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"Phantom" (1971).

Lynda Benglis's Sculptures Splash All Over the Lower East Side

by Benjamin Sutton

Lynda Benglis, the 69-year-old artist finally having her first retrospective in the city she's called home since the mid-60s, has been an outsider-turned-inovator through several phases of contemporary art. If John Baldessari's career has been oracular for precipitating new aesthetic evolutions, Benglis has consistently found herself on the cusp of artistic revolutions. She earned her stripes breaking with the hegemonic hard geometry, monochrome palette and slick materiality of (male-dominated) Minimalist sculpture, pouring can-fulls of acrylic paint in bold tones directly onto gallery floors and making big, bulbous, organic, unruly and fun sculptures. One such piece, "Contraband" from 1969, sprawls across the New Museum's ground floor gallery like the runner rug in some psychedelic drug kingpin's compound. Beyond it two glowing pieces from her recent "Manu Light Vessel" series look like ostentatious versions of Ikea's paper lamps. Three adjacent wall-mounted pieces in matted black patina on bronze, also from 2009, complete the narrow space's movement from light, through every color in the rainbow, to pitch black. It's the most satisfying installation in Benglis's exhibition (through June 19), the rest of which is squeezed a little too tight onto the museum's second floor. (The cumbersome distribution isn't so problematic as that in the George Condo exhibition on the floors above.)

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Installation view with “Contraband” (1969) in the foreground, “The Manu Light Vessel I” (2009) at back right, and “The Manu Light Vessel III” (2009) at back left.

It’s a testament to Benglis that, even with curator Massimiliano Gioni’s concerted effort to focus almost exclusively on her sculptural output, these half-dozen rooms are generously filled and still leave visitors wanting more—the traveling show is significantly larger here, since much of her work has remained in New York. A concurrent exhibition of Benglis’s latest work, including a trio of golden fountains and a series of expressionist drawings, merits a walk one block south to Salon 94’s Freemans Alley space (through March 11).
In the New Museum exhibition’s biggest room another rug-like sheet of acrylic from the “Fallen Paintings” series leads into more three-dimensional clumps of pigmented polyurethane that resemble bits of land art made from Play Doh. Pieces like the polychrome “Night Sherbert A” (1968) and the glossy bronze “Come” (1969-74) are like obstacles on a scatological mini-golf course, all messy, bulging, sagging and organic globs of material installed directly on the gallery floor.
At one of Modernism’s most self-serious moments, Benglis brought sculpture off its pedestal and out of its grayscale garments. In these moments Benglis seems an essential precursor to Ken Price’s work of the last two decades.

Benglis’s messy, texturally rich mutant clumps of intriguing materials—the impulse to touch is difficult to suppress—move onto the walls, dripping down totemic pieces like “Cocoon” (1971), and cascading into the polyurethane forms of “Wing” (1970) and the glow-in-the-dark black-lit installation “Phantom” (1971), which evoke the effect of pouring paint over the Invisible Man. These fluids, frozen in their progression down some undetectable slope, invert the form and physics of Camille Claudel’s 1897 marble miniature “The Wave.”. A subsequent series made from similarly mysterious materials evokes giant shoelaces tied in impossible knots. These loops of cotton bunting with plaster and glitter remind of Louise Bourgeois’s final series of vaginal bronze totems. (Much could be made of the parallels between Benglis and Bourgeois’s careers, as some art historian will no doubt demonstrate in due time.)

Owing to the exhibition’s density one or two pieces often stand in for entire series. The incredible pleated copper wall growth “Panhard” (1989), its twisted, peeling folds evoking flower blossoms, rotting fruit, beehives and internal organs, is the most intriguing such excerpt. Another is “Minos” (1978), a tube shaped like an upside-down vacuum and made of gold leaf-plated chicken wire and plaster. Pieces like these, with their shimmering surfaces, spectacular colors and hard-to-discern components get at the alchemical streak in Benglis’s work, like she’s constantly trying to conceal or obfuscate the true nature and quality of her materials, draping something rich and powerful like bronze onto something unglamorous but functional like plaster or chicken wire, and covering the lot with something distractingly gaudy like glitter, gold or bright acrylic paint.

Such manipulation of materials continues in newer pieces like a series of small ceramic and glass sculptures from the early- to mid-90s and more complex works from the past decade that tip the balance of unnatural materials and organic textures towards the former. “Ghost Shadow II” (2007), with spores of rubberized black matted foam applied to chicken wire, seems simultaneously sci-fi and

primordial. The golden fountains at Salon 94 are similarly double-natured, being at once precious and otherworldly. These always abstract sculptures stand in sharp contrast to the few aggressively figurative works presented in the retrospective, like the tongue-in-cheek installation "Primary Structures (Paula's Props)" (1975)—whose tacky garden ornament-ish sculptures and fake plants reference her gallerist Paula Cooper—three perversely amusing public access-caliber videos and five Polaroid series juxtaposing flowers and sexual play. Nearby, Benglis stands defiantly, wearing only sunglasses, gripping a dildo between her legs, in an ad from Artforum for her 1974 show at Cooper's gallery. These works underline the strong feminist streak in her work, one that will no doubt be better served by a full retrospective at a major museum one day. But for now this selective survey does well to keep a narrow focus (and benefits from Salon 94's judicious timing) to provide the outline of an impressive career still in development. Benglis's work merits widespread recognition, and now we all know why.

Installation view with "Blatt" (1969) on the floor and "Omnicron" (1974) on the wall above it.

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