

STORM KING ART CENTER

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

LYNDA BENGLIS

March 27, 2018

Interviewed by Sarah Dziedzic
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Thank you!

Interview with Lynda Benglis	New York City, NY
Conducted by Sarah Dziedzic	1 audio file
March 27, 2018	Open for research use

Audio File 1

Dziedzic: Today is March 27, 2018, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Lynda Benglis for the Storm King Oral History Program. We're at Lynda's apartment on Prince Street. So, you were telling me a little bit about this before we got started, but I'd just like to know how you came to learn about Storm King.

Benglis: Well, I had understood that there was a Storm King as such, but I never really saw it in detail until I was invited by Peter Stern. [00:01:00] We met in Long Island, at a dinner party. I think Mia Westerlund—I knew Mia—she's part of their collection, too, isn't she? So, I think she was probably dating Peter, right? Dating him, or maybe not.

Dziedzic: I don't know.

Benglis: But she was good friends. [00:02:00] I knew her name, and I knew some of her art through Klaus Kertess. Mia showed with Leo Castelli, and I remember that, because she was friendly with Klaus, and Klaus had roomed with her husband—I think they had gotten a divorce. Klaus has passed away a couple of years ago.

I knew of Storm King Art Center. [00:03:00] I didn't see it until later, much later. And when I was invited there to consider a show, it was possibly the best time in my career, up until that time, because I was doing these large pieces. I was just thinking, when I saw the images there that you have¹, that I had not—I'd done images and installation at the Walker, and that was kind of peaking, because it was at a time when museums were taking great chances and inviting artists. That was the opening of the Walker, and the *New York Times*' Hilton Kramer, [00:04:00] who usually doesn't like contemporary work, raved about it. Maybe it was just being perverse, because he liked the Walker Museum as such. It was considered one of the best museums in the country, and it was the opening of the new museum [building], where they invited artists to actually install pieces meant for the space. That kind of began to put me on the map in terms of the *New York Times*. I'd had reviews before, possibly through Paula Cooper, but then Paula was very brilliant with what artists she wanted to show, and also had hired Roberta Smith, who was a writer, and also [00:05:00] Doug Baxter, who's now at Pace.

¹ *Adhesive Products*, 1971, pigmented black polyurethane foam

I think, because I grew up in the art world, working partially, part-time, for Klaus Kertess, and also had taken logic and philosophy with one of the probably best logicians of the country at that time, and possibly of the world. He was Albanian Greek, and kept trying to say, “Why are you majoring in art? You should major in philosophy.” Because there are not too many philosophers around. That taught me, I think, to think about art as a philosophy, [00:06:00] and art as a conversation, in order to present the possibilities of how you can see and how you feel. So, I began thinking about balance, weight, cantilever, color. All these things were talked about since the—well, Klee, if you think about the Germans being very rational, and also Americans also being very rational in trying to figure out rules. At the time, there were so many rules in the art world. Topics such as “Is easel painting dead?” were reviewed at NYU, and the place was so packed, there was standing room only. This [00:07:00] wouldn't happen today. It was a real crisis, I think, in Vietnam, and there was a crisis in the art world having to do with the philosophy of where easel painting should go, and what the difference in illusion and allusion was.

I thought this kind of very funny. I was able to kind of cut through the butter, so to speak, get the milk and the whey out of the way, and decide what I wanted to do with the context of the rules that I was going to make for myself. But it was a spinoff of Greenberg and Greenberg's balancing [00:08:00] the look of abstraction, and Pollock having done the paintings on the floor. Morris Louis having done the gravity paintings and putting them on the wall, and Helen Frankenthaler. So, one of my first little paintings on the floor was called *Hey, Hey Frankenthaler*. I remember that, having thought about this and seen the important show in Washington at the time, and knowing about the Washington painters.

