

Lynda Benglis Shape-Shifters

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Essay by Brenda Richardson

Lynda Benglis: Shape-Shifters

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Lynda Benglis launched her college career in 1959 as a philosophy major and gravitated to the field of logic (“the study of the principles of reasoning”) as her primary interest. Today Benglis says that had she not diverged serendipitously to become an artist, she almost certainly would have been a logician by profession. On such a seeming biographical footnote pivots a life’s work! Having learned, she explains, that “a philosopher may reason anything in making an argument, I thought a more pure way to reach ideas was through the making of art.”¹

Benglis’s work, more often than not, has been categorized with that of other “process” artists, a circumscription that may fail to credit the dominance of the reasoning mind at work. There is no question that the act of making is essential to Benglis; she sometimes uses her body with startling physical force as she engages directly with the materials of her art. It is apt that her work has been described as “frozen gesture” or that it is aligned with bodies of art identified as “displayed act.”² At the same time, the act of making should never be confused with the artwork as an object of communication. It is the viewer, knowing little or nothing of the making, who endows the object with its numinous content, however subjective those intuitions may be. Benglis knows this; after all, “gestalt” is her favorite word in relation to the

interpretation of art. Her *body at work*, most especially the way she uses her arms and hands, performs in concert with her *mind at work*. Benglis’s sculpture speaks to four decades of experience and intellectual deliberation, that is, trial and error, accepting, discarding, modifying, learning, and advancing. Her eagerness to experiment with new materials and unfamiliar techniques has been facilitated through her collaboration with foundry workers around the world. In recent years she has made sculpture in cast metals (bronze, silver, nickel, chromium, stainless steel, lead, aluminum) as well as glass, creating artworks at foundries in Walla Walla (WA), Santa Fe and neighboring Tesuque (NM), Ahmedabad (India), and Auckland (New Zealand). She also continues to make paintings in wax as a primary medium, that is, not as a casting substrate.

Benglis is worldly in every sense of the word. She has been making art since 1960, working within a language of maverick forms that she invented early on. Her most recent sculptures emerged over several years of sustained testing of the boundaries she set for herself in those early idiosyncratic forms. In the past year (2007) Benglis conceived sculptures mostly in triadic groupings. The present exhibition features three *Cloud Shadows*, three *Ghost Shadows*, and three *King Pins* as well as the

three-part sculpture, *The Graces*. In their Locks Gallery premiere, each threesome will be presented in artist-sequenced orientation. (Benglis would love to see these coherent three-unit groupings maintained as an integral work but she recognizes that may be unrealistic.)

CLOUD SHADOWS (I, II, III)

cloud: **1.a.** A visible body of very fine water droplets or ice particles suspended in the atmosphere at altitudes ranging up to several miles above sea level. **b.** A mass, as of dust, smoke, or steam, suspended in the atmosphere or in outer space. **2.** A large moving body of things in the air or on the ground; a swarm: *a cloud of locusts*. **3.** Something that darkens or fills with gloom. **4.** A dark region or blemish, as on a polished stone. **5.** Something that obscures. **6.** Suspicion or a charge affecting a reputation. **7.** A collection of charged particles: *an electron cloud*.

shadows: **1.** The darkness following sunset. **2.a.** A feeling of gloom or unhappiness. **b.** A cause of gloom or unhappiness. **3.** A shaded area in a picture or photograph. **4.** A mirrored image or reflection. **5.** A phantom; a ghost. **6.a.** One, such as a detective or spy, that follows or trails another. **b.** A constant companion. **7.** A faint indication; a premonition. **8.** A vestige or remnant. **9.** An insignificant portion or amount; a trace; *beyond a shadow of a doubt*. **10.** Shelter; protection.

Benglis sees the evolution of her work as having a significant and necessary relationship to the unique characteristics of the varied landscapes in which she spends most of her time. When she first visited the southwest, she says, she was struck by the rocks. (There's nothing like the rock formations of the southwest, of course. But, also, she points out, there were no rocks where she came from in Louisiana.) Another natural feature presents itself with marked drama in the vast open spaces of the southwest: clouds cast shadows. A shading creeps over miles of distinct landscape (foothills, forested mountains, expansive grasslands). Taken by surprise, you think it's an overcast sky signaling rain or an unaccountable alteration in the colors of the land or foliage. But then, no, you realize what you see are cloud shadows making their leisurely way to the horizon.

