

Lynda Benglis: In the Realm of the Senses

By Daniel Pateman
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“No man ever steps in the same river twice,” the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus once stated. The Museum of Cycladic Art’s latest exhibition—a survey of Lynda Benglis’s provocative sculptural work—engages with this sagacious comment in various ways. Facilitated by non-profit organization NEON and curated by art historian David Anfam, the show unites 36 of the artist’s singular creations, beguiling and bewitching with their evocation of fluid transformation. Carefully chosen, the works celebrate the sensual materiality characteristic of Benglis’s oeuvre, while also highlighting the influence of both modern and ancient Greece on her artistic practice.



Installation view: Lynda Benglis: In the Realm of the Senses, Museum of Cycladic Art, Athens, 2019-20. © Panos Kokkinias, Courtesy NEON.

A selection of Benglis’s “fallen paintings,” created by tipping latex or polyurethane over the floor or an armature, are located downstairs, as are various encaustic works made using heated beeswax. These pieces illustrate her engagement with the dialectics of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, which she subsequently steered in a dreamily tactile, Post-Minimalist direction. *Baby Contraband’s* (1969) horizontal convergence of spontaneously poured, neon-colored latex acknowledges Jackson Pollock and other gestural painters of his generation. But, where Pollock’s paint-lashed canvases were created on the ground and subsequently hung on supposedly neutral



Installation view: Lynda Benglis: *In the Realm of the Senses*, Museum of Cycladic Art, Athens, 2019–20. © Panos Kokkinias, Courtesy NEON.

gallery walls, Benglis's latex pourings remain on the floor, materially imposing themselves on the viewer's sense of space. And where the waxy quadripartite display of *Untitled* (2009), for example, invokes the output of Color Field painters like Mark Rothko, the artist's fields of intersecting color evolve into organically tactile pieces. *Fat Green's* (1993) verdigris and mint shades of beeswax stand out from its Masonite base in bulbous, erratic formations, while *Untitled's* liqueous bleeding of red, yellow, and purple resembles a gangrenous wound.

Anfam terms the "puritanical austerity" of Minimalism in the 1960s, this aluminum cast rejects that movement's fascination with neutral surfaces, plain geometric forms, and somber intellectualism. Its mercurial mass is imbued with sensuality and motion, and its thick overlapping layers suggest an erotic celebration of skin. Non-representational but provoking the imagination, it was these "fallen paintings" that garnered Benglis her early reputation as an iconoclastic figure of Post-Minimalism.

Especially impressive is the ambiguous heft of *Wing* (1970–1975), which slopes away from the wall to ooze in mid-air. Reacting to what

Benglis clearly shares Heraclitus's understanding of life as continual flux, an idea expressed in the Greek phrase "panta rhei." Accordingly, evocations of fluidity and flow predominate on the exhibition's ground floor. Three squat fountains, bronze totems of organic matter, lead from the building's polyphon to the atrium, quietly dribbling water, while, in an adjacent room, a trio of polyurethane sculptures (*The Graces*, 2003) resemble bubbling towers of liquid, suspended displays of translucent majesty. It's tempting to conflate such flux with female biological experience. As Benglis herself commented when discussing "fallen paintings" like *Baby Contraband*, the ebb and flow of life is a reality that women are particularly intimate with.

Although Benglis's forms conflate myriad cultural referents, including those of India, Louisiana, and New Mexico, it's the pervasive influence of ancient Greece that's foregrounded here. Across the first floor Anfam has juxtaposed three of the museum's Cycladic-era artefacts with the artist's metal, paper, and wire-mesh forms. One such combination is a fragment from a marble *Hekataion* placed alongside gold-leaf and copper "pleats." *Charro and San Marcos* (1995) gracefully imitate its sublimely rendered creases and drooping folds, the undulating curves of their burnished metal carapaces rendering the breezy rippling of fabric. In fact, Benglis's masterful evocation of weightlessness as demonstrated here is the focus of Thomas Dane Gallery's *Spettri*, a concurrent Naples exhibition of the artist's enigmatic work.

In the same room, *Come* (1969–74) provides a vivid contrast with the geometries of these "pleats."



From under a landslide of goeey bronze matter one discerns a more sinewy agglomeration, barely differentiated from the whole. It gives the impression of simultaneously rising and sinking, recalling the inverted, frozen cascades of *The Graces*, while the golden hue of the bodily substance the title alludes to implies something both base and precious. *Lagniappe II* (1979) strikes a similar note. Its name means “something extra” in Creole, and recalls the cotton and paper presents thrown to the crowd during Mardi Gras, an offering Benglis describes as “a bow, a gift of no value, a gesture, an object.” This notion of superfluity is articulated by *Lagniappe II*, whose gaudy presentation—



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iridescent polystyrene topping and rainbow-colored decoration—gleefully presents the body as a husk, a frivolous and temporary wrapper. It’s a wonderful gift, Benglis’s work suggests, but inescapably transient.

In the Realm of the Senses effortlessly updates the ancient adage I began with, attesting that no woman steps in the same river twice—especially not Lynda Benglis. Endlessly inspired by nature and her environment, since the 1960s her work has engaged a wide variety of influences and made use of a plethora of materials, with beeswax, latex, clay, glass, bronze, and polyurethane being melted, twisted, knotted, pleated, or poured into emblems of transformation. Proving remarkably constant, however, is the sensuality and intoxicating physicality of the artist’s creations: each one overflowing with an uncanny life that dares us to reach out and touch.