I was even asked to be on *The Dick Cavett Show*, and then I drew the line, because it was very different than getting reviews, and going on television just to perform was not what I wanted to do. There was a place [00:09:00] for it, obviously, and I realized that. It was the beginning of the feminist movement. I went to LA because of that, invited to CalArts by the head of the CalArts at the time. Mimi Schapiro and Judy Chicago were very active there, but there was Paul Brock, Mimi Schapiro's husband, who said, “Come to us, because you're really doing something,” as if the feminists were just complaining. I thought that very interesting, so I ran a mixed class in media, and was interested also when I was offered a job in Rochester prior to that. I experimented with the [00:10:00] media, with the new reel-to-reel cassettes, and I had my own portapak. But before that time, there was just reel-to-reel, open reels, much like the sound open reels, and no cassettes at all.

[Portion removed]

I was telling about how I structured my flights in LA. I was there in Venice.² I kept my place in New York. I was first in the Lower East Side, on 9th Street, with a basement, in 1967. I had one plug, and began my wax paintings there, in the basement, and had to shovel the snow out from under the [00:12:00] basement door, which was just alongside the stairwell, up to the first floor above the basement. I was living in a loft on the top floor, so I got my exercise, and then went down to the bottom floor to the studio. Just before that, I got a studio sublet from Bob Duran, a Hawaiian fellow, in the summer of 1968 on Grand Street.

There were many people that showed at Park Place, and so I saw some ideas that interested me there. They fired the gentleman that was working there. I've forgotten his name. I haven't seen him in the art world at all. Paula, [00:13:00] of course, I met for the first time because she had a little gallery. She married a millionaire when she was only in her early 20s, and she divorced him, but had a little gallery. She had an interest in unusual works. She showed different painters in her own apartment on the Upper East Side, and took over Park Place, because she was voted to do so. People liked her, and still do love her. She has the type of personality [00:14:00] that's firm, and she knows what she wants, and she doesn't hesitate when she likes something. She commits to it. I found that true. I showed with her and got started with her, and I found that true of her since I've known her. We became very good friends. Also had a business relationship. Then we both grew out of that relationship as she decided, and I decided, and just took a year off.

Then, in terms of dealers—and I'm mentioning dealers, because I think dealers are so extremely important in recognizing the work, with young artists [00:15:00] particularly, so they may grow, maybe a little—and one's own, as an artist, relationship with other artists. These moments and unsolicited events and opportunities are really your guidepost to life. If you get famous or not, it helps to have recognition and be able to see the ideas as they are happening and being shown.

That's the first chapter.

Dziedzic: Well, I'm interested in seeing the ideas as they develop. In a way, I think it would be wonderful to hear about [00:16:00] the works in this exhibition [*Water Sources*, 2015] and recall how they developed for you.

Benglis: One thing, the fluidity of the work. I was always involved with flow. I think the development of the flow, the organic situation—I wasn't interested in right angles as much as I was interested in the flow. So,

² First visited Los Angeles in 1971, then moved there in 1973 to teach for the spring semester and was bicoastal through 1977.

I found materials that could create that flow with the texture, and that I could build with. Firstly, I pigmented latex rubber.

[Portion removed]

Benglis: That was such an important show [00:18:00] for me, because I realized—it culminated in the idea of the flow, and that we got the piece—we didn't know whether to put *Hills and Clouds* (2014) in the water or not. We were talking about floating it on a raft, and I think they might have even built a raft, or thought of building one, and then we didn't. It couldn't have floated. It would have slid off, like an anchor. But the fact that I was thinking of floating it made me float the form itself, I think, because I was feeling—I think women, proprioceptively, have a different feeling about their bodies, and a lot of that has to do with their bloating and their cycles, and having to do with the gravity and the moon and so forth. That shows up in my work, that feeling of flotation, of bloating [00:19:00] buoyancy. I've used it for allusion, in the sense of alluding to flowing things, but also the illusion of the thing itself floating.

At the Museum of Modern Art, there are four pieces called *Modern Art*. I was also mocking the idea of modernism as such, but those pieces, only with a few flows themselves on the ground, that was in the studio itself. There's these atomic elements, but the smaller pieces that the Museum of Modern Art has, they have an aluminum one and a bronze one. [00:20:00] Jeff Byers actually had bought *Modern Art Pair* (aluminum and bronze). Then I later gave them the lead and tin. [00:20:00] Also, I was able to do a piece called *Eat Meat*, which was bronze first, but I also did that in aluminum.

