

# CHEIM & READ

## FINANCIAL TIMES

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FINANCIAL TIMES FEBRUARY 4/FEBRUARY 5 2012

Arts

### 'I keep arriving'

The American sculptor Lynda Benglis is rediscovered, yet again. Julie L Belcove talks to her in New York

It's a wet, wintry day in New York and Lynda Benglis has taken a taxi "across the river", as she says, meaning she's ventured out of Manhattan into Brooklyn. The Bedi-Makky Art Foundry, in the Greenpoint section, has made a sand casting of "Eat Meat", a sculpture Benglis created nearly 40 years ago and cast in bronze and aluminium versions, which she showed side by side at the Paula Cooper Gallery.

"I never could afford to do it before," she says matter-of-factly. "I never finish any editions. I was lucky to live long enough to do another now."

At 70, she has also lived long enough to witness a reappraisal of her oeuvre. An extensive international museum retrospective last year met with wide acclaim, and now a major survey, the artist's first in the UK, opens at Thomas Dane Gallery in London. The show will focus on Benglis's unceasing exploration of materials - from polyurethane foam to glass, enamel, stainless steel, beeswax and poured latex - and her boldly sexual brand of abstraction.

At the foundry Benglis, nursing a bad back, is slightly unsteady on her feet as she circles the new mould for "Eat Meat", snapping shots with her iPhone. "OK," she nods in approval, "it's a good casting." Bill Makky, the genial artisan who made it, is visibly relieved. The sculpture, he notes, weighed about 450kg. "It took me almost a day just to turn it around," he says.

Then it's on to inspect the intricate bronze casting just completed for Alexandros Zugouris, a bearded artist Benglis befriended on Kastelorizo, the Greek island her grandparents left behind when they emigrated to the US. When Benglis is in Kastelorizo - she also flits between homes in Manhattan's SoHo district, East Hampton, the high desert outside Santa Fe and Ahmedabad, India - she lives in her grandparents' house.

"It's very difficult for me to feel comfortable anywhere," she claims. "I like to wake up in the morning and not know where I am."

Benglis's wanderlust seems an apt metaphor for her artistic practice. Her work has spanned painting and sculpture as well as videos and photographs, all executed with the heart of a rebel. Her most famous piece, a biting parody of the male-dominated art world that became iconic in the history not only of art but of women, ran as an ad in Artforum in 1974: it shows Benglis in the altogether save for a pair of sunglasses, her body buffed and oiled, her hip thrust in defiance, an enormous dildo poised at her vagina.

It was scandalous. A clutch of Artforum editors quit the magazine in protest. Benglis, now petting her dachshund Pi while lounging on a sofa in her SoHo loft, her face pleasantly lined and her hair white, admits that, although she expected outrage from some quarters, when self-proclaimed feminists turned on her "it was a slap in the face". In the decades since, most feminists have embraced her, as have all manner of contemporary artists. The catalogue for her retrospective included testimonials



**Philosophical** Lynda Benglis in her Manhattan loft with her dachshund Pi. left, 'Untitled C' (1993) Bryan Dertala

from John Baldessari, Richard Tuttle and Cindy Sherman. Famed for her own performance-based photographs, Sherman proclaimed Benglis, "She kicked ass!" Not exactly what was to be expected of a nice girl from sleepy Lake Charles, Louisiana, born in 1941 the eldest of five children in what Benglis describes as a very southern family. She studied ceramics and painting at Newcomb College at Tulane University in New Orleans, where she became adept at painting abstractions.

"I knew about de Kooning. I knew basically what was going on," she says. "I was really trying to find a subject for art." That she did, in New York City. When she stepped off the bus in 1964 she soon encountered important figures from the art scene, from Andy Warhol and Donald Judd to Sol LeWitt, Eva Hesse and Barnett

Newman. She recalls attending a David Hockney opening with Gordon Hart, who would become her first husband.

She spent her nights at Max's Kansas City, her days in her basement studio. Soon she traded up for one with light but no heat. She took a job as an assistant at Klaus Kertess's new Bykert Gallery and later at Paula Cooper Gallery, and took part in group shows at both. Hanging out with the greats and visiting their studios, Benglis says she realised "There was nothing to be afraid of in art."

Indeed, by 1968 she had found a new way to challenge Jackson Pollock by pouring big puddles of brightly coloured latex directly on to the floor. Dubbed "Fallen Paintings", the massive but still feminine floor sculptures were a daring departure from the male versions of minimalism and pop blanketing the galleries.

"I just wanted to go beyond," she says, "and create something that was visually more. I was interested in excess, buoyancy, weight, gesture of material. It was very different from abstract expressionism."

From the beginning she had an impact, visually and politically. In 1969 she was invited to show in a prestigious group exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, alongside Richard Serra, Robert Rymann and others of an austere minimalism. When the curators, flummoxed at the garishly coloured poured piece she proposed, tried to shunt it aside like decorators fearing it would clash with the furniture, Benglis withdrew from the show.

"I wasn't interested in the small picture," she says. "I wanted the larger picture, and that was about taking power, understanding oneself, understanding the world."

After her divorce from Hart, Benglis visited India at the invitation of a prominent family who lived in a famous doorless house in Ahmedabad designed by Le Corbusier. Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Morris, both previous guests, had put her name forward as the next artist-in-residence. "I got this little invitation, typed on onion-skin paper," she recalls.

On that trip in 1979 she met Anand Sarabhai, her host's son, who became her life-long partner. Like many a first-generation pioneering feminist, Benglis never had children, a decision she says she now regrets. While she does not fall back on the cliché that her work is her baby, it is easy to see that, for Benglis, it's not such a stretch.

"For me an artwork is alive. It's a living being," she says.

Her work clearly has intense emotional resonance. She mentions a canvas damaged in a fire that burned her childhood home to the ground. It had hung in a den that both her mother and father used as a bedroom when they were dying. She spent 10 years lovingly repainting it; the Metropolitan Museum of Art bought it last year.

With 45 years in the art world behind her, Benglis is philosophical. "I keep arriving, and I don't disappear," she says. "I'm staying afloat."

Thomas Dane Gallery, London, February 10-March 17, [www.thomasdane.com/](http://www.thomasdane.com/)