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# Material Personae

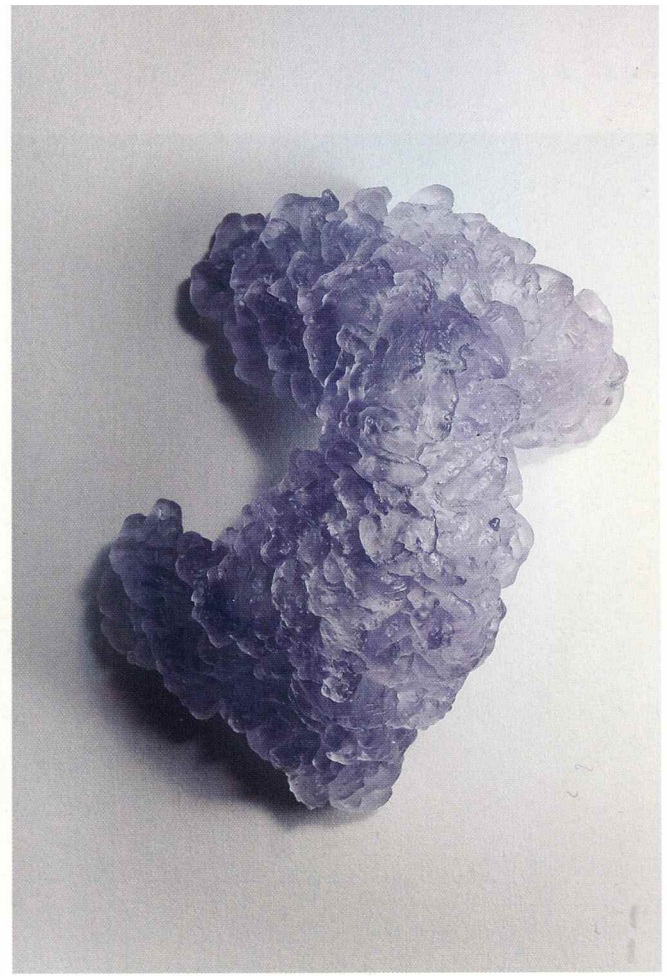
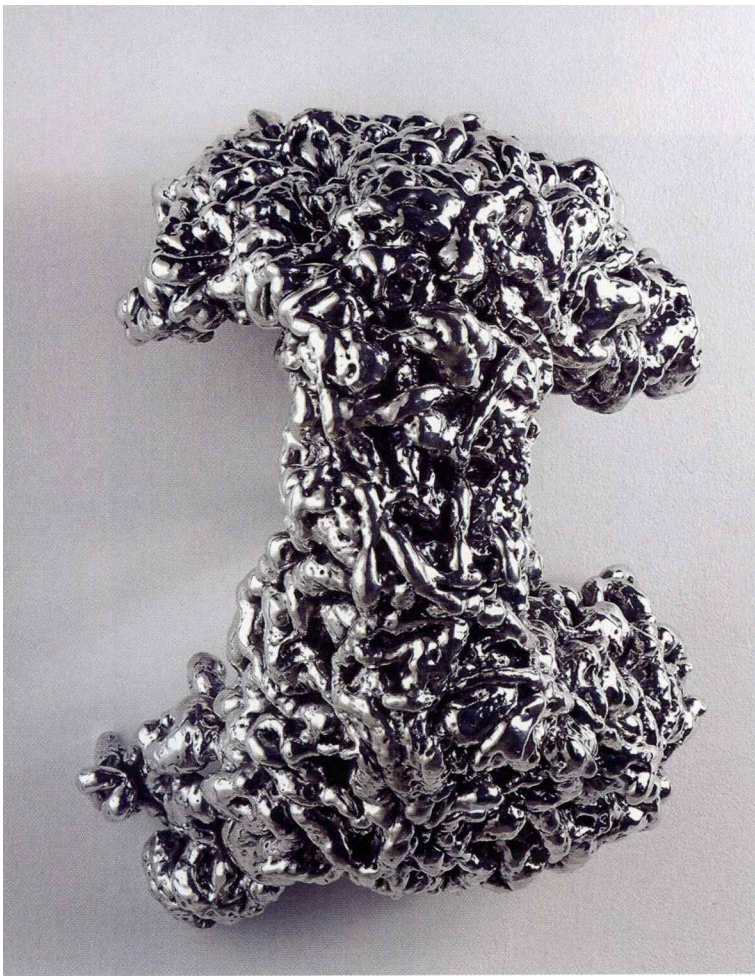
## LYNDA BENGLIS