Benglis's *Cloud Shadows* unexpectedly look a bit like small white clouds. Composed of cast polyurethane, the chubby torso-shaped sculptures feature a cloud's indefinable shape-shifting perimeter. Up close, the icy clusters resemble rock candy's aggregation of large sugar crystals. The artist's calculated application of urethane, built up stroke by stroke, is as close to drawing as it is to sculpting. In the end, the *Cloud Shadows* come to seem pummeled and yet ethereal; they somehow share the skin of meteorites and the body of quartz. Unlike shadows, but much like clouds, they glow in the light and drink up any color reflected from their surround. At certain angles they can appear as if shaded in a fog-colored gray; at others, they look clear as crystal. In their stillness, the *Cloud Shadows* are strikingly soulful works, even as their markedly sensuous surfaces beg to be touched.

GHOST SHADOWS (I, II, III)

Ghost: 1. The spirit of a dead person, especially one believed to appear in bodily likeness to living persons or to haunt former habitats. **2.** The center of spiritual life; the soul. **3.** A demon or spirit. **4.** A returning or haunting memory or image. **5.a.** A slight or faint trace. . . .

The *Ghost Shadows* also take their name from the landscape of the southwest. Benglis was in Santa Fe at one of the relatively infrequent times when there was snow on the ground. In that environment, open to the high light of the desert, there was an odd translucence to the shadows cast on snow. Their edges were undefined, their silhouettes more gray than black, their identity diffused in the granular white snow. They seemed to her to be more ghosts than shadows, more felt than seen. In that context, Benglis at one time thought of naming this group after the phantasmal Sasquatch, a name she loves for its Halkomelem linguistic roots.

Pondering ghosts and their amor- phously figural shapes, Benglis initially called this group the “Grey Torsos.” The torso configuration has been a Benglis constant since at least 1974, when she began the elegant *Caryatid* series of mermaid-like forms. And even now she is at work on a new series called “Torso Waves.” (The dimensions of some of her sculptures initially evolved as schematics of her own torso or forearm.) But “Grey Torso” was never quite right as a name, the artist reports. For one thing, she knew they were not purely “gray.” Even as they are a deep elephant gray in color, the rubberized paint she uses to coat the urethane is actually a discrete mixture of black and

white particulate. In fact, when Benglis speaks casually about these sculptures, she tends to call them “the black ones.” Accordingly, “grey torsos” was jettisoned, first in favor of “Snow Shadows” and ultimately *Ghost Shadows*.

Benglis physically “paints” these sculptures by, essentially, “drawing” with a spray-nozzle can of compressed urethane. Interlacing tubular strands of cream-colored medium, she delineates controlled meanders over the chicken-wire armatures she has cut and shaped as sculptural support. A certain cognitive dissonance sets in when viewing the *Ghost Shadows*. On the one hand, they are sculptures of pronounced abstraction. But the *Ghost Shadows* are also apparitional, nearly animate in feeling (most especially when seen in spirited interaction as a trio). In shape, they are slender, attenuated, somewhat irregular rectangles. Their surfaces are seductive and complex, an aggregation of countless tiny mounds. From a distance the sculptures appear to be soft, even velvety, in texture (an effect of the rubberized paint); up close it becomes evident that their surfaces are crusty and delicately furrowed. Skeletal segments of the sculptures’ shapely wire armatures are exposed to view. In material form, the *Ghost Shadows* look remarkably like fragments of reef coral. (Benglis is a seasoned scuba diver, a veteran of two dives at the Great Barrier Reef alone. Her deep sea experiences have profoundly affected her, both spiritually and artistically.) *Ghost Shadow III* strikes a pose of classical contrapposto, with a sensual twist at the waist. Attenuated and sinous, these deeply affecting Benglis sculptures are as evocatively figural as they are abstract. Like ghosts, like shadows, they elude definition but unleash fantasy.

KING PIN (I, II, III)

kingpin: **1.** *Sports.* The foremost or central pin in an arrangement of bowling pins. Also called *head pin*. **2.** The most important person or element in an enterprise or a system.

