

# Stacked, Forced, Pinched:

## LYNDA BENGLIS AT WORK

By Michael Klein

For the past thirty years, since the early days of what once was Soho, Lynda Benglis has sustained a reputation for sassiness and invention in her art. More than many other artists of her generation, she endeavors to expand on the definition and course of contemporary sculpture and ideas. Her earliest exploits began in the late Sixties with polyurethane sculptures and wax paintings that exemplified an artistic vision seeking to take command of her materials. In this way, she could manifest the most physical, exotic and fertile of forms. She invented a special hybrid of art for herself, making paintings for the floor and sculptures for the wall. For Benglis, process was the way through which to understand the properties of the world and in turn demonstrate those properties and their metaphoric values for herself and to the viewer.

At the start of the 70's, Benglis was one of a number of artists such as Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra and Richard Tuttle, who had turned their experimentations into what became a critical direction called Post-Minimalism. Akin to the post war sculpture of Lucio Fontana and his remarkable experiments with clay and cast metal to the more contemporary examples set by the artists around the Arte Povera movement in Italy and the perplexing installations of Joseph Beuys in Germany, the emphasis on all this work lay within the abstract nature of their respective creations, always underscored by the individual sense and personal associations with the medium in which they chose to work. Art making

was no longer going to be limited to the easel or the foundry and artists had rejected the routes of Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Minimalism. Through process that exemplifies the artist's attitude, came the discovery, disclosure and understanding of the emotional and/or psychological undercurrents in the work. (It would be this same search for content that would open the door some two decades later to the exploration of race, gender and identity among contemporary artists).

Whether through individual works or room-sized installations, process pieces were staged through the use of non-traditional art materials, materials more likely to be found on the shelf of a hardware store than an art supply shop. Benglis used her energies inventing strategies in which she could pour or layer objects into existence. Pools of colored latex rubber covered the floor and spilled out in a manner not unlike Jackson Pollock's method of tossing and pouring enamel paint onto his mural-size canvases. Like Pollock, Benglis utilized gravity to guide the course of her ideas; her finished works, however, stayed grounded. Pollock would, of course, tack his canvases to the wall. Along those same lines, Benglis developed another process now using the pour technique to create layers of pigmented polyurethane that stacked like laundry piles on the floor or against the wall. Her actions continued as pours and became larger, eventually taking shape on the wall as grand, wave-like reliefs.



actions of the human body in the voluptuous and luxurious materials

of her modeled works.

*Materials Girl, Lynda Benglis*

Finally, Benglis moved onto cloth. The "knots" became characteristic of Benglis' style and also a symbol of the movement itself. Using cotton bunting, Benglis monumentalized her actions—her process—by covering them with a metal skin. The once soft pliable folds of the natural fiber of the bunting have been radically transformed into heroic structure, a silver or copper colored icon.