BY TOM CSASZAR

Lynda Benglis's recent sculptures consistently direct the viewer to their material qualities. However, it is the narratives that develop in relation to the materials and shapes that are stressed in her works. As one moves from their commanding physical power to the richness of their metaphoric and emotional associations, their playful intelligence becomes more evident. Bits of cast silver or rubberized foam become sinews or smoke; the same form is like an arching human back or a crenulated piece of coral. Rooted in the structure and resistance offered by particular materials and processes, Benglis's pieces are literal and intellectual statements about the conditions of making and artifice, or at least they begin there. *King Pin III* (2007), a hollow, 20-inch, torso-like shape projected off the wall, is composed of lumps and skeins of silver. Initially these elements appear like wads of chewing gum made from mercury—chaotic crud transformed into a moving surface. The amorphous lumps are too large to become homogenized into one surface, and too small to become forms on their own. These are not easy sculptures until one sees how Benglis uses the broken sheen of the surface to activate the form and untie the little blobs, creating motion across the whole shape, which one can variously read as a torso, landscape, sea creature, or pixilated bridge.

Opposite: *Storm Pattern*, 2003. Bronze, 31 x 28 x 28 in. Above: *Fool*, 1980. Plaster, bronze, and gold leaf, 26 x 34 x 16.5 in.



Left: *King Pin III*, 2007. Cast silver, 19 x 12 x 10.5 in. Right: *Cloud Shadow III*, 2007. Cast polyurethane, 19 x 12 x 10.5 in.

Benglis's recent sculptures, like many of her past works, can seem not only formless, but also conceptually one-dimensional unless one reads their material qualities as statements of their own history, the story of their making. This opens up implied motions and dramas, including biological, personal, and architectural references. While rooted in materials, her ideas are not confined to them and extend into observations on identity and social structure. Benglis offers a unique solution for bridging formal and narrative messages by uniting myths with narrative forms.

One can begin to explain how she does this only by looking at the diversity of her origins. Benglis was born in Louisiana, educated in the early '60s at Tulane, then at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. She taught at the California Institute of the Arts in the 1970s, also home to Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro. The context of Benglis's works stretches back to the late 1960s and bridges Minimalism, conceptualism, video and performance, feminism, and the Pattern and Decoration Movement.

Benglis's works possess, on their own terms, a Minimalist reticence and a Pattern and Decoration flamboyance, partly because she lets the persona of each work be clearly defined and coherent but includes two or three aspects or characters. Like a teenager trying on different attitudes or a 50-year-old adult moving between roles as co-worker, spouse, and parent, Benglis acknowledges the ability of identities to remain fluid while not becoming separate. Her narratives are at once deeply personal and profoundly social. She emphasizes this complexity through strategies that recall Barnett Newman—whose sculpture could be seriously concise, as well as ironically contradictory—and Eva Hesse. Benglis finds her own way to parallel the humor and intelligence of Hesse, creating the spookiness and exuberance of a Mardi Gras costume in the shifting material qualities of *Storm Pattern* and *The Graces*.