As if defying the material preciousness of their medium, the *King Pin* sculptures are an especially playful lot! Cast in silver, they slyly hearken back to the many silver-color knots and bows and fans of Benglis's sculpture in earlier years (all of which took their silvery finish from sprayed-on liquid metal rather than from silver ore). Like their alter ego *Cloud Shadows*, whose shapes they mimic, no *King Pin* has a dimension greater than nineteen inches. Each is composed of a tangled web of coils and ringlets, fused in intimate contact by the slight melt of casting. The title *King Pin* comes from the large "pin" (actually a steel rod) on which the sculptures are mounted. The rod keeps the sculptures spaced slightly out from the wall surface so that they appear to levitate. The "kingpin" allows the piece to be rotated on its axis, subtly redefining the sculpture's form. Benglis says that she sees each *King Pin* as "having a definite up and down" even as the angle of the piece can be played with—thus altering its outline (and, not incidentally, the shape of the shadow it casts on the wall). The shape-shifting trickster is a familiar figure in Native American culture, and shape-shifting is a motif in both Hindu and Buddhist teachings as well.

The King Pins specifically allow for variant orientations. They are not designed to be spun or swiveled on their pins as a game, that is, they are not meant to be kinetic sculp-

ture. But the *King Pins* do invite their owners to experiment with alternate configurations, to rethink the sculpture's body language from time to time. But, *King Pin* declares, there are limits! It may be a shape-shifter but the bolts of its pin are there to be tightened in order to fix in place a given configuration.

STAINLESS WAX

stainless adj.: **1.** Without stain or blemish. **2.** Resistant to stain or corrosion.

wax n.: **1.a.** Any of various natural, oily or greasy heat-sensitive substances. . . .

4. A phonograph record. **5.** Something suggestive of wax in being impressionable or readily molded. . . . **wax intr.v.:**

1. To increase gradually in size, number, strength, or intensity. . . .

The perversely titled *Stainless Wax* is an installation piece composed of an artist-specified display table and fifteen discrete sculpture units. (Fifteen, fittingly, is a multiple of three and thus *Stainless Wax* joins the other triads in this exhibition.) Since Benglis has for decades created wax paintings "stained" with color (fig. 1), her choice of *Stainless Wax* as a title for these quirky forms in cast stainless steel is notably puckish! The fossil-like forms hint at ossified skin and bones. Indeed, it is the transformation from "soft pulled translucent wax" to "cold hard stainless metal," the artist says, that she finds beguiling.

Inspiration for the sculpture units, cast in Ahmedabad, came from the cactus "fencing" used by householders in some parts of India. For a time, the artist actually cast the spikey

cacti called “thor,” just as she once cast from the rounded roots of the Indian turmeric plant. Those whimsical cast aluminum fragments were created for the 1997 “scatter” piece, *Jacks #2*, a floor sculpture composed of thirty-one of the small elements and a significant forebear of *Stainless Wax*.

Benglis conceived the *Stainless Wax* sculptures in order to explore the direct relationship between hand and form. She wanted to generate intimately scaled sculptures that would retain specific imprints peculiar to her own hands. (In this, *Stainless Wax* is close kin to the artist’s *Pedmarks* group of 1998.) The pieces are meant to be arrayed on the table for others to play with; the units have no fixed arrangement and may be realigned at random. It’s a heretical way to think about sculpture. Benglis turns on its head the convention of precious “don’t-touch” fine art; *Stainless Wax* is purposefully conceived to be democratic. This is an artwork that can be “sculpted” by anyone, and then resculpted by someone else. Those who opt to play may be surprised, however. The sculptures are surprisingly heavy! After a few lifts, they begin to feel more like gym weights than game pieces.

These unmistakably bone-like fragments scattered across a surface are dazzling in the beauty of their dark silver shine and sumptuous nuance. But they’re also somber, somehow, even grave, as if they came from an archaeological dig or an elephant graveyard. They could even be relics from the killing fields.

Benglis has also contemplated alternative presentations for the *Stainless Wax* elements. She has already experimented with the sculptures mounted vertically (eerily echoing



Fig. 1. *Bundi*, 1971. Pigmented beeswax and damar resin on masonite, 36 x 5 x 3 inches.

Giacometti figures). And she has pondered, as well, the prospects of a more elevated orientation that might dramatize the light and weight at the heart of these sculptures.



Fig. 2. *The Wave*, 1983-84. Bronze fountain, 108 x 108 x 204 inches.



