart and timely, but the execution usually goes awry, and this can no longer be attributed entirely to the evident problems with the architecture of its galleries—awkwardly proportioned spaces in which most artworks look stranded. Having worked in their new building on the Bowery for more than three years, the curatorial staff should by now have figured out how to make lemonade out of the lemon they’ve been handed—how to use these uncomfortable spaces to reveal unexpected dimensions of the art they’ve chosen to exhibit. Regardless of the architectural issues, the staff should know that an artist’s lifelong process of developing, extending and refining her primal intuitions can entail not only the loss of an initially reckless energy but also an increase in depth and force.

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It’s up to us to make lemonade from the New Museum’s incomplete account of Benglis’s art. An opportunity to see her early work shouldn’t be passed up. What Benglis was after from the beginning was a new way to combine the imaginary space of painting with the physical presence of sculpture. The earliest pieces here are peculiar wall-mounted reliefs made of colored wax, deeply pitted and furrowed and several inches thick, on long, vertical panels, rounded at the top and bottom. Their atmospheric color evokes pictorial space as insistently as their shape and physical assertiveness works against it. Then there are pieces made of pigmented latex poured on the floor. Again, but in a completely different way, they hug the edge between sculpture and painting. It’s as if Helen Frankenthaler (to whom Benglis dedicated one such work) and Carl Andre—aesthetic contraries if ever there were ones—had somehow decided to work in tandem by exaggerating rather than smoothing over their differences. Somehow Benglis carries it off. The wax wall pieces are pretty, but reminiscent of the deathly glamour of fake flowers; the colors of the floor pieces are harsher, more opaque, almost nasty. In different ways, the pieces have a dark, aggressive thrust, disguised as lyricism in the wall pieces and energy in the floor pieces. Both forms seem to present a kind of corporeal excess (the buildup of the wax surfaces, the stainlike spread of the latex) in tension with some sort of restraint (the modest size of the wax pieces, the flatness of the pours).

By 1969 Benglis was making pieces out of polyurethane foam poured into corners—similar to the latex pours but with volume. In these works the colors would cascade over one another

like dripping candle wax, not mixing but showing themselves as separate layers. Subsequently she began casting these in lead or, more often, bronze—Quartered Meteor (1969–75), for instance, was made from a black, white and gray piece from 1969 called King of Flot. The essential impact of these sculptures, not only the bronzes but also the multicolored foam pours, arises from form rather than color, and it no longer depends on just a subtle hint of excess: it's an abstract grotesque. Benglis had spoken of her work as "frozen gesture," but sculpture such as Quartered Meteor is more like solidified viscosity. The emphasis is much less on the sense of material being deliberately manipulated and more on stuff that can no longer be entirely controlled: heavy, oozing fluids pouring down in glutinous layers. Benglis renders not the proudly standing body of classical sculpture but a melting, bloblike body with little resistance to gravity.

The artist soon realized she could pour polyurethane foam over chicken-wire armatures covered in plastic; once the foam had dried, the armatures could be removed and the resulting monstrous shapes hung from the wall. Looking like hybrids between animate and inanimate forms, they seem to claw at the air like amorphous sci-fi swamp creatures lunging out yet ultimately collapsing. Theirs is a threatening sensuality. Benglis took the eeriness of these forms to an extreme with Phantom (1971), a group of five polyurethane foam sculptures imbued with phosphorescent pigments; under ultraviolet light they glow a ghostly green. It's as if their physical presence were partly dissolving but in recompense emitting a radioactive image of their surfaces.

That sense of dissolving form calls to mind not the opticality of painting, as Benglis's earlier work might have done, but the liquescence of the imagery in the videos Benglis was making in the early 1970s. Video wasn't something she stuck with for long, but that doesn't mean it was unimportant. What the detour through video may have added to her already fraught phenomenology of the object was a dose of self-consciousness. In Now (1973) the artist multiplies and layers her own image by posing in front of a previously recorded image of herself and pretending to engage in an autoerotic relationship with her double. But then we become aware of the artist's third embodiment, the directorial persona off-camera, when the artist-as-image asks the artist-as-viewer, "Do you wish to direct me?"

The answer was always going to be, Yes, Benglis does wish to direct. It's not surprising that, alongside and following her efforts to stage-manage the flow of fluids under the implacable pull of gravity, she began engaging with forms that more overtly demonstrate her efforts to manipulate materials. There are the "Knots" she made from aluminum screening rolled into tubes and covered first in plaster and bunting, then with metallic sprays and sometimes paint, sparkles and other gaudy decorative surfacing. Hanging on the wall, they look funky and fragile, like things made in a kids' arts-and-crafts class, yet with a compelling bravado and a knowing vulgarity. Organic yet artificial, they dare you, with an ambiguous smile, to see them as gimcrack, as fireworks that emit sparks but also fizzle. Named as some of them are for

Greek letters (Alpha 1, 1973–74; PSI, 1973) they are posited by Benglis as the beginning of a new visual—or rather, material—alphabet.

And so they are, but we need another exhibition to spell out what Benglis made of it. Her recent works, particularly those in glass or translucent urethane, such as Chiron (2009) are hypnotic. They seem to be made of endless vermiform strands, not knotted but crazily piled up and yet somehow fused just at the moment when they would have fallen apart. Their overall forms are simple, globular, yet there is endless complexity in their minute intertwinings, at times resembling the convolutions of the cerebral cortex, and which reflect and refract the light that passes through them, somehow diffusing and concentrating it at the same time, amplifying it. There is radiance but also obscurity: we feel as if we could look into the bodies of these objects, but then realize that they shield their secrets by directing luminosity back to the surface. As bluntly physical as they seem, they disappear inside their auras.