Benglis's pleated works, especially the gold-leafed ones of the late 1970s and early '80s, are all this and more: reticent and demonstrative, showing several attitudes

but tightly coherent, concise yet ironic, and minimal but metaphoric of personal attributes and social masquerading. At the same time as these pleated works, she made her first torsos, similar in shape to the "King Pins" and the "Cloud Shadows." *Vittorio* and others in the pleated series share with the early torsos the attribute of being a part of a form and, at the same time, an entire or complete entity, part of a body on public display and a whole body telling its personal story. Benglis has referred to some of these early torsos as being like gold slugs. The reference also fits some of the small globs that form her newer works, as well as their overall shapes. The related pleated pieces have a clear, repetitive set of elements, the pleats, which define an entire shape. Like the "King Pins," they have only small elements and one large whole, with no intermediate structure. The most delightful thing about the pleated, dancing shapes, which flutter across the wall, channeling light as they go, is that they seem to be both showing off for the viewer's gaze and unconcernedly self-pos-



Above: Installation view with *Ghost Shadow III, II, and I*, 2007. Rubberized foam and chicken wire, 50–60 x 18–24 x 13–15 in. Below: Installation view with *King Pin III, II, and I*, 2007.

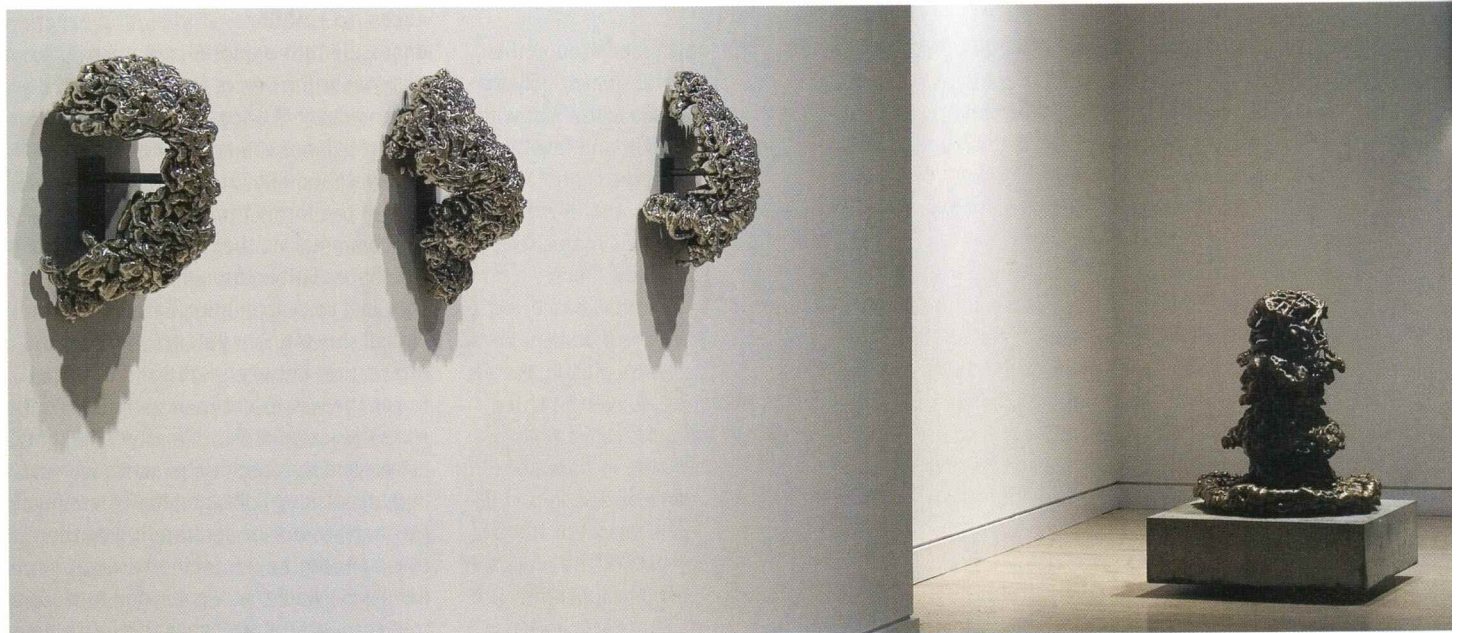
essed. They are like fans broken free from their hinged center, or like dresses whose pleats have taken off on their own to generate other shapes, postures, and gestures.

