

Lynda Benglis seems to have taken on the entire American status quo during the first, madly creative decade of her career. Her eddying floor pieces and poured piles of brightly coloured polyurethane co-opted Jackson Pollock while blurring the line between painting and sculpture; her lozenge-shaped encaustic 'popsicles' subverted the waxy coolness of Jasper Johns and Brice Marden with erotic creases and luscious colours; the work she paid to have inserted in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*, a photo of her naked and brandishing a massive dildo between her legs, skewered male chauvinism and nailed the pornlike ethics behind advertising and editorial opinion. Even the earnestness of process art, to which she is often linked, fell to her garish colours and generous use of glitter and glass jewels.

Her parodic flippancy and the tension her work established between, for example, heavy folded forms and weightless materials often seemed to contradict the seriousness of her engagement, however, much as her decorative bent often became twee – reasons perhaps why her work has been underrated and sometimes overshadowed by her *Artforum* 'spread'. It is here, of course, placed in a long side gallery busy with obviously sexual stuff: recent vaginallike ceramics and Polaroids from the 1970s of the artist's buddies, some nude, paired with closeups of roses. (There are also several difficult-to-hear videos, all playing simultaneously.) If this placement sidesteps the easy spectacle inherent in her posing, it disconnects these pieces from the rest of Benglis's oeuvre and makes them seem 'dirty'.

What dominates the show is heroic sculpture: pours, knots and popsicles from 1966 to 74. The rest of the installation is muddled and cramped. Later work comes off as an afterthought. This emphasis classes Benglis as a transgressor of the male aesthetic while, ironically, inscribing her into the bold history of ballsy innovation that she subverted. The deeply sexual content of her work, the pools of congealed polyurethane, with titles such as *Come* (1969–74) and *Night Sherbet A* (1968), or the labial folds of her fissured lozenge paintings come off as feminist gambits as well as winking and crude assaults on phallogocentric culture.

These understandings of the work are fair enough, but they sideline Benglis's keen understanding of sexual fluidity, which is most obvious in the work consigned to the 'dirty gallery'. Her videos, for example, play with autoeroticism, voyeurism and hermaphroditism. The dildo she posed with and cast in metal as *Smile* (1974) was double-headed, suggesting that pleasure and sexual identity are part of a continuum, a yin and yang in which being penetrated and penetrating complement and complete each other. In the same way, kitsch and high aesthetics are faces of a single coin, each defined in part by its relation to the other. Visual and physical pleasure, and the creation and consumption of art, are also both expressions of the libido and the mind. Benglis's work seems less important, then, for undermining history than for exploring a more organic and humanist attitude in place of the rigid status quo of America in the 1950s and 60s. *Joshua Mack*

## Lynda Benglis

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*Eat Meat*, 1973, bronze, 61 x 203 x 137 cm. © the artist, DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2009. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, and Cheim & Read, New York