



The woman who refused to take her clothes off for Warhol

Lynda Benglis, 'heir to Jackson Pollock' and NYC art scene darling, is finally getting a show here. **Will Pavia** met her

The sculptor and feminist icon Lynda Benglis is making ham sandwiches. She toasts the rye bread, slathers on a thick layer of butter and varnishes the filling with a fig relish. Coffee is poured into white china cups; napkins are fetched. Then we sit down at a marble-topped table in the middle of her vast loft in SoHo, New York City, to discuss the time when she stood before a camera, naked with a massive dildo protruding from her crotch. People have ascribed all kinds of intentions to this work, I say, groping for a high-minded way of broaching the topic with ham in my teeth. Benglis looks at me sharply. She is 73 with silver hair that runs to her shoulders. Wearing a black shirt, a scarf cast about her neck, she looks regal, a queen in her court. A miniature dachshund, named Miss Pi, approaches occasionally across the polished wood floor to eat a morsel of ham from her hand. "Well," she says. "Is there anything you think about it?"

I suppose I was shocked, I say. Even if I half assumed that this sort of thing was going on in the early 1970s, it's still a strong image. Ostensibly it was an

advertisement for a forthcoming show: Benglis paid \$3,000 for the ad space in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum* magazine. She experimented with

pictures of male subjects in various states of undress before deciding that she would be the subject.

There's something about the way she frowns down the barrel of the camera lens in those sunglasses like one of those suited secret policemen in the *Matrix* trilogy, regarding a civilian target. I say it reminds me of a line in a Martin Amis book where a character is distinguishing between two types of magazine models: the type that men stare at lasciviously and the type who seem to be staring back

and judging you for daring to look.

"Well, good," she says. "All I wanted was for it to be confrontational. It wasn't meant to be gazed at. I was looking back at the gazer, whomever the gazer might be. It was meant for both sexes. So that's all I can say about it. I've never said that before but I think that's the best way of saying it."

I feel I should mention the elephant in the picture. That dildo — it's ... huge, I say. "Double size," she replies. "That's why. It's like a boomerang but flexible."

Benglis has been producing art for

half a century. Early in her career she sought to abolish the distinction between sculpture and painting with works that bulged or oozed brightly across the floor. She made cantilevered sculptures that leapt from the wall, or took wing, or glowed, or glittered and ran headlong against the prevailing — and rather macho — art-world orthodoxy of minimalism.

She worked in plaster, metal, plastic and paper and made strange and troubling films. *Life* magazine in 1970 declared her the heir to Jackson Pollock; a more recent generation of American artists, most notably Cindy Sherman, call her their inspiration. This week 50 of her works, old and new, will go on display at the [Hepworth Wakefield](#) gallery in Yorkshire, the latest in a series of retrospectives but the first in Britain.

Yet the image that still springs out at you, like one of her cantilevered sculptures leaping from the wall, is the *Artforum* advertisement. Some feminists hailed it as a brilliant piece of protest art, a parody of the pin-up girl and a cannonade against the male-dominated art world. Other feminists thought it was itself pornographic. Among the outraged

multitude were five editors of *Artforum* who submitted a letter to their own magazine, accusing her of “brutalising ourselves and, we think, our readers”. Several staff members resigned and quite a number of American middle schools cancelled their subscriptions.

Was she happy with the reaction she provoked? “I don’t know the complete

reaction,” she says; this is partly because people are still coming up to her to tell her how they feel about it four decades later. “Some younger women come and tell me: ‘Oh, I’ve felt like that,’” she says, “and I don’t know what they mean. And other women, my age or more, say: ‘Oh Lynda, we thought that was just great.’”

What did her parents think? She was raised Presbyterian in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and describes her mother as a country girl from northern Mississippi, from the territory of William Faulkner novels. Her father was a successful Greek-

American businessman, a lover of cowboy films. She recalls showing him a series of slides that showed her thought process. “When I got to that particular one, he said: ‘Ye gods,’” she says. “He walked out of the living room and never said anything more about it, never asked me any more questions. I could never explain it, but my mother, she said: ‘They’ll never forget this.’”

Did she mean the neighbours? Or the world? “The world,” she says. “When my mother said: ‘They’ll remember you,’ I thought, ‘Yes, but that’s a challenge,’ and I knew beforehand that I was going to deal with that challenge all my life.”

