

ARTNEWS

THE SHAPE-SHIFTER

How Lynda Benglis left the bayou and messed with with the establishment

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You notice her face first. This is odd, because she's nude, her body bronzed and oiled, with one wiry arm holding a large double-sided dildo between her legs. Her eyes aren't even in play; a pair of white sunglasses covers them. The focus is really on her face, framed by an androgynous hairstyle that could have been cut and pasted from the cover of David Bowie's *Aladdin Sane*. Her eyebrows are shaved. Her expression, to the extent that it's readable, rests somewhere between a smirk and a grimace.

Lynda Benglis was about to turn 33, and she wanted her nude self-portrait to run alongside a feature article about her by Robert Pincus-Witten in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*. John Coplans, *Artforum's* editor, wouldn't allow that, so her dealer at the time, Paula Cooper Gallery, took out an ad, which cost \$2,436. Benglis paid for it, which involved a certain amount of panic. In the middle of October, as the issue was getting ready to go to the printer, she reached out to Cooper, frantically trying to track down collectors with outstanding payments so she could put the money toward the ad. "Everyone seems out to get me," she wrote.

Benglis's ad might have been written off as a quirky footnote for an artist who would go on to become a pioneer of contemporary art in numerous guises, from video to sculpture to painting and beyond. The work, though, has experienced a second life as a poignant statement of dominance in an art world still mired in inequality between men and women. Two years ago, on the occasion of the ad's 40th anniversary, *New York* magazine asked female artists to weigh in on how it has aged. As Diana Al-Hadid, who was born some 40 years after Benglis, said: so much of the system is still "set up to prevent girls from being messy and spreading out." Despite its lasting interest to her disciples, Benglis herself is no longer interested in the work. "It's a tired subject," she told me, adding that maybe we should wait 50 years to bring it up again. But the ad, often looked at in isolation, was a turning point for Benglis, the culmination of her first ten years as an artist, laying the groundwork for all that was to come.

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Benglis's image didn't come out of nowhere. Over the previous two years, she had been raising the stakes of her public image in a series of escalating photos, presented in the usually banal form of announcement cards and ads for her exhibitions. In January 1973, for a show at the Clocktower in New York, she released a photo of herself as a child, wearing the national dress of Greece. The April 1974 issue of *Artforum* printed a photo of Benglis in aviator sunglasses and a blazer, her short hair slicked back, leaning against her silver Porsche, one hand resting proudly on the car, the other on her hip.

Benglis wasn't alone in this increasingly suggestive presentation of herself. The April 1974 *Artforum* also carried an ad for a show by the artist Robert Morris at the Castelli-Sonnabend Gallery in SoHo. Morris was a pioneer of Minimalist sculpture, as well as an influential writer. His 1966 essay, "Notes on Sculpture," published in two parts by *Artforum*, was a milestone in the history of Minimalism, guiding the critical discussion around the style for many years to come. But now here he was, in an advertisement for himself, shirtless, clenched-fisted, and greased-up, wearing a metal helmet, his wrists chained to a spiked collar.

Benglis met Morris at Hunter College, where both artists were teaching. They began collaborating on a series of video works, call-and-response collages between the two artists that functioned as an investigation of their very form. Video was still a new medium at the time. Their pictures in *Artforum* felt like subliminal dares, invitations to try to outdo one another.

"The installation I made for Castelli in 1974 was an eight-track sound work with no imagery," Morris told me in an e-mail about his ad, which had been printed as a poster before appearing in the pages of *Artforum*. "I decided to concentrate the image into the poster. One of the tracks was about war and destruction. I wanted to make an image of Mars, but failed and produced that of a biker."

Benglis's next announcement card, a photograph taken by Annie Leibowitz, shows the artist from behind, her pants around her ankles, looking over her shoulder. She'd soon follow this thread to its conclusion, going up to a sex shop on 42nd Street to purchase her phallic prop. She asked Morris to go with her, but he declined. One evening last December, I was sitting with Benglis in a café near her apartment in New York City. She wore sunglasses, despite the fact that it was dark out. I asked her if Morris's biker image had provoked her.



