

LYNDA BENGLIS

Untitled (Beyond Barnett Newman)

At roughly the artist's height and sharing her vertical orientation, Lynda Benglis's *Untitled (Beyond Barnett Newman)* serves as an analogue of the human figure. However, the narrow rectangular shape, with its monochromatic covering of translucent red wax, remains decidedly abstract. *Untitled* was an early experiment in abstraction for Benglis (American, born 1941), one that helped her to see how her interest in painterly gesture could become more independent of the canvas and more sculptural. It was also foundational to her later attempts to transcend the limitations of gender with works that collapse sexual difference.

In 1966 Benglis found herself pulled between a belief in the continued relevance of Abstract Expressionism and the upstart alternative, Minimalism (as it would soon be known). Abstract Expressionism, especially the work of Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler, had influenced Benglis's interrogation of painterly gesture. Her later works involving poured latex, piled or cantilevered polyurethane foam, and knotted aluminum all grew from her desire to free the painter's expressionist mark from the support (and limitation) of the canvas. This goal increasingly led her to sculptural practices. In spring 1966 Benglis saw the Jewish Museum's watershed exhibition *Primary Structures*, which featured reductive, abstract geometric sculptures. Soon after, she embarked on her own minimal work, *Untitled*.

Bridging these options was the work of Barnett Newman, whom Benglis befriended after she moved to New York in 1964. Newman's vertical "zips" pre-saged Minimalism's simplicity, while also offering a more structured example of Abstract Expressionist gesture. Benglis was particularly impressed by *The Moment*, a 1966 multiple that Newman made by screenprinting a light-blue zip and its narrow darker blue field on the back of a long piece of Plexiglas only five inches wide. She appreciated how the colors

appeared suspended in the Plexiglas and how the thinness of the support seemed to liberate the zip from the canvas—the wall itself became the ground.¹ "I had never seen an object so narrow," she recalled.²

Benglis responded to *The Moment* by making her own thin, vertical works. But unlike Newman's editioned multiple (or, for that matter, the precisely fabricated objects of Minimalism), *Untitled* resulted from a direct, physical engagement with the material. As Benglis has explained, she employed beeswax to balance the hard-edge abstraction of the geometric form: "I wanted to make something very tactile, something that related to the body in some way, because all this art in some way scared me. . . . I really wanted somehow to get more tactile and chemically involved with the material."³ More specifically, she explained, "I wanted control over matter and placement and wanted to make my own paint."⁴ To achieve this aim, Benglis developed unique mixtures of pigments, waxes, and other components that were slower to work with and less liquid than conventional paints, as well as more variable and organic than the steel, plywood, and other industrial products favored by the Minimalists.

Because of its translucency and tactility, wax has been used by artists for centuries to suggest the organic and, more specifically, skin.⁵ Benglis recalls that she was interested "in wax as a skin, a mummified version of painting, as something buried with a dimension that isn't quite perceived upon first glance."⁶ Indeed, *Untitled* invites close looking through the material depth of the color suspended in the wax. That act of looking, however, is orchestrated by the unorthodox proportions of this wall work. Any painting hung on a wall reflects the viewer's verticality and frontality, but Benglis (and Newman before her) heightened this relation by making the work all narrow figure and no ground. Benglis's vertical is even

UNTITLED (BEYOND BARNETT NEWMAN), 1966–67
Encaustic pigmented with aniline dye and gesso on Masonite, and gesso on wood
166.4 × 14.3 × 3.8 cm (65 ½ × 5 ⅝ × 1 ½ in.)



1 Lynda Benglis recounts this in "Interview," *Ocular 4*, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 35. See also Susan Krane, "Lynda Benglis: Theatres of Nature," in *Lynda Benglis: Dual Natures*, ed. Susan Krane, exh. cat. (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1991), 21–62.

2 Benglis in Ned Rifkin, "Lynda Benglis" [interview], in *Early Work*, ed. Lynn Gumpert, Ned Rifkin, and Marcia Tucker, exh. cat. (New York: The New Museum, 1982), 8. At three inches wide, the Art Institute's 1950 Newman painting, *Untitled 3*, is a precursor of this multiple.

3 Benglis, quoted in Rifkin, "Lynda Benglis," 8.

4 Benglis, quoted in Robert Coad, "Interview with Lynda Benglis," in "Between Painting and Sculpture: A Study of the Work and Working Process of Lynda Benglis, Elizabeth Murray, Judy Pfaff and Gary Stephan" (PhD diss., New York University, 1983), 240.