The idea of the flotation with the curves—because you can't see the edges, so what happens to your eye when you see a curve, you follow it around, and sometimes it disappears, [00:21:00] depending on the light. At some time with the eggs [referring to egg-shaped sculptures on the wall] that I did—and again, out of foam, and Styrofoam underneath that was made for these works, this mold—the illusion of the same image, and the volume, because of light, changes. This is basically the same image, but different colors, and creating color and texture, you create a kind of illusion where the surface does vary because of light and weight. So, in a way, I was kind of writing a textbook, with my different materials and techniques. [00:22:00] This big photograph of my doing the Walker piece, that was the first time that I appeared in the *New York Times* with those pieces, and Hilton Kramer actually pictured nine pieces, cantilevered off in the wall, and claimed that that was the head of the show, so to speak, of the opening of the Walker Museum.

After that, I had an offer to show in San Francisco, and I did show some wax paintings³. I found a gallery there, and I decided that I liked LA better than San Francisco. So, early in the '70s, I moved to LA, but did not give up my interest in the East Coast. I left upstate New York, [00:23:00] where I was teaching in Rochester, New York, at the University of Rochester. I drove up once or twice and left my Volkswagen there, because flying was so cheap then. It was \$50 to go each way. So, I could go to LaGuardia, park my car there, and come back, I found, almost the same day, after teaching, or stay one day and then come back. I found myself, during the middle of a snow storm, often—where my Volkswagen was brand-new, '70. I had a show offered in Germany, and so I bought a Volkswagen. It was in the spring, [00:24:00] in Dusseldorf⁴. Actually, it was Galerie Hans Muller in Cologne, too, that I sort of had the first show⁵. There, they were kind of—I had a show with this fellow wearing a hat, right? He had the drawings on the wall, and I had the foam pieces. In Germany, I was first known because Joseph Beuys was so popular, all his students were there, and the Germans were so excited about Beuys. He did these lovely Rococo drawings, like figures. They were very beautiful drawings. Then [00:25:00] he was doing these felt pieces, and then, of course, my friend Bob Morris, when I was exchanging with him later, started also being interested in the folds of the felt. He liked the fact that I was still working with my hands in my work. He said something about that. I was working with my hands with the wax, doing the wax paintings, and stirring the latex rubber, and stirring the foam.

He began to make recordings, trying to essentially—very existential things, recordings on tape. That's reel-to-reel. So, I invited him over, because we lived down the street from one another—and he was on some [00:26:00] of those panels about art. So, we became friends, and we talked about the philosophy of what we were interested in. I was interested in kind of the tactile aspects of television, and the fact that I had seen the underground movie scene, and I was experimenting with how was video streaming—you know, running, streaming—different than the movie frame. So, I began thinking about film as frame, and not film with streaming video—what was the difference. So, I blew up the texture screen. I did all those things that you later see, kind of, in movies that people [00:27:00] do, thinking about it as well.

So, I recorded Robert Morris talking with his—the way he talked about the object of his desire, which also played with the object of his possession, which would be art. I think, essentially, we were denoting what the object was. [00:28:00] We were all thinking about what illusion was, what objects were, the process of art. He became more symbolically involved with the process, and I guess I was, too. Other people counted, and Sol LeWitt was also my friend, doing his hatch drawings, like a little old lady weaving, with

³ Hansen Fuller Gallery, San Francisco. *Lynda Benglis: Wax Paintings*, February 1–29, 1972.

⁴ Stadtische Kunsthalle Dusseldorf, Dusseldorf. *Prospect '69*, September 30–October 12, 1969. Exhibition included unspecified “floor pieces,” referenced in correspondence with Hans Muller.

⁵ Galerie Hans Muller, Cologne. *Lynda Benglis*, June 26–July 23, 1970. The first solo show of foam works was at Paula Cooper in February 1970. This was followed by another show at Janie C. Lee Gallery in Dallas in May 1970.

all these multi layers of ink. I remember getting a few of his mistakes, that were later stolen by these subletters from my apartment in the Lower East Side. So, I don't have my mistakes of Sol LeWitt.