Lynda Benglis's Artforum advertisement for "Metallized Knots" at Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 1974.

"Let's just say he beat me to the punch, but he didn't win," Benglis said.

IN A LETTER TO PAULA COOPER FROM FEBRUARY 1974, BENGLIS described her work as "decadently excessive." This was in reference to her metal knot sculptures, twisted coils of steel highlighted by bright acrylic, but it's a reasonable description of her entire career. Benglis is one of contemporary art's great shape-shifters, and surely the only artist to be branded "Post-Minimalist" while also making prominent use of sparkles in her work. She'd quickly master materials, and then progress to something new—wax, latex, polyurethane, rubber, ceramic.



Most recently she's been making massive fountains out of bronze, some of which were on view at Storm King Art Center last year. She started working in the mid-'60s in a basement on the Lower East Side that she rented, along with an apartment upstairs, for \$75 a month. Lately, her works have been priced in the seven figures.



Lynda Benglis, *Pink Ladies*, 2014, at Storm King Art Center.

happen.” And yet she was always hard to classify. Her Artforum ad turned her overnight into a hero of second-wave feminism, but she didn't care for the movement—she thought it was “angry and full of hate.” Her work generally exists in an indefinable space between painting and sculpture. Looking back on it now, the decade between Benglis moving to New York City and releasing her ad clearly solidified her reputation as a great American artist. At the time, though, she was more like a cautiously revered outsider.

“I always thought you should just empower yourself with whatever you like, whatever means you have.”

BENGLIS WAS BORN IN LAKE CHARLES, LA, AND THERE ARE OCCASIONAL traces of a Louisiana accent in her voice. Her family was of Greek origin—Benglis would eventually inherit her grandmother's house in Kastelorizo, an island a few hundred miles southeast of Athens—and the Benglises got by through her father's business selling building materials. Her childhood, as she described it to me, was like something out of Mark Twain: “Lots of mud, lots of water. Living in a rice paddy. Living in a house on stilts about three feet above the land. Playing underneath buildings and houses. Putting bread on the end of strings and fishing. Going crabbing. Getting buckets full of blue crab. Eating a lot of raw oysters. Going in boats all over the gulf. We had houses on the gulf that would get blown away by hurricanes, so we'd put up another one. We'd change the whole landscape.”

She studied ceramics at Newcomb College in New Orleans. The city was about three hours away from Lake Charles by car but its metaphorical distance from the family home was greater. It was her first real exposure to other artists and, she said, “I knew that's what I wanted to do.”

Benglis was the Zelig of the late-'60s art scene in New York. She told Dan Flavin, who in his newer pieces had been attaching fluorescent lights to boxes, to ditch the boxes. To Robert Ryman, she said, “Why don't you just paint directly on the wall?” At one of her first shows, the performance artist Jack Smith—in attendance with a young actress named Jessica Lange—jumped on one of her foam sculptures, and broke it in half. Carl Andre was the first artist to visit her studio. Her early paintings, poured directly onto the floor, had her inheriting the mantle of Jackson Pollock. Her later sculptures, with their fascination with form, made her a spiritual counterpart to Donald Judd. She's been known to deliberately destroy her work if an audience isn't respectful of it.

She was and remains prolific, and a kind of creative anxiousness is the main thread running through her career. “I do my work,” she said to me.

“I don't think about what's going to

Before moving to New York City, Benglis taught third grade for a year in Jefferson Parish, outside of New Orleans, where some of her students “had parents who didn’t know how to read or write,” she said. She rode from New Orleans to New York in a Volkswagen full of—her word—“Yankees” who had traveled down south as part of a program promoting literacy in poor communities. She arrived in New York in 1964, in the middle of a “long, hot summer.”