5 See, for instance, Roberta Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2008); and Georges Didi-Huberman, "Wax Flesh, Vicious Circles," in *Encyclopaedia Anatomica: A Complete Collection of Anatomical Waxes*, ed. Marta Poggesi (New York: Taschen, 1999), 64–68.

6 Benglis, quoted in Rifkin, "Lynda Benglis," 9.

7 Benglis, "Interview," 40.

8 See David J. Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015). In her analysis of Benglis's later lozenge-shaped wax wall works, Susan Richmond has deftly identified feminist debates around androgyny as bearing on Benglis's desire that her art evoke and transcend sexual difference. See Richmond, *Lynda Benglis: Beyond Process* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 45–69.

9 Benglis, "Lynda Benglis," 34.

10 Benglis, quoted in Robert Pincus-Witten, "Lynda Benglis: The Frozen Gesture," *Artforum* 13, no. 3 (November 1974): 55.

11 See Richmond, *Lynda Benglis*; and Bibiana K. Obler, "Lynda Benglis Recrafts Abstract Expressionism," *American Art* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 2–23.

12 Benglis, "Interview," 35. For Benglis's description of the persona advertisements as "sexual mockeries," see p. 34.

more visually and tactilely inviting than Newman's Plexiglas-encased stripe due to the subtle variations along the exposed surface of the hand-applied wax in a robust red. Moreover, when we look at this vertical work, we primarily look at its "head" (the uppermost part that is closest to our eyes) rather than at its "foot"—much as we do when we face another person. Thus, even as it repudiates both figuration and the reliance of figure on ground, *Untitled* evokes a human body.

From early experiments such as *Untitled* onward, Benglis has sought to make abstract images that are independent of a determining and limiting ground. This is a metaphoric, not just formal, endeavor. She has explored materials that index her bodily engagement and carry color in themselves, allowing her to make a new kind of image that is freed from both frame and support. As Benglis has said, "The process could not be clearly read in any of the works that I've done. The process was always hidden. The process was transformed by the image. I have always been interested in imagery."⁷ Her early embodied zip is such an "image"—a term she uses with precision—not because it represents the human form but rather because it offers an analogue of it. In this way, Benglis's work relates to a tendency in American sculpture of the 1960s to couch abstraction in corporeal terms.

When the body is evoked but not imaged, it raises the question of how bodies might be imagined differently. More importantly, it rebuffs the ways in which gender is predicated on the recognition of the body. In the 1960s, abstract bodies were proposed by sculptures (like Benglis's) that intimated the human but nevertheless resolutely refused its representation or anthropomorphic resemblance.⁸ With its uprightness and human proportions, *Untitled* asks us to relate as bodies in a way that is unforeclosed. "It's often difficult to say if any image is masculine or feminine," as Benglis once said.⁹

Soon after *Untitled*, Benglis adapted its long, narrow format for a series of highly textured works in brushed wax with rounded corners. These lozenge-shaped wall objects were smaller, their height equivalent to her arm's length. In this series

she more directly invoked bodies and implied the combination of the sexes, explaining that the works were "nutshell paintings dealing with male/female symbols, the split and the coming together. They're both oral and genital."¹⁰ Benglis has long been frank about her frustration with the structural sexism of the art world, and she attempted to renounce belief in the defining role of sexual difference.¹¹ In the years following she used representational imagery to further this aim in various works, including the "sexual mockeries" (as she called her art magazine advertisements, most notoriously her 1974 *Artforum* advertisement-as-artwork); *Parenthesis*, metal casts of double-headed dildos visually paired to make a space to be filled; and videos that recombine male and female signifiers, such as *The Amazing Bow Wow*, her 1976 collaboration with Stanton Kay, which features an intersex talking dog as its protagonist. Such works, according to Benglis, critique "the repression of humanism using sexuality as a medium."¹² These subsequent, more overt short-circuitings of sexual difference and her proposing a move beyond the limitations of binary gender all have a precedent in the transitional *Untitled*. Its pared-down abstraction evokes both flesh and the standing human form without representing either. Not only is *Untitled* one of Benglis's first experiments with viscous materials, its unorthodox format and proportions allowed her to address the body in a manner that circumvents the presumption that gender is defining. Benglis's embodied zip was an early attempt to demonstrate what she upholds as humanism.

David J. Getsy





Material Meanings

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