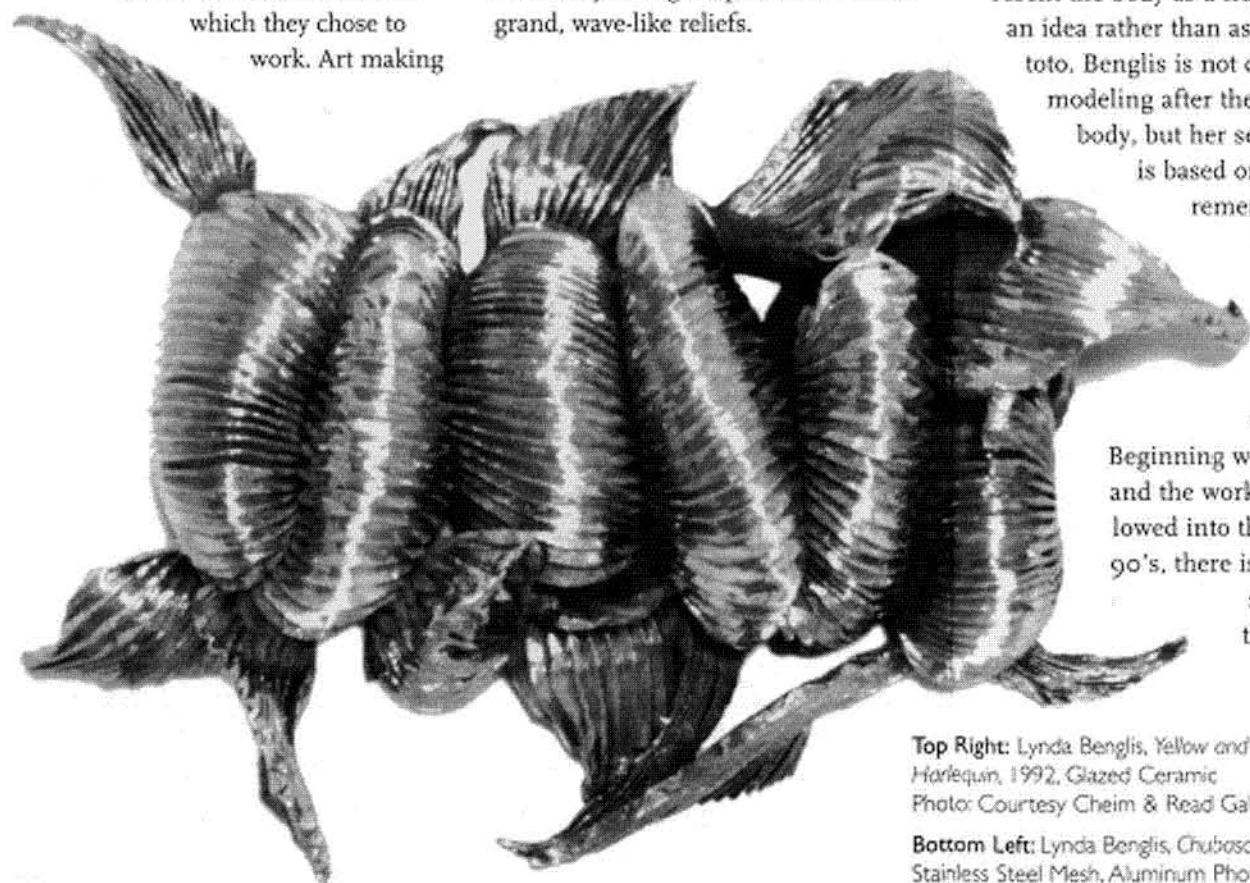
With her knowledge, Benglis set the paradigm for her future work. Her sculpture was the result of a reframing of the idea of movement and balance, classical concerns, but exercised by means of new, different materials. Behind this sense of new sculptural forms was always the suggestion of the fragmented body, what art historian Linda Nochlin referred to in a 1994 essay as the "Body in Pieces." Nochlin discusses a variety of late 19th and 20th century artists whose oeuvre exemplify the idea that to be considered modern or Post Modern, an artist must represent the body as a fragment or as an idea rather than as an entity in toto. Benglis is not carving or modeling after the human body, but her sense of form is based on seeing and remembering the body, or parts of the body, sensuously draped or undraped.

Beginning with her knots and the works that followed into the 80's and 90's, there is often a suggestion of the poses and

on view at the Meadows Museum of Art includes a small sampling of work of the last decade in various mediums. Through the years, Benglis has sought varied solutions and worked in different parts of the world to achieve her personal, radical vision. She has worked with metallic sprays in Los Angeles and molded glass in New Zealand; in Santa Fe she has modeled clay and cast bronzes such as *Double Trouble* on view at the Meadows Museum of Art. The most recent examples on view are two works, one in bronze the other in wax, from a series entitled *Hot Spots*. These were first shown in New York in the fall of 1999.

It should come as no surprise that Lynda Benglis comes from the same region as the infamous George E. Ohr, the mad potter of Biloxi. These artists share Louisiana roots and persuasions, as well as other Southern associations; they also share an uncanny kinship in the exploitation of their materials with which each creates stunning and uncanny results. But Benglis has the advantage over Ohr; life in the late 20th century has put her in contact with many more materials in more places and with different kinds of artists and crafts people. Ohr's infinitely varying and masterful craftsmanship over clay is akin to the various and formidable innovations of Benglis' art. Try to imagine what Ohr's work would look like if he had been born in the 20th century and not died in 1918.

The master potter Ohr once said, "this pot is here and I am the potter who was." Similar is Benglis' statement in a 1978 museum catalogue, "...all my work has to do with the search for the inner most feelings, the truth of what I am." Both Ohr and Benglis, adventurous and inventive, restless and energetic souls who seek something more within the tradition of the schools and the times in which they live.



Top Right: Lynda Benglis, *Yellow and Black Harlequin*, 1992, Glazed Ceramic  
Photo: Courtesy Cheim & Read Gallery, New York

Bottom Left: Lynda Benglis, *Chubasco*, 1991, Stainless Steel Mesh, Aluminum  
Photo: Courtesy Cheim & Read Gallery, New York