Benglis was the eldest of five children. “I had a kind of open, expansive life,” she says. “Very secure.” The family belonged to a country club and owned horses and a motorboat. They holidayed at ranches on far-flung plateaux in Colorado where “you could see nobody else, just a mountain top with snow, even in summer”. There were also experiences she now regards as formative: a trip,

aged 11, to visit her father’s mother in Greece, a philosophy course taught by a charismatic Albanian logician in Lake Charles and a ride through a haunted house at an amusement park

in New Orleans. The haunted house ride was “my first art experience, basically”, she says.

When she arrived in New York, after studying painting and ceramics at a women’s college in New Orleans, “I felt I knew how to cut through information quickly. I was confident. I got a job as a part-time gallery person, just sitting in the office, kind of flirting with the people that came in, you know ... the artists and the collectors.” It seems she made an impression. “I said to [Robert] Ryman, why don’t you just draw directly on the wall, you know, which he wasn’t doing before,” she says. “Here I was, this gallery girl, telling him what to do, logically.”

She knew Sol LeWitt and Eva Hesse; went dancing with Barnett Newman and his wife Annalee. Newman, who had then turned 60, was becoming

“**Here I was, this gallery girl, telling male artists what to do**

known as one of the great painters of his generation. He also excelled at the jitterbug. His wife would watch and say: “Barnie, you’ve got to work tomorrow, you gotta take it easy,” Benglis says. “And then in the wee hours of the morning we’d go and have a breakfast on Houston Street at the old delicatessen there.”

She remembers stepping into a party at the Guggenheim and seeing Diana Vreeland pointing and asking someone who she was. She wore her hair long, loose and black and her woollen skirt long and loose too, amid the mini-skirts; her eye make-up was jet black. “The taxi drivers thought I was a young starlet,” she says. So did

Andy Warhol, who wanted to film Benglis and her partner at the time, the Scottish painter Gordon Hart, having sex. Did he express it like that? “Yeah. Basically. Making love, you know.” She says Hart was a blond Adonis and Warhol had just produced a film featuring couples kissing. “He wanted to go further,” she says. “A lot of my inclination, to think about what the

media does, what Warhol is doing, [and] thinking about the feminist movement, I was very aware of not being the object,” she says. “So when he asked me to do something *Penthouse* I said no.” She was married to Hart, the second of two brief marriages [the first was in New Orleans before she arrived in New York] before deciding: “I didn’t need to get married any more because I was really just an artist.”

She had begun making wax paintings in a basement studio in the East Village. Hearing her talk of that time, you start to see how she might have eventually felt moved to pose with that dildo. She recalls pulling out of a show at the Whitney Museum in 1969 after the curators suggested that her brightly coloured installation would not fit with the monochrome offerings of Richard Serra and Ryman. “The artists themselves [had] complained,” she says. “If I had been a guy I think there would have been no question about it.”

She remains profoundly grateful to the minimalist Carl Andre and the landscape artist Robert Smithson, who took her seriously in the early days — she would later name a piece after Andre, who was the first man to visit her studio, besides Hart.

She was not always taken as seriously as she might have hoped. Once the multimillionaire owner of the Dallas Cowboys asked her to construct a tunnel for the model railway that ran around his estate, a

request that seems akin to asking Mark Rothko to paint your front door. One of her works, a rearing wave, cast in bronze and glazed in running water, was recently found beside an old sewage plant. It is thought to be worth about \$1 million, although it came very close to being sold for scrap. It is now to be reinstalled in front of a museum in New Orleans. Visitors will reach it by way of a curving path that reminds her of the twisting route the trolleys took through the haunted house: "You come round a bend and you see this thing," she says, mimicking a monster, rearing up.

A lot of her work is like this, including that infamous advert leaping out at unsuspecting readers when they turned a page. The conceptual artist Robert Morris, who was behind the camera, still has the photographs, she says. "He's probably going to ask millions for them."

Lynda Benglis is at the Hepworth Wakefield (01924 247360), from Friday to July 1



Zanzidae: Peacock Series (1979)



Left: Lynda Benglis in her studio with Miss Pi. Above: at work in 1969. Below: A Night Sherbert (1968)

