

Warsaw



View of “Lynda Benglis,” 2019–20. Foreground: *The Graces*, 2003–2005. Background: *Knossos*, 1978.

Lynda Benglis

MUSEUM OF CYCLADIC ART

“In the Realm of the Senses”—an exhibition organized by the Athens-based nonprofit Neon—featured thirty-six of Lynda Benglis’s sculptures, arrayed in the ornate period rooms of the nineteenth-century mansion that hosts this museum of ancient Greek art. *Storm Pattern*, 2003, which looked like a visceral organic rupture captured in bronze atop a sleek marble plinth, stood sentry among the austere neoclassical columns framing the stately entrance. Its two companions, *Summer Dreams* and *Thunderbird*, both 2003, occupied the foyer and an adjacent sunlit rotunda like uninvited guests, presenting disruptive counterpoints to the fussy chandeliers suspended directly above. Part of a grouping the artist calls “fountains,” these terrific torrents depict mushroom clouds in a state of stasis, like all museum relics, yet open to endless conclusions. Whether fonts of primordial ooze or nuclear

explosions, these sculptures equally embody both coming into being and entropy, the beginning and the end of everything.

Rather than embodying concrete things, Benglis's works suggest unfurled feelings or qualities beyond the constrictions of categorization. Haunted by allusions to figuration and myth, the three freestanding crystalline forms of *The Graces*, 2003–2005, remain tentative and otherworldly, and it would be no surprise if they were to start undulating like underwater plants. The aluminum *Figure 4*, 2009, seemed to scale the wall, its wormy texture and squirmy posture evoking an elemental life-form. In confronting these uncomfortable abstract bodies in this venerable building, viewers could sense that the process of defining things in the framework of historicism, connecting fragmented impressions and scattered bits of trauma, represents a comforting yet deeply flawed attempt at order and control.

In a room upstairs, several small sculptures flitted across the walls around a central vitrine displaying the disembodied shoulder of a statue from the fourth century bce. The gilded pleats of *Fancy Work*, 1979, and *Gangtok*, 1980, flirted with the carved fabric adorning the ancient fragment, while the buoyant forms of *Charro* and *San Marcos*, both 1995, resembled flying birds and scraps of windblown drapery. These indeterminate objects adapted easily to the museum's historical context, yet seemed as if they might lift off the wall and flee at any moment. The fluidity of identity was reflected in a photographic print hanging just beyond the doorway: *The Clocktower, New York, invitation*, 1973, portrays Benglis as a child dressed in the traditional costume of the Greek Presidential Guard, an elite male corps. The pleats of her fustanella echoed those of modern feminine attire as well as the migratory sculptures in the next room.

The amorphous aluminum *Wing*, 1970–75, burst from a wall in defiance of the forces of gravity; three luminously pigmented beeswax paintings (*Purple Shadow*, 1993–94; *Blue Lozenge with Yellow Zips*, 1994; and *Fat Green*, 1993) were arranged on the opposite wall like stained-glass windows. On the floor lay the “fallen painting” *Baby Contraband*, 1969, its vivid hues echoing those of Orthodox icons, or of hellfire. One of a seminal series of works produced from poured latex in a gesture likening the material to a prosthetic extension of the artist’s body, it transgresses the boundary between painting and sculpture. To say that it resembles a vagina may be stating the obvious, yet the title’s evocation of the forbidden paired with the formal echo of the shadowy, heroic *Wing* might also have evoked the Fall, imbuing the tableau with a sense of divine tragedy.

This concise selection of work spanning Benglis’s entire career made a convincing case for her oeuvre as a coherent whole, in all of its variety an exploration of ambiguous states of being. Arguably, from the day she published her divisive *Artforum* advertisement of November 1974, in which she was dressed only in sunglasses and wielding a double-duty dildo, her work has been about seizing art as a tool of empowerment and autonomy. Set on the museum’s parquet floor, *Come*, 1969–74, was an orgasmic eruption immortalized in lustrous globs of bronze. As pregnant with polymorphous meaning as it is playful, the precious sculpture epitomizes the sensual and liberating essence of Benglis’s process-driven art.

— Cathryn Drake