



Natural's Not In It

Lynda Benglis' printmaking retrospective is a wild dance between nature and decoration

MATT MORRIS // SEP 23, 2008

There are 95 art objects by Lynda Benglis spread over three rooms in Carl Solway Gallery. Solway himself, along with Laura James, registrar at the gallery and a CityBeat contributing writer, have managed to arrange the exhibition thoughtfully, capitalizing on formal

commonalities in different works. They've created several amazing wall compositions in which arrays of prints bear strong resemblance to a central sculptural or relief work. Yet there is some degree of irony that Benglis' art — historically associated with Post Minimalism — would appear so densely. In direct contention to the usually discreet sculptures she has produced throughout her career, many of her printmaking investigations result in wildly colorful and rakishly decorative ensembles. Each series of prints in this retrospective reveals the artist's inspirations from nature and culture.

While the break from abstraction into clear depictions of leaves and plant material printed onto Indian silk in the front gallery is an alarming surprise, they introduce nature as a source early on so that it can be detected throughout decades of work. The next time that such evident botany appears is in a sleek back wall where a platinum-glazed ceramic sculpture "Torso" is flanked by selections from Benglis' Palmetto Series. These prints interplay geometric shapes with the strong rays of palmetto leaves in mostly cool grays and blacks. The bold, sometimes clunky compositions succinctly integrate many of the formal concerns that run rampant in much busier, exuberant prints.

Benglis runs hot and cool, evidently as empowered and adept at sparse, black-and-white works as with multi-hued prints that test chaos against organization. Possibly none of her series better exemplifies to what lavish extremes she is willing to build a print than the Pani Rang Series that are luminous with intense watercolor drawing and unfurling tangles of pattern and symbols scattered like confetti across the pages.

Benglis has long resonated with the aesthetics of Indian art. One print designated "untitled CSG-02" references a Kenneth Noland target painting as easily as it does traditional mandala motifs, arranging festive lines and marks around a central circle form, all over top a glee-inducing green wash.

There are few contemporary artworks with which I have as strong a visceral response as with Benglis' Lagniappe works. These objects are typically phallic, hang on the wall and play a bulging solid form against an eruption of iridescent cellophane. In these she finds a smart, post-minimal vocabulary which to reflect on the glittering decadence of Louisiana. Through simplification and abstraction, such ideas are unbound from a single cultural source, instead embodying pure, directly phenomenological encounters with forceful physicality and sheer joy. The body of "Lagniappe I (194-B)" is made from cast paper (like many of the wall-mounted sculptures in the exhibition) that is marked with contrasting colors of paper pulp. This patterning calls to mind angular sectioning in African masks. While dealing with gender and posturing,

might this reductive sculptural work traverse some of the same meaningful territory as Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger"?

The art world too often situates an artist's life work in a specific medium or genre. While predominantly recognized for her sculpture as well as her scandalously feminist ads from the 1970s, this retrospective continually iterates an ongoing passion for print media within Benglis' creative process.

LYNDA BENGLIS AS PRINTMAKER continues at Carl Solway Gallery through Dec. 13.

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