

Who's Afraid of Color, and Fun: Lynda Benglis at 81

Spanning five decades of creative output, Lynda Benglis' solo show at Locks Gallery in Philadelphia, PA, (May 19-July 22, 2022) is an inebriating—and joyous—encounter with the artist's uncompromising creative practice. A curated selection of early abstract objects, as well as recently completed work from both her two US studios (N.Y. and Santa Fe) and atelier in Kastellorizo, Greece, comprise the expansive exhibition. Born 1941 in Lake Charles, Louisiana, the two-floor retrospective reveals the critical gamut of Benglis' alchemic praxis.

The artist's lifelong (and life-giving) romance with form (-less too) and texture drench her visual texts. A luscious vernacular of anti-language and capacious inventiveness teem across these mini-monuments. Shiny phosphorescent forms and molten wax polygonal sculptures, effusively oozing sap of messy rainbows colors, and glittery polyurethane quasi-paintings (Benglis' reformulated drippings of abstract expressionism) are not tongue and cheek irony, but rather startling one-of-a-kind artworks. While the artist's affinity for post-minimalism's grandeur endures, her oeuvre is more importantly an urgent reminder to viewers: tactility and desire breathe lightest in the in between spaces of suspension.

Most impressive then, is Benglis' indefatigable sense of playfulness and imaginative receptivity. The beauty of humor—and its accompanying Eros—percolate across nearly every assembled construction in the two floors Locks Gallery. At 81-years-young, the inexorable innovator's process and *trans* mode of experimental making resounds most in its iconic, camp-like aesthetic.



Blue Pair, 1972 purified pigmented beeswax with damar resin
and gesso on Masonite (36 x 4 ½ x 1 ¼ inches)

Take *Blue Pair* (1972) as an origin point. Formally indentifying more with avant-garde sculpture than traditional wall painting, *Blue Pair* is a consummate early example of Benglis' foray into the poured vernacular of abstract expressionism. Contemporary conceptual referents point to Eva Hesse and Helen Frankenthaler, Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman. However, the quixotic and resinous, aqua amoeba form offers an inexplicable confrontation with the unknown.

Dovetailing in this outlandish vertical system of wax remnant scrapings is a hybridity of painting and sculpture. The synthesis is primordial life force: in the rippled glare and translucent layers of striated aquamarine, *Blue Pair* unveils a jellyfish mirrorscape of both the stars and our selves, the human and otherworldly.



Figure 2. Installation View.

Whereas the content and form of *Blue Pair* abound with ambiguities, *7 Come 11: Seis* (1976) is a geometry of formal impulses and knotted bows. By the mid-1970s, the swagger and pomp of the young artist had reached its first apotheosis (or disjuncture). While the outrage from Benglis' *Artforum* (November 1974) ad—a massive F U to the establishment, patriarchy, and east coast art critics—may have subsided, the greased oil of her naked body and protruding dildo persist in the skin-toned and smoothly contoured sprayed alloy metals limbs of *7 Come 1: Seis*. (94 words)



Figure 3. *7 Come 11: Seis*, 1976. Wire mesh, cotton bunting, plaster, sprayed aluminum and copper. 34 x 48 x 9 ¾ inches.

In dual contrast again, consider Benglis' 1978 memorable multimedia sculpture *Lagniappe I* (Edition 6/26). Created a mere two years later with a motley alternative of materials—cast paper, acrylic, glitter and polypropylene—the four foot object frenetically frizzes with nameless queering. Anthropomorphized, the French-Creole (Quechua too) locution refers to a bonus; an excessive kind of gift. In this way, the anti-decorative champagne bottle of reflective plastic glitter bursts beyond its own measly frame. The quizzical bombast and auto-generative bubbly personifications of both 1970s artworks teem with a mutual joy fluid inside their own formal constraints. (95 words)



Figure 4. Installation view. *Kearny Street Bows and Fans*, 1985. Five Bronze, nickel and chrome wall sculpture elements. 50 x 36 inches (each)

Dipped bows and torqued fans, the flying trapeze birds of *Kearny Street Bows and Fans* (1985) defy gravity. Chronologically ordered, the wall installation is weightless: it is as if the seriality of composition and their rhythmically creased pleats hold hands of memory. Like a murder of crows, the bronze, nickel and chrome fossils strangely levitate too, sculpture seemingly ready to launch—a trajectory flight toward Benglis' 2013 *Pink Lady (For Asha)* permanently installed at Storm King some 150 miles north would be an ideal place for their drone aerial slumber.



Figure 5. *Stainless Wax*, 2007, unique cast polyurethane and stainless steel in fifteen elements.
Dimensions variable

Stainless Wax (2007) rests situated on a non-descript black table. Emerging at waist-level from this horizontal tableaux, a larvic grove of fifteen spindly sculptures announce their own trans-organic, alien presence. Benglis' metallic totem objects stand erect (a unique blend of stainless steel and polyurethane) even in the face of their own crinkling drips and volcanically smoothed crevices. More than mere charismatic bravado, however, the self-effacing falic objects are at once too pitifully demure objects. This kind of hermaphroditic interfold—an oscillation between stoic confrontation and wimpy, reflexive coyness—are likewise part and parcel with the larger oeuvre of Benglis as master liquid pourer. In the wake of 9/11, one can't help but also imagine the stains of tragedy infiltrating her volcanic steel towers—victors and vanquished together humbly stationed on fifteen, identical black pedestals.

Contingency, for Benglis a highly motivated aesthetic gesture that embraces chance through the liveness of fluid materiality, imbues *Stainless Wax* with creaturely viscera. Most unusual is the way a deep humor dribbles across the polished surfaces of these finished, yet somehow still formless, talismanic swords. Adding to this mutability and glee, just beneath *Stainless Wax* is a flotsam puddled iteration of Benglis' iconoclastic 1969 *Contraband*—Dayglo pigmented latex—an ochre rainbow pool of self-contained alchemy and color. The stained swirling ground echoes of not only narcissus, but also the consequently sprouting flowers, *Stainless Wax*, just above.



Figure 6. *Peitho*. 2017. Cast pigmented polyurethane. 51 x 35 x 17 inches.

Last, and one of Benglis' most recent creations, *Peitho* (2017) is a voluminous tableau of opacity and incongruity: at once both repulsively vulgar and intoxicatingly desirous, the slippery wall figure feels nearly unapproachable: this aura of brazen passion statically freezes rapt observers. The title itself, *Peitho*, is etymologically rooted in a Greek word for the goddess personifying persuasion and seduction.

Sexual, rhetorical, and mythical in meaning, Benglis' creamy cotton candy, magenta-pink sculpture is a menstrual forcefield: uncanny and bulbously frightful, the artist discloses a pupil-less eye of femme erotica. Resplendently gripping the wall and viewers in mutual tandem, the uteral object gazes—in screaming silence (and with shadow nipple wings beneath) the orbicular flesh pronounces an ulterior kind of sequel 'Fuck You' to naysayers and hecklers, enterprisers and haters alike. Benglis takes no prisoners, and in these *Pussy Riot* times (see Russia) her latest show at Locks affirms this tenacity and hardnosed artistry.