

# LYNDA BENGLIS IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES

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# NEON

These three fountains epitomize Lynda Benglis's concern with fusing elements from the realms of landscape and human culture. Typically, in the process her works combine ancient or archetypal motifs and modern ones. A primal element in nature and life, water represents pure flux – suiting the artist's penchant for fluent rhythms and change. In turn, water as a subject per se recalls a broad preoccupation in art since 1945 with the formless. By contrast, in Native American lore (Benglis has a studio near Santa Fe, New Mexico) the Thunderbird symbolizes the coming of rain. Whether the globular silvery particles seem almost infinitely large or small, their endlessness feels in place either outside under the sky or indoors rippling amid the spaces that we inhabit. To quote the artist: "I'm from Louisiana. Louisiana's mostly water and we are water."

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Here Benglis's relationship with her ancestral homeland grows explicit. The Three Graces are benign goddesses familiar from Greek mythology. Their traditional attributes include charm, beauty and fertility – apt qualities for an artist who has long probed issues relating to female gender. Her sculptural trio *The Graces* emanates a soft luminosity, akin to beacons that rise and reassure our gaze in some far, airy distance. Secondly, the title *Knossos* invokes a venerable, storied site on the island of Crete. Sometimes called the oldest city, Knossos is rich with legends from time immemorial. Furthermore, this organic upright shape carries multiple memories and associations – a golden siren, a caryatid-cum-pillar (Benglis's Greek grandmother first took her to the Acropolis in 1952) and a fragmentary torso or limb. Lastly, *Figure 4* offers another complex hybrid. An outspread living spirit of sorts, this dramatic personage also bears a certain resemblance to the craggy contours of a map – perhaps roughly similar to the geographical mass of Greece? What links *Figure 4* to *The Graces* (and *Storm Pattern*, *Summer Dreams*, *Thunderbird*) is a strange molecular makeup, as though all are aquiver with bubbling energy. True to Benglis's sensual approach, each sculpture invites the viewer to touch and caress it, albeit in different ways. This vibrancy, oddly akin to how for example lava shifts and pulsates (no wonder *Knossos* is aglow), emanates a life-enhancing, magnetic charm.

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In the 1960s at the outset of her career, Benglis found a special source of inspiration in Abstract Expressionism, a phenomenon that remained an inescapable precedent – to love or to loathe – for a new generation of avant-garde artists. Jackson Pollock exerted a particular appeal. "What attracted me most to Pollock, at the time," Benglis recalls, "was the way in which he and the material were one. In other words, the 'hand/eye' coordination. This really interested me." The latex pourings such as *Baby Contraband* respond to Pollock's landmark decision to use the floor rather than a wall as his painterly support. Yet Benglis went one step further or even more. Crucially, she allowed her viscous medium to remain on the ground so that its inexorable flow established a permanent residue upon the very surface over which any spectator must walk or look – a trail intimating the bodily gush from which it originated. In a trice, Benglis had therefore trumped Pollock's macho muscularity. Nor did she stop there. On the contrary, the ultra-intense tints of these "fallen paintings" make a sly nod to contemporary Color Field Painting. Indeed, one of their titles – addressing a female star of the latter movement – speaks volumes: *Odalisque (Hey Hey Frankenthaler)*. And, in short, the word "contraband" signaled that Benglis was a transgressive iconoclast.

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In opposition to the “fallen paintings” Benglis crafted others that stood erect only too provocatively, though both embodied her fundamental notion of the “frozen gesture”. She layered beeswax and other subtle ingredients to establish a long vertical format. The outcome proved a unique amalgam of painting and sculpture. Frankly erotic, these ridged shafts also allude to the Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman, whose chromatic pictorial fields had vertical stripes known as “zips” (Benglis would have caught the sexy overtones to the word and configuration). Benglis wished to “make something that was rounded, that would float on the wall, that was organic, that was highly surfaced and highly personal. I wanted to make an icon because I thought that painting had a kind of ritual and had lost a particular reference”. The gorgeous hazy colors with their opalescent softness also call to mind the imageless icons by another Abstract Expressionist. Namely, Mark Rothko’s evanescent veils. Like Rothko, Benglis conceived her apparent abstractions in human, anatomical terms.

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*Wing’s* scale and wrenching power demonstrate yet another side to Benglis’s performative impulses. Unlike contemporary Minimalism’s puritanical austerity, excess is the name of the game here. This cataclysmic outburst projects from the wall into our personal space with an awesomeness that belongs to a perceptual experience known as the “sublime” – that is, an overwhelming, even theatrical drama. Whether viewed as an uplifted wing, crashing ocean wave, volcanic eruption or formidable landscape terrain, this “event” arrested in mid-air attests to Benglis’s sensitivity towards nature and its wonders.