Benglis always hated canvas (“Canvas had too much of a history,” she said), so after she moved into her first studio, she found new ways of applying material, experimenting first with wax and pigment on Masonite panels. At her friend Sol LeWitt’s studio, she was intrigued by a small latex sculpture, by the artist Eva Hesse, with a “pearlescent surface.” It was shaped like a muffin tin and sitting on LeWitt’s coffee table. Using the Yellow Pages, Benglis tracked down M.P. Medwick, the “Rubber King” of World War II-era manufacturing, and started playing around with latex herself. She worked a variety of day jobs to pay for production. She bought latex and Day-Glo pigment by the hundreds of pounds. Around this time, Benglis began thinking of the floor of her studio as her canvas and pouring her materials directly onto it, the pigment hardening as it flowed. “It allowed me to think that a painting could be continuous in matter and form,” Benglis said. “The paint was the subject.”

She was constantly running out of money and her modest professions weren’t helping: a bartending job she inherited from Brice Marden’s wife; working as an assistant to Klaus Kertess, a director at the Bykert Gallery who would give her aphoristic advice on artistic freedom like “it all comes out in the wash”; a gig as the secretary for Paula Cooper, who had never learned how to type.



Lynda Benglis, *Contraband*, 1969

“I accused her of being Byzantine,” Cooper told me, “but in a kind of delightful way. She was tricky, but it was always very interesting.” Cooper began showing Benglis in 1968. Their working relationship lasted for the next 25 years, but didn’t begin until Cooper agreed to meet with Benglis’s astrologist, the dealer said.

Benglis’s experimentations on the floor of her studio brought her fame before she turned 30. A photo of Benglis, wearing black bellbottoms and a blue turtleneck, pouring 40 gallons of bright latex pigment onto a gallery floor, ran in *Life* magazine in 1970. To me, she compared her work to the oil slicks on the bayou back home in Louisiana. *Life* compared her to Pollock. Because of the way her sculptures seemed to have their own production inscribed within them, the dried pigment telling the story of how and where it was poured, critics grouped Benglis in with so-called “process” artists like Richard Serra and Barry Le Va.

And so, in 1969, when Marcia Tucker at the Whitney Museum organized a show called “Anti-Illusion: Procedure/Materials” that included works by, among others, Andre, Hesse, Le Va, Ryman, Serra, and Joel Shapiro, she naturally included Benglis. Benglis considered all of these artists her peers, following a similar line of thought about material and process, but the piece she was working on in preparation for the exhibition lacked the austerity of their work. The unapologetically exuberant *Contraband* (1969), a river of primary colors that could pass for a lava flow, measures 33 feet in length. Benglis said Ryman and Serra didn’t want it anywhere near their work—it was too big, too colorful. Tucker herself had asked Benglis to do the show



based on a much smaller piece she had seen in Benglis's studio, according to Susan Richmond's book *Lynda Benglis: Beyond Process*. As a compromise, Tucker wanted to install *Contraband* near the entrance to the museum, but there wasn't enough room: the piece would have to be set half on a ramp and half off. Benglis pulled out of the show, but the catalogue had already been printed. Her paintings are described in it as, "poured onto the floor, with no boundaries..."

"Marcia, bless her soul, I think she was very conflicted in the situation," Benglis said. "She couldn't find a place." (That same year, Benglis did a different poured latex piece, called *Bounce*, in situ at the Bykert Gallery, where it was on view in front of the first Chuck Close piece ever shown publicly.) Ironically, the Whitney acquired *Contraband* in 2009.

"The pour pieces were already a challenge to the rigidity of Minimalism," Donna De Salvo, the Whitney's current deputy director and chief curator told me. *Contraband*, she said, "was a lightning rod. It still is."

