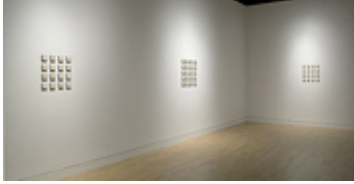
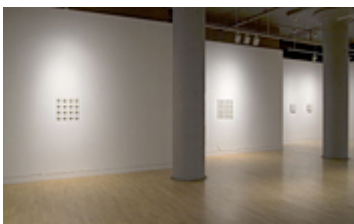




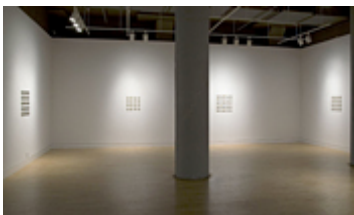
Print Article



Installation view of Thomas Chimes' "The Iambic Paintings" at Locks Gallery



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Thomas Chimes
IAMBOS I
2006-07
Locks Gallery

THE ADVANCE OF BEAUTY by Donald Kuspit

It's hard to think of Thomas Chimes and Lynda Benglis in the same breath, apart from the fact that they both had overlapping exhibitions at the Locks Gallery in Philadelphia, among the choice venues of contemporary art in the United States. It is even harder to think of their works as beautiful -- as eloquent examples of modern beauty at its most dialectically extreme. But they would be lost without the wonder of their strange beauty. They would become epitomizing homages to a modernism -- Symbolism in the case of Chimes, Abstract Expressionism in the case of Benglis -- that seems far in the historical past.

Chimes is obsessed with Alfred Jarry and Ubu Roi, the pathological tyrant of Jarry's notorious play. That work opens with the vicious anti-hero Ubu insulting the audience; he calls them "merdre," a play on "merde" (shit), and continues to do so some 30 times during the course of the play. A Dadaist before Dadaism became fashionable, Ubu Roi became a symbol of the impudence and irreverence -- often misread as creative license and freedom -- of perennially adolescent avant-garde art. Jarry's play has also been understood as unwittingly prophetic of 20th-century barbarism: Ubu killed his way to power, making his fortune along the way. He has been compared to Hitler, both in arrogance and ruthlessness: Both Ubu and Hitler were foot soldiers who became generals, riding high until they were brought low by over-reaching. (Hitler, like Ubu, first conquered Poland, but then, like Ubu, failed to conquer Russia, which finally defeated him.)

Even more artistically consequential than Ubu Roi was Jarry's invention of Dr. Faustroll and "pataphysics," a pseudo-science of the absurd that profoundly influenced Surrealism. Jarry died young and forgotten, until he was resurrected by Andre Breton. Is Chimes, now almost 80, nostalgic for his own youth, and afraid of being forgotten (although last year's major retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art shows that he is unlikely to be)? Chimes' lionizing portraits of prominent literary and artistic figures from the good old days of Parisian avant-gardism suggests that he is more nostalgic for that era than for Jarry and Roi, although they appear more often than anyone else.



Thomas Chimes
IAMBOS II
 2005-07
 Locks Gallery



Thomas Chimes
IAMBOS III
 2005-07
 Locks Gallery



Thomas Chimes
Ch 08.30.00
 2000
 Locks Gallery

But, more to the esthetic point I want to make, Chimes' new series of "Iambic Paintings" are exquisitely pataphysical. They coyly solve the age-old pataphysical problem of squaring the circle: In these works, a large circle almost fills a small square, suggesting their interchangeability. They also engage the pataphysical artistic problem of the relationship of figure to ground, implicitly the relationship of the physical to the metaphysical (the pataphysical has something of both): The circle is a golden coin gently raised in low relief on the pure white surface of the flat square. Both coin and surface are precious. Stamped on the coin are images of Jarry derived from photographs -- he looks much more noble than he does in them, suggesting that he has been deified after death, like an emperor -- and, on the inner rim, words, sometimes cryptically playful. A letter or two may be missing, noticeably from the word "entropy," thereby literalizing its meaning. The word recurs like a mournful refrain on many of the medallion-like coins. The small paintings are arranged in a large grid -- an entropic form, by way of its homogeneity, as Rudolf Arnheim reminds us. Entropy is also implicit in the coins, some of which are broken, suggesting they are fragments from an archaeological excavation. One may recall that the Greek word *symbolon* means broken ring or coin; Jarry is a symbol of the lost paradise of avant-garde originality -- however hellish its expression and forms -- for Chimes. "Half of it was kept by the host and the other half handed to a departed friend," the psychoanalyst Susan Deri notes, "so that their descendants would know they had met a friend if the two broken halves matched exactly to form a whole." Clearly Chimes is the best friend Jarry ever had.

But most entropic of all, the ultra-luminous flat ground invades the sun disk of the circle, at times obliterating the inscribed image and words, leaving an empty circle -- pure nothingness. The image and words are often blurred, giving them a ghost-like presence. It is this that is the deepest source of their delicate beauty, along with the delicacy of Chimes' touch -- his ultra-refined, many-layered surface, each layer adding to the depth of its purity. His painting is pataphysical, that is, ambiguously physical and metaphysical.