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Opposites attract. On the one hand, Benglis relishes looseness and chaos – latex and polyurethane that falls downwards, water flooding in every direction, fragmentary shapes, wax prone to melt or wrinkle, fragile paper and oozing bodily fluids. On the other hand, Benglis has tailored the neatest curves and geometries, collectively termed “pleats”. They hang on the walls of this room and shine with a light that is by turns brightly golden or copper-colored or brooding with a dark brassy luster. The luminosity and interwoven whorls stem to a great extent from the artist’s Hellenistic consciousness. When questioned about the subject, Benglis answered by listing “the braided Greek Easter bread” and “the gold and gilded elements of the Greek Orthodox religion.” Although relatively modest in size, the gilt “pleats” exude a rich awareness of art history and geography. The drapery of classical Greek sculpture, Byzantium’s lapidary splendor, Baroque folds and much more condense into what are above all spatial tours-de-force. To cite the titles, we indeed behold “fancy work”, “gold luster ” and, in miniature, the Himalayan peaks that surround Gangtok in the province of Sikkim. Fans, bows, heights and depths coalesce here into metallic glory. But like a draftsman in three dimensions Benglis can also shrink everything into a small squiggle (another title) that writhes with manual energy. Energy’s fate, though, also results in *Come*. Its mass spreads alone on the floor, a post-coital puddle. Benglis knows that the human condition runs from ecstasy to fallenness. She gives it vivid form.

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Cycladic art (whatever its original purpose may have been) strikes most contemporary observers as unusually modern because of its simplicity and directness. In particular, the stiff straight lines seen in Cycladic and other ancient artefacts or figurines serve as a reminder that abstract motifs are the building blocks of art. Benglis recognizes these traits and reconfigures them in new guises. *Cygnus* changes drapery pleats into metal folds. Like a piece of fabric, it also has a floating aspect. The title triangulates the two. “Cygnus” is the Latinized Greek word for a creature that drifts gracefully, the swan. A second meaning is the star constellation that lies on the plane of the Milky Way. In *Cygnus* the sky marries material that clings to the body. Benglis distils much into the drift of a crinkled coppery wafer.

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The painted paper works constructed over chicken wire spring in part from Benglis’s upbringing in Louisiana, where at an early stage she encountered the New Orleans Mardi Gras carnivals. They climax in the twofold *Lagniappe II*. Clothed in gaudy metallic paints and (in the one part) iridescent polystyrene film, a witty eye might quip that the Vessel from two years before has now graduated into a drag queen. The Creole word “lagniappe” means “something extra” – for instance a gift with little worth but much sentiment, such as sweets that a shop owner gives to a child after something else has been bought. The flimsy paper encourages intimacy and an air of throw-away sweetness, as if bonbons had been changed into relics. Other works in this room, though, have a different biographical angle. In sum, they reflect Benglis’s love for the New Mexico landscape. Witness *Bee Sting*. Its dry pales

flakes – bleached as Georgia O’Keeffe’s cow bones – would not be out of place in the arid land surrounding Benglis’s Southwest studio. However, even in this ambience she discerns a favorite note: “There is water in the sky all the time – the most wonderful clouds I’ve ever seen!” Whereas the “fallen paintings” were all about gravity, these paper pieces look light as a feather (Benglis attends the annual kite festivals in Ahmedabad, India, where she has had a home for the past forty years). Floating and falling are two sides of the same psychic coin.

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Benglis began the “knots” in 1972. Their ultimate precursor is the legend of the so-called Gordian Knot that derived from Gordium, the capital city of ancient Phrygia. This mother of all knots symbolized something so entangled that it proved near-impossible to unravel. As Benglis conceived her versions, they acquire other emotional or perceptual overtones. *7 Come 11: Tres* appears rigid, defiant and severe – locked upon itself. Maybe it resembles a letter from some undecipherable alphabet. *Sparkle Knot I* is the antithesis. As the title implies, we are now closer to a festive mood. When such glittery twists were first shown in 1973 at New York’s Clocktower, Benglis adorned the gallery with cheery Christmas lights. *November* names the month before this holiday season. Accordingly, it coils into a dour, dull, chilly ball. Who would have thought that knots could have individual personalities?

When Benglis turned her attention to ceramics she sought to test clay’s manifold possibilities. Twisting, hugging, peeling, pinching and handling this malleable substance every which way (as the Americans say), the ceramics present a cornucopia of colors, surface variations and actions. Shiny glazes meet matte passages, while sharp edges contend with curves. The exuberance is infectious. At one moment, a viewer might liken the pieces to tree bark. At another, they seem more gruesome, metaphors for internal human or animal organs rudely brought to light. Thus it should come as no surprise that a curator who observed Benglis at work in a New Zealand pottery factory concluded that her results had an affinity with “carnage”. Among her many virtuoso roles, Benglis can play the brilliant wrecker.

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The anatomical dimension comes across with particular immediacy in the various “torsos” and their counterparts. *Vessel* offers the most naked variant of this thematic type. The dark bronze idol-object stands as immobile yet voluminous as the famous Paleolithic limestone Venus of Willendorf (c.28,000 - 25,000 BCE) with her swelling breasts, belly and buttocks – nature personified, so to speak, in the raw. Indeed, the equation between woman and a vessel is as old as human history. Although still container-like and again amply bulbous, the glass *Detva (Novy Bor)* ranks with Benglis’s most audacious gambits, bringing a socially risky object into the domain of art. Not content just to emulate a double phallus, the brown vitreous glaze (the Czech town named in the sub-title is especially known for its glass production) rings sensory alarm bells. With this kind of raunchy move Benglis asserts her identity as an heir to the sexual revolution that galvanized the West in the 1960s and 1970s. Her erotic frankness recalls Andy Warhol and Robert Mapplethorpe, while her primitivism remains singular. To complete the bacchanalia, a thin twisting paper column hangs loose.