BENGLIS'S LIFE MAGAZINE SPREAD GOT HER A JOB TEACHING AT THE University of Rochester, where the school's media department encouraged her early fascination with video. But she didn't last long there. Paul Brach, then the dean of the School of Arts at the California Institute for the Arts (CalArts), invited her out to Southern California to give a lecture in 1972. Benglis remembered Brach saying to her, "You're someone who's really doing something." "That always stuck with me," she said, "because it was as if all the other women weren't doing anything



Lynda Benglis photographed in her Baxter Street studio with *Night Sherbert* in 1969

and just complaining." This further surprised Benglis because Brach was married to the feminist painter Miriam Schapiro. "I was never really part of their gang," she said.

Los Angeles in the early '70s was, to the outside world at least, all cult killings, bad trips, and apocalyptic weather. It was as formative for Benglis's career as New York had been. She'd wanted to go there in order to better understand three things: Charles Manson, the San Fernando earthquake, and the feminist movement. "It had all snowballed," she said. "A horrible, hairy, awful, tangled mess." She considered New York and L.A. to be "like two medieval cities." "It was so different out there," she said. "There was fresh air. There were guys playing guys, and girls, you know, playing girls. Mocking whatever I decided to mock, it was easier to do there."

CalArts, founded in 1961 as an offshoot of the Chouinard Art Institute with a \$25 million donation from the estate of Walt Disney, was besieged with financial and administrative problems by the time Benglis arrived there. In 1969, construction had begun on a new campus in Valencia, but the project was plagued from the outset by labor disputes and other issues, among them the earthquake, which destroyed two hospitals, one dam, miles of freeway, and killed almost 60 people.

“We have had a few crises here,” Brach told Benglis in a letter written just before she was about to start a full-time teaching job at the school. She was supposed to replace the mostly abstract painter Allan Hacklin in the department of painting, but Brach was writing to inform her that she had been reassigned to advanced sculpture; Christopher Wilmarth, a Minimalist sculptor who claimed to have been inspired by Stéphane Mallarmé, “couldn’t make it.” “I hope that this doesn’t freak you,” Brach wrote. “I’m sure you will not mind.” By 1971, the new campus still unfinished, CalArts was being run out of a former Catholic girls’ school in Burbank.



Lynda Benglis, *For Carl Andre*, 1970

However provincial the school seemed in the early '70s, there was an energy in the air, and CalArts was a hotbed of radical politics, postmodern art, and critical theory as the school drifted further and further into more outré territory. Judy Chicago had brought her Feminist Art Program, which she had founded with Schapiro at Fresno State University in 1970, to the school. Robert Corrigan, CalArts’ first president, had laid the groundwork for an arts education that privileged ideas over technique, where student and teacher were thought of as peers. Corrigan resigned just before Benglis’s arrival and was replaced by the far more bureaucratic William Lund, who was married to Disney’s youngest daughter and eventually helped secure the school’s financial future, at the cost of some of its audacity. Still, CalArts hardly passed for a standard education at the time. Benglis taught a class with John

Baldessari that mostly involved taking students around to see the exotic sites of Los Angeles—Marilyn Monroe’s signature on the Walk of Fame, the Hollywood Wax Museum—and discussing them at length.

Baldessari described Benglis to me as an eager teacher —“What was great about her is that her face always lit up and she always seemed so excited; that was very contagious”—but in many ways she was still an outcast. Benglis may have been an odd fit in New York’s hypermasculine club of Minimalism, but that didn’t mean she would gel with the West Coast women’s movement.

Chicago had vaguely utopian goals for moving the Feminist Art Program to Southern California. “As macho and difficult as it was for women artists,” she told me, “there was a spirit of self-invention in Southern California that allowed me to think, for example, that I could create a new kind of art education, and a new kind of feminist art practice.”



