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Art review: 'Lynda Benglis' at the Museum of Contemporary Art

By Christopher Knight
For The Los Angeles Times

Here's the first thing you need to know about Lynda Benglis, the sculptor whose traveling retrospective opened this week at the Museum of Contemporary Art: Born in muggy Lake Charles, La., in 1941, she moved across the state to New Orleans for art school at 19 and remained there for four years.

Here's the second thing you need to know: When she arrived in New York shortly after, in the mid-1960s, art's purity police were out in full force, busily patrolling what artists shouldn't do when making paintings and mustn't do when making sculptures.

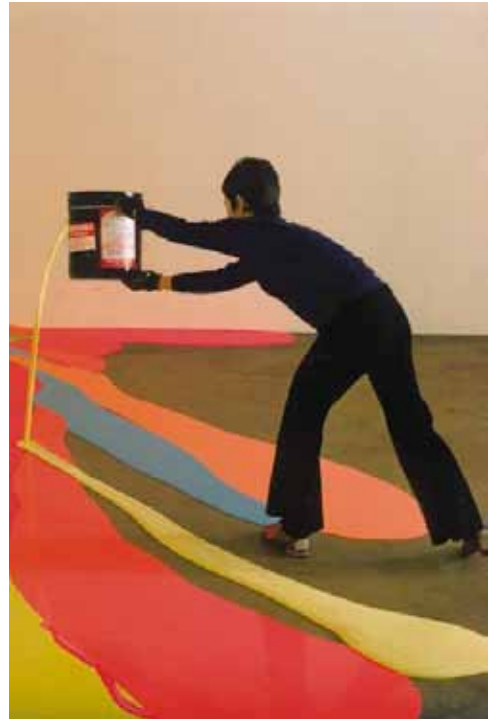
If you sense a collision coming, take a bow. Benglis, after surveying Manhattan's art landscape, did the only reasonable thing. In the face of its ponderous penitential virtue, she brought Mardi Gras to Soho.

The fiesta was undertaken neither lightly nor at random. Ambitious, she looked hard at the local art that had come before, from the 1940s to the early 1960s. Much of it was great; still, it's always helpful to know how we get to where we are.

She looked at Jackson Pollock's skeins of dripped paint and at Helen Frankenthaler's big puddles of stained color. Barnett Newman's zip-lines -- those ambiguous vertical bars of color dividing fields of painted light and darkness -- came under scrutiny. So did more recent work: Carl Andre's checkerboards of metal plates that turned the floor into an artistic pedestal for people, Donald Judd's orderly sculptural subdivisions of space and Richard Serra's molten lead splashed into studio corners -- all of them sculptures directly challenging the postwar primacy of painting.

There was more. What Benglis made in response to all this -- and in response to establishment claims about what an authentic painting or sculpture could be -- was a gushing, rushing carnival of flowing color, tumescent forms and melted candle wax. Her oozing works of art fused painting and sculpture into erotically charged couplings. In the process Benglis became the original "girl gone wild" -- but without a cheesy formula or some exploitative fellow calling the shots.

Her paintings lie flat on the floor. They languorously unfurl in curvilinear compositions made from



Fling, Dribble and Drip, Life magazine Feb. 27, 1970



poured rubber and polyurethane color, all without benefit of canvas, stretcher bars or frames. One is titled “Odalisque,” its sensuous roots in the harem laid bare. Others grow into deep, thick mounds of Technicolor cartoon colors or darkly scatological hues.

Perversely, her sculptures trip the light fantastic on surrounding walls, rather than the floor. Galvanic lava flows seem to gush from a hidden space within the architecture itself, cantilevered out into the room without touching the ground. Some are infused with phosphorescent pigment to glow under black light. Others are tangled knots of plaster-coated canvas rolls, their flying “limbs” as energetic as any Toulouse-Lautrec can-can dancer’s. Gilded or silvered fans of glittery pleated metal would do a burlesque performer proud -- or any New Orleans Mardi Gras krewe.

For her art, up was down and right was wrong and it all looked absolutely fabulous.

And so it does at MOCA, where 57 paintings-cum-sculptures, some Polaroid photographs, a few videos, a couple of magazine pieces and one drawing are on view. They span the last 40 years but emphasize her early breakthroughs.