With these works, Benglis takes a final step away from the starkness and diagrammatic coolness of late Modernist and conceptual works and toward a sumptuous narrative that makes even Postmodernism look reductive. Susan Krane describes these works as being “mysteriously vivified,” possessing “a torque and a pulse.” Benglis accomplishes this through a system of cumulative or aggregate sections equally

animated by, and animators of, the whole shape. In *Vittorio*, the pleats have no sense without the form that they generate, and vice versa. In the same way, the chunks and beads of material in the “Cloud Shadows” and the “Ghost Shadows” create the pulse of the whole: the torque of the sculpture would have no rhythm without the flickering motions of the smaller elements. The unique virtue of the pleated works is that they create structure and rhythm in a series of shapes that speak of ambiguous, sometimes contradictory, desires: the desire to be flat, orderly, and repetitive at the same

time as being exuberantly dimensional, open to unexpected variations, and unified in tone and character. Krane appropriately finds these works Dionysian and feminine; however, in Benglis’s world, it may not be contradictory to recognize that they are also Apollonian and androgynous. The social drama of displaying their desires becomes part of their characters and their stories, clearly demonstrating Benglis’s ability to overcome binary comparisons.

This quality of uniting contradictory aspects extends into Benglis’s choice of processes and materials in casting. She



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*The Graces*, 2003–05. Cast polyurethane, lead, and stainless steel, 95–113 x 21.5–30 x 23–27 in.

takes a form such as that of *King Pin III*, cast in silver, and then casts it again as *Cloud Shadow III* (2007) in clear polyurethane. In doing this, she switches the mood from knotted and tense to pliant and relaxed, simultaneously shifting the visual properties from hard to soft, reflective to transparent. Each of the three “King Pins” was cast from the same mold as the corresponding “Cloud Shadow.” Using material associations to make broader references may not be new, but Benglis finds new ways to insist that the different materials speak for themselves, in relation to the movements and tensions in the forms.

*The Graces* (2003–05) are as much the triplets of Belleville as the classical Graces. The three elements of this sculptural arrangement eccentrically jostle their forms

as they move up, down, and around their axes. They are cast in translucent polyurethane, like the “Cloud Shadows,” but with slightly different purplish and lavender tints. Each form stacks three central, conical shapes on top of each other like a diagram of the human body’s major sections—legs, torso, and head. Denied a firm physical footing, these narrow-based verticals each rise from a different plate or bowl that looks like equal parts plastic, water, and air. A final shape, above the three cones, changes most drastically from piece to piece, each one acting in part like a thought bubble in a cartoon and in part like a final variation on the vessel or floral forms below. In the third of the pieces, *Element 3*, the top portion exuberantly flattens, spilling out its contents, as if this

might fulfill its overriding desire. In *Element 1*, the shape on top declares an impossibly rising and upward-trailing spiral that seems to desire incompleteness. It denies the order of the shapes below it, while at the same time expressing a jagged motion consistent with the zigzag outline of the stacked cones. In *Element 2*, the upper shape recapitulates the lower shapes, but it is separated by a disk, a spatial pause, which helps it to be more stable and defined in relation to the lower cones. This pert, careful shape also echoes the floor below, which now becomes the obvious surface with which these shapes want a more resolved relationship, although the sculpture’s motion and mutability refute even the possibility. There could, of course, be alternate readings. But these are the kinds of dramas that one finds in Benglis’s works—not just polemical assertions against traditional materials or diagrammatic explorations of materiality, but particular narrative impacts of charged qualities felt through materials.