I met Eva Hesse through Sol, and Eva—I now live on the [00:29:00] floor above where Paula Cooper had her first gallery in Soho. This was not my apartment at the time. So, when I lived here in the '80s, I went down the stairs, this is where I used to come to work briefly. I was above this floor, and had a desk just above this floor, near those windows, and all the gallery was here. The gallery walls went on like this, and then there was the building next to this, Colonnade building, was open, and it happened to be another place where you could show. It was more square. Actually, it was up here. This was the gallery wall. It was a big wall. The office was quite deep above. The elevator opened, and it was quite deep this way. [00:30:00]

I was thinking about Paula's husband did this minted piece of Duchamp—Paula showed it. It was actually a drain, a stopper, cast with his wife's vulva. A stopper that you could actually put in the drain. [Laughter] It was a very funny piece. I remember it was very little. I don't know what the edition was. Maybe a hundred, maybe not. I don't remember, but there is that edition that Neil put out. Later, I met Teeny with Anand and I remember we went to see her, and she was [00:31:00] a bright red-head lady, Matisse's daughter, wearing this leather skirt and textured stockings. She must have been in her late seventies. She was quite something.

I drove all around the south of France with Klaus, and we saw every Gothic church there was, major town there was, to see. We also saw some art, recent Picassos. I also [00:32:00] saw the museums in Paris. One piece in particular, the [*Winged*] *Victory of Samothrace*, really interested me. So, I wanted to do a winged kind of piece myself. So, at the Louvre, when I saw it, and also when I saw the columns, and when I saw the bridges later—I'm just saying what Paris might have brought to me. But it was that *Winged Victory* that I thought of. And also, the canyon of the rocks, when I saw the Grand Canyon [00:33:00] with my sister. But, I was very taken with those rocks that appeared out of nowhere. Many years later, when I went back to clay sculpture, I started doing just roll clay, and piling it on top of one another. Very kind of primal. Not thinking just how stupid I feel in the presence of the great art and architecture, and how I wanted to somehow go back to nature, having moved to Santa Fe area. And never moved out of it once I was there. This is in '92. In the early '90s, I came there.

So back here—and there—I was doing these clay forms, and [00:34:00] not really knowing what to do. But with *Winged Victory*, that's when I got the things off the floor. It was thinking about up and off the floor, at the Walker. But before the Walker, there was a phosphorescent piece at Paula's that actually broke, because it just cracked one day⁶. Then I destroyed it afterwards, because it wasn't what I wanted

⁶ *Floor Murr*, 1970, pigmented polyurethane foam

to have of it. There was a piece that should have been glued back, and then I could have supported it, but I was so horrified that—it was kind of balancing on its tiptoe, like a ballerina. I did take ballerina lessons. Never toe lessons. Didn't get that far. But I was very [00:35:00] involved as a kid in going to the library and reading about the great ballerinas. I was very interested in the gestures. Also, with that series of tubular knots, I know that I was thinking of dancing, and those things, gesturing. In fact, with all my work, I think of it as the material does dance. It does move. So, it's configurative, with configuration.

Dziedzic: And it has more than one movement at once.

Benglis: That's it. That's right. It's not only the flow, but it's the building up of the flow. Now, crawfish in Louisiana [00:36:00] build up from the center out. They spit out the dirt. Crabs spit out—the crawfish dig in the mud, and they have a hole. They dig down in the mud, and they spit out the dirt, and pretty soon it's a mound. They can be even a foot high. But usually they're anywhere under a foot. They're this kind of beaded-like thing that bubble up on the sides of mud. Very textured. When it rained, it could rain so much that you had to take a motorboat to school, because we lived in rice paddies when I was a little girl. My dad would make a barbecue pit wherever we would go, and there were only a couple of places where we stayed long enough where we had a barbecue pit. We had a house above ground, [00:37:00] on stilts, brick stilts. My dad actually ran a building material business next to choo-choo trains, where they kept the choo-choo trains, those big, block, huge monsters. I think I was amazed, in the beginning of the scale, of materials that my father had on—colors, Formica colors, colors later that were plastic colors. But all kinds of lumber. So, I began, before I had any money at all, before I even bought this loft, or any loft, the Bowery, I bought land out in East Hampton, because I wanted to build. It seemed the most natural thing for me to do. [00:38:00]

Dziedzic: So, you built your house and studio out on East Hampton?