Fig. 3. *Chimera*, 1988. Bronze fountain, 54 x 192 x 42 inches.

THE GRACES

grace: **1.** Seemingly effortless beauty or charm of movement, form, or proportion. . . . **4.a.** A disposition to be generous or helpful; good will. **b.** Mercy, clemency. . . . **6.** A temporary immunity or exemption; a reprieve. . . . **9.** A short prayer of blessing or thanksgiving said before or after a meal. . . . **11.** *Music.* An embellishment such as an appoggiatura or a trill. . . . **graces tr.v.:** **1.** To honor or favor. **2.** To give a beauty, elegance, or charm to. **3.** *Music.* To embellish with grace notes. **grace cup:** **1.** A cup used at the end of a meal, usually after grace, for the final toast. . . .

The title of *The Graces* is pointedly not “The Three Graces.” Benglis assigns lovingly deliberated titles to her works. She delights in language and the subtle shadings of words; she often uses titles to introduce complexities of interpretation (notably including sociopolitical connotations). Though *The Graces* does not even hint at the figural in form, its triadic composition nonetheless evokes the ghosts of Aglaia (Splendor), Euphrosyne (Festivity), and Thalia (Rejoicing)—the lovely daughters of Zeus, the three charities of mythology—at play. (It’s a given, of course, that any modern artist’s graces are sweetly haunted by Botticelli’s luminous three graces in *Primavera* and by the iconic *Three Graces of Canova*.) Still, there are other, less mythological forms of grace that imbue the Benglis work with its compelling presence.

The Graces is a dance of light. The sculpture evolved from Benglis’s work with fountain designs. Benglis won the fountain com-

petition for the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans. *The Wave* (1983-1984) (fig. 2), in cast bronze, was the first of some half dozen fountains the artist created in the ensuing decades (fig. 3). *The Graces* culminates the artist's fountain work in a sculpture of surpassing beauty. Not a fountain, perhaps, but its three towering columns would seem to be made of ice! Each sparkling column rises gracefully from a bowl-shaped base in a tier of four delicately nested basket-like forms, some tipped jauntily. The sculpture masquerades as an elaborate ice sculpture, intricately detailed and awesomely balanced. Monumental in scale, *The Graces* is distinctly architectural in feeling. It could be a fairy tale castle in ruins, or a vision in a dream. Ornate, glamorous, commanding, and magical, *The Graces* takes root in one's imagination and doesn't let go.

These new Benglis sculptures shrug off constrictive identities. They decline to be straightforwardly this or that. At one moment they claim the realm of art, the next nature. They may first recall the shelter of architecture, and an instant later, the abandon of landscape. In one way or another, they all contradict their material weight and substance in feats of daring levitation. These are forms that shift and shimmer in light and space, very much like the ghosts, shadows, clouds, and other shape-shifters their titles evoke.

NOTES

1. Lynda Benglis, to the author, in e-mail communication from India, January 21, 2008. I want to take this opportunity to thank Benglis for her generous cooperation in responding to my many queries, both in extended telephone interviews, December 22-23, 2007 (as she prepared to leave for India), and then in regular e-mail exchanges in January as she worked in Ahmedabad. I am also grateful to Christy Speakman, Benglis's New York studio assistant, who responded promptly to my many requests for information and images, and who extended warm support throughout these weeks.
2. See Robert Pincus-Witten, "Lynda Benglis: The Frozen Gesture," *ArtForum*, November 1974, pp. 54-59; and Susan Krane, *Lynda Benglis: Dual Natures* (High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia, 1991), p. 13. It was Benglis herself who coined the evocative description "frozen gesture" and suggested it to Pincus-Witten. As for "displayed act," in writing about Benglis, Krane is referencing a description by James Monte in his Whitney "Anti-Illusion" text, where he used the term specifically in relation to Richard Serra's splashed-lead sculpture. Krane argues in her catalogue texts for addressing Benglis's work as "object" rather than as "displayed act." Krane's 1991 catalogue remains, to date, the only substantive publication on Benglis's work and, as such, is an invaluable resource.

Brenda Richardson, curator at The Baltimore Museum of Art 1975-1998, now writes independently on art and artists. In recent years she has published on the work of Jennifer Bartlett, James Lee Byars, Robert Gober, Brice Marden, Andy Warhol, and John Waters, among others.