An important part of Chicago's program was a project called Womanhouse, a subversion of the domestic space and the self-proclaimed first public exhibition of feminist art. Occupying a Hollywood mansion, Womanhouse provided studio space and a forum for women artists to work through "the daydreams women have as they wash, bake, cook, sew, clean, and iron their lives away," in the words of a historical overview of the show by Faith Wilding. Benglis should have fit in perfectly there, but the show was planned before her arrival in L.A., and she didn't even make it to the opening. She had to give a lecture at the school instead. There was only one woman in the audience at her talk, Benglis said, because all the others were at Womanhouse. The rest of the room was filled with men.

WHEN I BROACHED THE TOPIC OF THE ARTFORUM AD WITH BENGLIS, I had a sense that her eyes were rolling behind her sunglasses.

"I don't care about it anymore," she said. For decades now, Benglis has given lectures on her work using slides, but she removed the Artforum ad ten years ago. At a recent lecture in San Antonio, someone had slipped a picture of the ad into the presentation without telling her. "And I didn't ask that it be put there," she said. "I don't see any reason for it to be put there anymore. People ask me about it anyway. I don't resist the questions. But when people force me to look at it with my nose in it, they have their own perverse reasons for doing that."

She continued: "My mother had said to me, 'They'll never forget it.' I knew that, and I considered it a challenge." She paused before adding, "I consider everything I do a challenge."

Artforum was in its prime in an era when the art world was small enough for a magazine with a circulation of about 18,000 to believe it was at the forefront of the avantgarde. It was founded in San Francisco in 1962 and moved to New York in 1967, and for many years the publication really was the main venue for debate about what was or wasn't new in the art world. By 1974, however, Artforum had lost some of its steam as the result of editorial infighting about the magazine's direction.

On the eve of the November 1974 issue's release, Artforum's publisher, Charles Cowles, was conflicted. He didn't want his mother to see the ad, but he didn't want the art world to accuse him of censorship. The printer, a "retired brigadier general," as Coplans told Amy Newman in her book *Challenging Art*, an oral history of Artforum, had initially refused to print the ad. Coplans appealed to him by saying "it's a

fundamental American issue of the way democracy is run in this country." The ad was published and the response was immediate. Five Artforum editors—Lawrence Alloway, Max Kozloff, Rosalind Krauss, Joseph Masheck, and Annette Michelson—announced their resignation in an open letter printed in the December issue, citing the ad's "extreme vulgarity" and calling it a "shabby mockery of the aims of...women's liberation."



Lynda Benglis, *Vested Spirit*, 2015.



“I felt that publishing that ad was tantamount to saying that we were all hookers together, the writers, as well as the artists,” Krauss told Newman. “That we were all for sale.”

All of this was further complicated by the fact that Krauss was in a relationship with Morris, and, as she admitted to Newman, had taken Morris’s biker photo herself. (Morris wouldn’t comment on this. The photographer wanted to remain anonymous, he wrote to me, “and I see no reason at this late date to violate that desire.”)

Meanwhile, the establishment provided breathless coverage. John Corry, a New York Times reporter, called the ad “a dirty picture,” and quoted “a man from the Museum of Modern Art,” who refused to be identified, saying, “You can understand—a museum shouldn’t make a comment on something like this.”

Penthouse also responded. The magazine asked Benglis to do a spread alongside the artist Hannah Wilke. (Benglis declined because Penthouse wouldn’t give her full rights to the image.) By February 1975, Benglis was on the cover of New York magazine alongside Erica Jong and Joni Mitchell, being championed as one of the central figures in a movement the publication had dubbed the New Sexual Frankness. The ad brought her fame with a wider public outside of the art world, but she was a wary figurehead for sexual liberation, and she didn’t coast on the attention the image afforded her. For a time, she hung the dildo over the shower in her loft, like a trophy, Paula Cooper recalled. (“There was nowhere else” to put it, Benglis said.) For the most part, though, she simply moved on.

“I always thought you should just empower yourself with whatever you would like, whatever means you have,” she told me, as if with a shrug.