

## **ART REVIEW: New Sculpture by Lynda Benglis Shows Playful Spirit at Cheim & Read**

October 11, 2016

by Charles A. Riley II

A spectacular gathering of new sculpture by the now-legendary [Lynda Benglis](#) at [Cheim & Read](#) in Chelsea is really three shows in one, as though the formidable technique and quicksilver wit of this established master were on a turntable to be examined from a trio of perspectives.

“Lynda Benglis: New Work” opens with the towering, silvery cascade of *The Fall Caught* looming over the viewer in the gallery’s skylit space, where so many major works of contemporary sculpture have been displayed over the years. The medium of the large-scale work is actually aluminum, but the original form was an armature of chicken wire over which spray foam was blasted.



"The Fall Caught" by Lynda Benglis, 2016. Aluminum, 170 x 85 x 96 inches. Courtesy of Cheim & Read.

Leggy and animated, even though it is leaning on the wall, it has some of the tenebrous expressivity of [Willem de Kooning's \*Clamdigger\*](#) as well as the dangerous power of Homer's Polyphemus. An allusion to [Giacometti's](#) unsettling [Falling Man](#), which also relies heavily on a choppy rhythmic surface, may be implied by both the title and posture. Perfect lighting, especially during daytime, ripples over the metallic surface as it does in so many of the "classic" Benglis knots of silver in the past. *The Fall Caught* is a serious and significant addition to her catalogue raisonné.

The oeuvre of Lynda Benglis was already formidable before this show opened. She is best known for a wildly free repertoire of sculpture that has been poured, thrown and molded in an array of materials, ranging from ceramic to latex, polyurethane, aluminum and bronze. Since the 1960s, she has been a dominant force, both in contemporary art and in the recognition of women in the arts—along with her colleague in Los Angeles in the late 1970s Miriam Schapiro, whose work has been reviewed [here](#).

With works on view at the Guggenheim, MoMA and the Whitney in New York, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, her place in the canon is assured. Born in Louisiana, she lived in East Hampton as a child, and now

maintains studios in New York, Santa Fe and (since 1979) in Ahmedabad, India. All three locales add their distinctive flavor to the works in the current exhibition.

One of the most impressive monuments in the exhibition is the overstuffed binder lying on the front desk at Cheim & Read, in which the plastic-clad clips chronicling the high-profile career of Benglis mount in a giant stack. The accumulated weight of critical and scholarly estimation places Benglis securely on a pedestal occupied by few women in the arts. And so this reviewer must acknowledge that it is purely personal taste that made me slightly impatient with the comic spirit of the sculptor, cavorting in the main room of the gallery in a Rabelaisian frenzy in the largest of the three parts of the exhibition.

This room must have been an absolute bear to hang, with about four dozen twisting, twitching sculptures made from handmade paper draped over chicken wire—climbing and scurrying down every wall. At their best, they conjure memories of clouds on a windswept day, or dancers in a fast-paced Martha Graham or Paul Taylor ensemble piece. To single out one individual work, *Lure*, from the panoply of forms is to ignore the massed effect of the installation, which to some would have the energy of a symphony by Karlheinz Stockhausen, while for others it might seem a cacophony.



"Lure" by Lynda Benglis, 2016. Handmade paper over chicken wire, cast glitter on handmade paper, ground

coal with matte medium, 36 x 26 x 19 inches. Courtesy of Cheim & Read.

The glittering metallic sheen of *Lure*, along with its whiplash turns in and on itself, are only two aspects of the compositional difficulty of the piece. My problem is with the colors—a high-toned palette of aqua, salmon, concord grape purple and lemon yellow among others—that interrupt each other with what strikes me as a kind of rudeness.

Admittedly, color in sculpture is never easy: just think of the challenges it posed to such masters as David Smith or Nancy Graves. The candy colors of the Benglis paper sculptures, some of which invoke the fearless chromaticism of Indian textiles and the famous spectrum of spectacular tones in the Santa Fe desert, struck me as “skin deep,” to use the artist’s own phrase about the attraction of the medium of paper.



“Lynda Benglis: New Work” at Cheim & Read. Courtesy of Cheim & Read.

In a playful and at the same time art historically sound essay for the show’s catalogue, Nancy Princenthal invokes not just the all too rare lighthearted side of [Jackson Pollock](#) but Lucille Ball, and the crinkly, colored forms did bring to mind Lucy gobbling bonbons in the famous episode in which she is working at a candy factory.

The comparison with Pollock is not off-base. In a taped interview for the Cheim & Read website, Benglis echoes the method of the Abstract Expressionist painter: "I'm drawing with air, and wire, and paper."

With the the beautiful surface left bare instead of dusted with glitter and slathered with paint, the dancer-like torso of the monochrome paper sculpture *Fan farinade* completely won me over. I also liked the more restrained mark-making that accented the surface of the paper in *Scudder Flip*. Both these pieces have to be seen as antithetical to what this reviewer sees as the loud, prismatic palette of the rest of the room.



"Fan farinade" by Lynda Benglis, 2016. Handmade paper over chicken wire, 58 x 31 x 19 inches. Courtesy of Cheim & Read.



“Scudder Flip” by Lynda Benglis, 2016. Handmade paper over chicken wire, ground coal with matte medium, 36 x 24 x 17 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Cheim & Read.

The stately third section of the show marked, for me, a gratifying return to the high standard set by the opening piece. A circle of compact but potent black ceramic works establishes a quiet interaction in the back gallery.

Benglis has titled the pieces collectively *Elephant Necklace*, with this cryptic but lovely explanation: “Elephants’ necklaces are artifacts that I imagine in the long and short of the extrusions of life. The expulsion from the garden with the umbilical cord attached are perhaps the fragments left of the family of mammoths’ trunks. Having left only parts of their trunks in our imagination, I long to find out more about them through a united collaboration with [Saxe Patterson](#), my exploration team, and others who may decide to question their existence in this hemisphere.”



“Elephant Necklace” by Lynda Benglis, 2016. Glazed ceramic, 37 elements, 173 inches diameter. Courtesy of Cheim & Read.

The reference is to the husband and wife team of ceramists, Hank Saxe and Cynthia Patterson, whose studio in Taos frequently hosts Benglis for projects. Benglis and the Taos ceramists have also just completed a limited edition of wall pieces for the [Benefit Print Project](#).

The *Elephant Necklace* installation invites the viewer to stoop and consider the torqued form of each part individually. Suddenly, as with a good [Ad Reinhardt](#) painting, the seeming monochrome gives way to an iridescent array of greens, blues, umbers and other tones that will elude the visitor who stops at the door and looks at the work from a distance.

As with a Tony Cragg circle of stones, the quiet dignity of *Elephant Necklace* recalled to me the “pleasures of merely circulating,” as Wallace Stevens once called the effect:

*Yet that things go round and again go round  
Has rather a classical sound.*

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**BASIC FACTS:** “Lynda Benglis: New Work” is on view September 8 to October 22, 2016 at Cheim & Read, 547 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001. [www.cheimread.com](http://www.cheimread.com)

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