Benglis' sculptures of "Cloud Shadows," "Ghost Shadows" and "King Pins" -- three versions of each majestic form, often torso-like and voluptuously feminine, however made of Benglis' "frozen gestures," as she calls them, bizarrely aggregated into exciting unity -- are also deeply beautiful, in a different way than Chimes' paintings. Benglis' beauty is outspoken and confrontational; Chimes' beauty is recessive, drawing you into its intimacy.



Thomas Chimes
Ch 05.13.99
 1999
 Locks Gallery

Benglis is the feminist heir to masculinist gesturalism; her works are much more erotic and lyrical, with no sacrifice of epic forcefulness. *The Graces* (2003-05) makes the point eloquently. The trinity of abstract figures, composed of gestural vessels rising monumentally, reminds us that in the Renaissance grace was indicative of consummate art -- a point made explicitly by Vasari. Clearly it is still possible to be graceful in modernity, with no sacrifice of strength, as Benglis' work shows. She also shows that feminism can be feminine without going soft. There is a gritty hardness and uprightness to *The Graces* -- a steadiness of purpose however precariously balanced their body parts. The goddesses can be toppled, but they will always rise again.



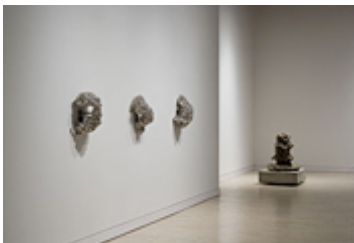
Installation view of Lynda Benglis' *Shape-Shifters* at Locks Gallery

Benglis' sculptures convey what the philosopher Max Scheler called "lived bodiliness," only the body that is lived is female. She reconstitutes female beauty in abstract terms without losing touch with the organic body. Her gestures can be understood to distill organic life into a visceral medium. This gives her sculptures their molten, painterly look, as though they were in perpetual metamorphic process, three-dimensional action paintings changing shape with protean dexterity. They seem fraught with anamorphic possibilities; they might turn into recognizable figures if one saw them from the right emotional perspective. This probably has something to do with the fact their chaos of gestures builds into a conspicuous pattern, as *Storm Pattern* (2003) makes clear. Benglis is romantically engaged with nature, but its structure is just as important to her as its energy; they are in effect inseparable. Do her works whimsically illustrate chaos theory -- convey the endlessly unfolding, repetitive structure implicit in chaos? The chaotic density of Benglis' gestures, indwelling as well as implicitly explosive, like flowing lava, makes the beauty of her sculptures all the more dramatic. It shows that genuine beauty -- often luminous, as the light that informs *The Graces* and the mercurial/silvery texture of other sculptures indicates -- is more than skin deep, however deeply it may inform the skin.



Installation view of Lynda Benglis' *Shape-Shifters* at Locks Gallery

Benglis' sculptures have an aura of purity, but they are also peculiarly entropic, as gestures invariably are. They dissipate and dissolve -- spend themselves, as Arnheim notes. He suggests that Abstract Expressionist gestures are the fragmentary residue of an explosion of the figure. Dispersive explosions, leaving heterogeneous gestures in their wake, and homogeneously ordered grids, are the opposite manifestations of the same entropy. The triumph of Chimes' and Benglis' art is that they transform destructive entropy into transcendent purity. They find creative "enlightenment" in death. Entropy and purity



Installation view of Lynda Benglis' *Shape-Shifters* at Locks Gallery



Installation view of Lynda Benglis'
Cloud Shadow III, II, and I (all 2007)



Lynda Benglis
King Pin III
2007
Locks Gallery



Lynda Benglis
Ghost Shadow I
2007
Locks Gallery

converge in wondrous beauty for Chimes and Benglis -- a troubling insight into the psychoaesthetic meaning of pure art. Both artists subversively expose the entropic underside of spiritual beauty, but they don't deprive us of an experience of it. On the contrary, they perversely enrich it. They show the perverseness that modernizes beauty -- the perverseness necessary to make it convincing in modernity.

To show that there is beauty in entropy is the dialectical ambition of modern art. Demonstrating the beauty of entropy may be the most dialectically creative of all creative acts, which would make modern art more authentic than traditional art. Modern art is about the creating of negative rather than positive beauty -- beauty pataphysically informed with death rather than beauty that removes its sting, indeed, seems to transcend it once and for all time: traditional religious eternal beauty. But modern art has come to seem more entropic -- a sum of destructions, to generalize Picasso's famous remark -- than beautiful. It seems more intent on subversion than celebration, on causing pain than conveying pleasure. Grotesquely distorting appearances is not exactly re-vitalizing them. Can the libidinous drivenness of Benglis' expressionism and the libidinous undertone of Chimes' work -- indicative of his Platonic love affair with Jarry -- be read as a defense against the death drive that underlies them? But I think they show that to be half in love with death, as Keats put it, is to find creative inspiration and pleasure in it -- the easefulness which Keats found in it, and with which he accepted its inevitability -- which is why Chimes and Benglis can be understood as paradoxical modernists. The modern world is more realistically entropic than ever, which is why the pataphysical beauty of their art is more necessary than ever.

Thomas Chimes, "The Iambic Paintings," Apr. 4-30, 2008, and Lynda Benglis, "Shape-Shifters," Mar. 7-Apr. 12, 2008, at Locks Gallery, 600 Washington Square South, Philadelphia, Pa. 19106

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Lynda Benglis
Storm Pattern
2003
Locks Gallery



Lynda Benglis
The Graces
2003-05
Locks Gallery