

Lynda Benglis –sensuality, sex toys and sea creatures in major retrospective

Hepworth Wakefield show ranges over long career of artist who's made use of materials from gold to foam

By Hannah Ellis-Petersen
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The artist's work Night Sherbert A from 1968, made in DayGlo pigment, phosphorescence and poured polyurethane foam.
Courtesy the artist and Cheim & Read, New York Photograph:
Courtesy the artist and Cheim & Read, New York



Standing in the Hepworth Gallery in Wakefield, next to her towering crystalline sculpture *The Graces*, artist Lynda Benglis offers some advice to those viewing her work.

“Think of crawfish, think of crawfish holes, think of water, think of swimming, think of diving, think of sea creatures and also think of rocks and caves,” she says. “Think of metal; metal that you find in the dirt when you’re a kid, think of metal undergoing changes. Think of tying your shoelaces, think of not knowing what to do sometime and just doing it.”

If that seems scattered and somewhat abstract, then it perhaps reflects the diverse nature of the work in a 50-year career that has moved from overtly sexual photography and sex toys cast in bronze, to clay ceramics created in New Mexico and vast sculptures clad in gold leaf.

At 73, Benglis is having her first major UK retrospective, showcasing work from different phases of her long career, including pieces inspired by her Greek heritage and her many years spent in New Mexico and Ahmedabad, India, where she still has a home and has worked for years with local craftspeople.



Other inspirations range from life on the bottom of the ocean (she was once a keen scuba diver) to the cloud formations in the sky.

The exhibition at the Hepworth begins with the pieces created in the late 1960s, when Benglis arrived in New York from rural Louisiana in her 20s – vast and bright oozing works on the gallery floor made from DayGlo pigment and poured polyurethane foam that were once dubbed “fallen paintings”. Her contemporaries included Andy Warhol, who once asked her to appear naked in one of his films, the minimalist artist Donald Judd and sculptor Eva Hesse.



Zanzidae Peacock Series, 1979 - a work by Lynda Benglis in wire mesh, enamel, glass and plastic. Courtesy the artist and Cheim & Read, New York Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Cheim & Read, New York

“I think I thrived in the New York scene,” Benglis says. “When I arrived pop art was peaking and pop art had a lot of irony and took on a kind of irony about the artists themselves, they were not shy ... they mocked the material which is art.

“So when I was in the art world, at a very young age, I saw that I didn’t want to think just one way. That I wanted to ask many questions within the context of the materials that I use, and I continue to do that.

“I definitely think I was reacting against the simplicity of where the rules were being taken. It felt like art was entirely out on a limb and that’s where I wanted to keep going, I wanted to keep climbing.”

Despite a long career, Benglis’s legacy as an artist is still dominated by an advert that featured in the November issue of Artforum magazine in 1974. In it, Benglis was photographed, naked and oiled, defiantly clutching a double-headed dildo at her crotch. The artist paid \$3,000 for the space after editors refused to give her the cover, and it proved so outrageous on publication that several editors resigned.

The original magazine features in the retrospective, alongside one of the five bronze dildos that Benglis cast following the outcry, in a piece titled Smile. While Benglis has been continually asked about the controversial piece for more than four decades, she is adamant she has no regrets.

“I can’t control what people want to hear but I can tell you any intelligent person can listen or look” she says. “And I can’t control what people think. It’s always an issue.”

For Benglis, her main concern remains sensuality in whatever material she uses, be it in the wire mesh and glitter sparkles of her knot sculptures, made in the early 70s, to the bronze and chrome used to mould her large pleated works of the 80s and 90s that also feature in the exhibition.

“Now I’m working with paper,” says Benglis of some of her most recent works, two of which are on display at the Hepworth retrospective. “They are like firecrackers, they are much lighter and for me they are skins. When I make them I am stretching a skin, a wet skin, and I stretch it just so far to have the imprint of the wire underneath. I feel that’s the body and I am putting on the flesh of the material.”

She adds: “It’s interesting to take material and be so sensually involved with it. That still excites me.”