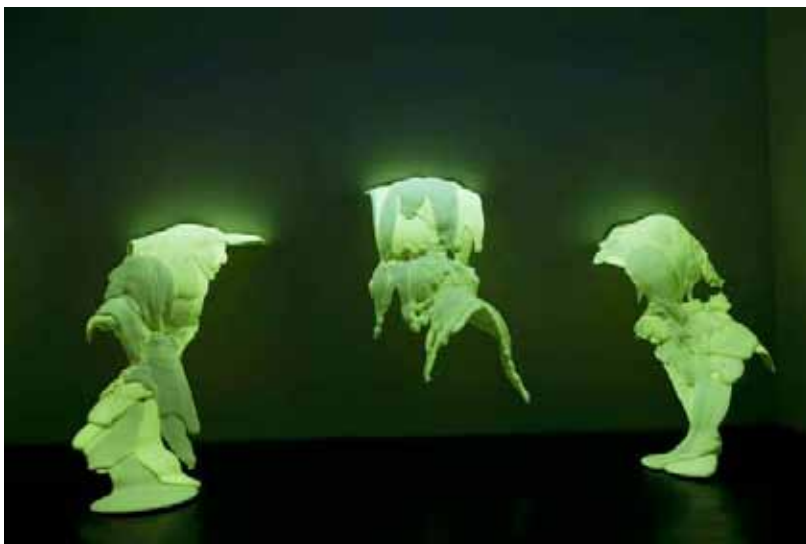
The show was organized by Dublin’s Irish Museum of Modern Art in 2009 -- her first retrospective abroad -- and has been traveling ever since in Europe and the United States.

MOCA was a late addition; the decision makes sense, though, given the artist’s two teaching stints at the California Institute of the Arts in the 1970s and her involvement with the influential feminist art program there.

For instance, Mike Kelley was a CalArts student during her second teaching gig, and the blobby mounds of indeterminate stuff in some of his late-1980s “garbage drawings” look almost like renderings of Benglis’ latex foam sculptures. MOCA also has six early Benglis sculptures (1968-1979) in its permanent collection, plus the show’s lone drawing.

The first room is almost a thumbnail sketch of her career. “The Graces,” a trio of translucent, cast-polyurethane monoliths that suggest frozen fountains, is a recent work. There’s also a late ‘60s, poured Day-Glo latex painting that spreads across the floor, rippling and buckling and looking like a toxic oil spill peeled off the Louisiana coast. A quartet of 1970s metallic-coated knots climbs across a long nearby wall.

Most arresting is “Wing” (1970). A swelling torrent of dull gray cast-aluminum cascades out from the wall, starting at a height of about 8 feet, before ending to hover in space at about mid-thigh. Oddly anthropomorphic -- think the lumbering Elephant Man, or perhaps a giant fossil dredged from the tar pits -- “Wing” is a poured painting that’s an oceanic aggressor claiming both wall- and floor-space in the room, albeit unlike anything produced by her celebrated predecessors in the New York School.



Phantom (detail), 1971, polyurethane foam with phosphorescent pigments



The lively show's weakest work is 1975's "Primary Structures (Paula's Props)," dedicated to art dealer Paula Cooper and named for the landmark 1966 museum exhibition that codified Minimalist sculpture. The visual essay lampoons masculine mythologies like the tree of knowledge and classical virtue, but it's at once too literal and too schematic.

The work makes fun of phallic art-traditions and religious prohibitions as old as Adam and Eve. A statue of Jesus, plus a group of plaster, lead and aluminum Corinthian columns (one snapped in two and pointedly hollow, another topped by a toy automobile) stand on a pool of sapphire velvet, all shaded by a real potted tree and another that is its artificial doppelganger.

Benglis' fluid and organic works have been aptly described as "sexuality abstracted" -- Post-Minimal provocations partly aimed at undermining Minimalism's rigid geometries. They luxuriously embody a far more effective critique than the dry "Primary Structures..."

So does a notorious, two-page 1974 spread the artist published in Artforum magazine, sporting a raunchy photograph of an oiled Benglis clad only in cat's-eye dark glasses and wielding a gigantic double-dildo between her legs. The picture scandalized not just the obvious purity police but also some on the magazine's staff (and elsewhere), who prided themselves on their supposed open-mindedness. More than one critic on the masthead quit.

Benglis had neatly scared the horses. That the photograph, discreetly on view in a display case, was published immediately before she made "Primary Structures (Paula's Props)" suggests that the explanatory sculpture was likely meant to articulate just how intransigent the status quo can be.

Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave., (213) 626-6222, through Oct. 10. Closed Tues. and Weds. www.moca.org



Wing, 1970, cast aluminum