Just as there are pieces of music whose immediate force derives from the virtuosity of their playing, there are sculptures whose primary impact depends on the skill with which the materials are made to speak for themselves. Absorbing as such experiences may be, however, to become meaningful and emotionally resonant, they must exist in relation to particular events and references, to emotions, stories, and experiences. Benglis explores and pushes the material in *The Graces* toward an improbable and delightful sense of eccentric motion and off-balance character. The translucent polyurethane allows us to read the structure of the forms through the density of the color, making the motion and mass of the shapes visible through a relationship of light and color to density. Rather than an embellishment, Benglis’s emphasis on the interaction between light and material forces the viewer not toward the sublime, metaphysical qualities of matter and light, but toward the specific characters we read in materials and light, and how these qualities narrate our understanding of them. Like a photographer or cinematographer, Benglis is aware that we respond to stories told through the way that the forms are

revealed. Whether a surface is reflective silver or translucent plastic, we respond to how it acts like skin, clothing, or fur to reveal the power and character of the animal that is there.

Neither material virtuosity nor its opposing tendency, technical and material crudeness, is ever quite enough, until the complexity—and in Benglis's case, sometimes the weirdness in the use of the materials is part of this virtuosity—takes on a particular unifying character and story. There are some works (by James Turrell, Mark Rothko, or Olafur Eliasson) that make a broad or abstract idea palpable, usually by addressing the nature of perception and perceptual knowledge. The strength of Benglis's best work is different. *Ghost Shadow I* does more than explore its material, in this case, dark, gray, velvety curls of rubberized foam. Benglis could do that in a flat sheet or in a geometric form. Instead, she coordinates the irregular beads of foam into a twisting shape compressed and arching in the middle and expanding and more relaxed at the top and bottom. The drama of this motion unifies the piece in a way quite different from a simple exploration of material. When the aggregate tensions of each small element are totaled, they result in the overall sweep of the four-foot shape—even so, the compound shape struggles to contain and coordinate the motions of each part.

In the case of *The Graces*, the three separately standing elements would have no force on us—and no reason for being—if we did not see them in terms of developments (narratives) of motions, desires, and events through forms and materials. Their geometrically capricious volumes are tightly wound by implied motions and purposes. The drama of viewing them is like encountering an improbably shaped sapling in a forest and realizing that its growth encodes a history of rainfall, light, and soil.

Benglis's weaker works settle for simple effects. Some of her earlier poured pieces seem mere illustrations of how poured material moves; others make gravity seem a dynamic force as the material responds to resistances, terrains, and internal weight and volume. Her knot pieces, equally ribbons, sleeves, and stalks, will in one work remain an exercise in informal aesthetic

materials while in another develop into a drama of abjection and the resistance of material to idealization.

Recent sculpture, if anything, wants to become less tied to a naturalistic aesthetics or to a "formal language," whatever that term may now imply, often setting before the viewer a strategy for making materials, processes, and objects tell stories. Benglis's career seeks a kind of shorthand to engage the viewer emotionally in the unfolding narratives of shapes that seem to be forming and dissipating in front of our eyes, and in relation to objects of everyday social and personal life. Perhaps recent sculpture such as that by Dario Robleto, Charles Long,

Jessica Jackson Hutchins, and others has replaced earlier aesthetics with a specialized exploration of sculpture's boundaries, especially as they resonate with the narration of a world view, defined in its most basic sense as the emotional underpinnings of the relationships we find in the forms of the world around us. At its best, Benglis's sculpture uniquely dissuades us from separating personal stories and social categories. Her works, like *Mardi Gras floats*, *August Wilson's plays*, or the sculpture of Richard Serra and Sarah Sze, tell us stories that are equally mythic and autobiographical.

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**Vittorio, 1979.** Gold leaf, gesso, plaster, cotton, and chicken wire.

