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Why are women artists so underrepresented in museums?

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by Danielle Avram



Guests walk past self portraits of Cindy Sherman during a press preview of Sherman's new exhibit at the Dallas Museum of Art on Thursday, March 14, 2013. (Cooper Neill/Staff Photographer)

In 1974, a double-paged advertisement appeared in *Artforum* magazine. On the left, a solid black page with minimal white text credits the image to Paula Cooper Gallery, on the right, the black gives way to a startling image: a woman, hair short and slicked back; nude, save for white cat's eye sunglasses and a conspicuously positioned sex toy. Staring defiantly into the camera — body taut and poised, teeth bared and fingers splayed apart — the woman is gloriously savage, a tigress ready to pounce.

The reviews weren't kind.

Critics derided the ad for its aggressive portrayal of female sexuality, likening it to a cheap stunt. The magazine was flooded with angry letters, and librarians everywhere carefully excised the page from the publication. Galleries pulled their sponsorship, and Artforum's two female editors left to form the theory-driven publication October.

The woman in the advertisement was Lynda Benglis, a 32-year-old rising star of the New York art scene. A member of the sprawling Post-Minimalist movement, Benglis gained prominence through her painting-cum-sculptural works that employed a range of materials such as poured foam, twisted metal, and cast bronze.

Often referred to as the heir to Jackson Pollock, Benglis liberated painting from the canvas, brushstrokes giving way to three-dimensional, corporeal undulations that stretched across walls and floors. She was a woman unabashedly occupying space in a man's world, wielding her body like a tool.



American artist Lynda Benglis pouring foam for a project at the Modern Art Foundry in Queens, New York. (Photograph by Sebastian Kim, courtesy of Cheim & Read, New York).

Now 75, Benglis bounces between New York City, East Hampton, Washington state, New Mexico, and India. She is a nomad who shifts between locations as deftly as mediums. Critics often cite her remarkable role as an artistic shape shifter, whose aesthetic derives primarily from her obsession with materials and materiality and unwillingness to be defined by any one style.

Still, mention Benglis' name, and almost immediately her infamous spread comes to mind. More than 40 years later, she remains puzzled by the thought that her naked body caused such a fuss. "At the time people said I was angry. I don't remember being angry. I remember having a lot of energy and wanting to see that energy materialized."

Yet, she is proud of the fact that the image remains a point of discovery for legions of people, her image serving as a battle flag, the encapsulation of energy, provocation, and the desire to be acknowledged.

Benglis will be in Dallas at the Nasher Sculpture Center on Saturday, Feb. 11, as part of a panel discussion on female representation within the

arts titled "Off the Pedestal: Women Artists in Art Museums". Benglis will be accompanied by Connie Butler, chief curator of the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles; Elizabeth Sackler, president of the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation; and Jenni Sorkin, assistant professor of contemporary art history at the University of California in Santa Barbara. The panel will be moderated by Nasher assistant curator Leigh Arnold and will address the historical underrepresentation of women's works in art institutions — especially sculpture — and generate creative solutions for remedying this situation.

It's a timely conversation, given the recent women's marches across the globe and the national conversation.

PLAN YOUR LIFE

"Off the Pedestal: Women Artists in Art Museums," 11 a.m. on Saturday, Feb. 11, the Nasher Sculpture Center, 2001 Flora St., open to the public, free with admission. Complimentary wine reception with RSVP. nashersculpturecenter.org