Benglis: Yes. Well, I just bought land, firstly. At the time, my friend Klaus, he built firstly, and I was teaching here and there, elsewhere. I stayed there quite a bit and would commute to Rochester.

When I began living in California—I went there because I had had the show in San Francisco, but I didn't like San Francisco. I liked LA. Lenny Bruce said one thing that interested me: if you take the map on its side and it all fell in, that's LA. [00:39:00] I kind of agreed with that. It seemed like the place to be, because it reminded me of any other place in America, basically.

By then, I was going all around, giving talks everywhere. Then I met Paul Brock, and he said, "You should come to LA to give a talk, because you're really doing something," as if Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro weren't. I did go there, and I liked CalArts. I had a mixed group, and I taught video, as I did with

the scientists up at Rochester. With those scientists, and with the people at CalArts, we were making good videos, [00:40:00] before [John] Baldessari, and at the same—Baldessari was making photographs, and Baldessari was doing these great, kind of primitive drawings of his face, self-portrait. They were almost childlike. I taught at CalArts, and I had some terrific students, as he did, and we shared those students in a class we taught together. We took them all around. We took them to the graveyard. We took them to Hollywood, where they imprinted the hands and signatures. We were interested in all the things that had to do with death and life, really. The museums, the wax museum. [00:41:00] So it was a whole other kind of conceptual art that was happening with video and with the object, and what is the object, and what are the issues.

Dziedzic: Let me ask you a question about the philosophy background, I guess, and also the culture at the time, to be talking so much about, and codifying ideas and having a sort of philosophy of one's own in art-making. I'm interested in how that works, alongside what you were saying about the clay. That you're working just with the material, kind of getting away from a deliberate practice, and responding more to the material itself.

Benglis: To what the material can do [00:42:00] in the context, yes.

Dziedzic: Yes. So, on one hand, there's a very sophisticated climate for thought, in which you're capable of working, even if you don't want to be writing something down and putting your name on the bottom of it and saying, "This is my program." Then there's, also, responding to the material. It seems as though you're saying, take all of that thinking away, and just respond to the material. So how do those two things work for you simultaneously?

Benglis: Well, finally, it's the intuition that's the most important thing in directing the material. The material itself has qualities that nothing else can get. Translucency, for instance, with the urethane in this situation⁷, but there are all kinds of materials that are called urethane. [00:43:00] Paint is also a urethane. Rubber is also a paint, I found out. Natural rubber latex from Nigeria was being imported. So, there were all kinds of materials that can do different things. It was a material, a rubber material, natural rubber, that was used in the beginning for mold-making. Just a lot of ammonia was put into it. So, by the time I got it, it was fresh. [00:44:00] It had been canned by M.P. Medwick, who was a World War II veteran of the plastics, in a way. He had a very small little studio—was a science lab, really. It was his studio, and he was kind of a little nutty, because he had been experimenting with so many chemicals, it had really gone to his head. Everybody died in his—even his wife. Everybody died, and he was fairly young. He did. The people working with him, his wife. I know I'm part plastic [00:45:00] now from having worked so intensely

⁷ Referring to cast pigmented polyurethane works on view at Prince Street apartment.

with him. But I was also interested in being safe, so I wore a mask and pumped in the air from the outside. I wore a mask that had—were pumping air from the outside, but also had tanks that also blew air, that made lots of noise while I was working with the urethanes. With the guns themselves, I usually tried to keep open the doors, and work in big areas where there's lots of air and ventilation, with fans.

[00:46:00] So the material itself had an attraction, but it also has a repulsion for me. I show some of that in the works. They're like dinosaurs, they're like monsters. They're also friendly, though. I can also build with them. This reminds me of things I see, both in the North and the South. It reminds me of the large oak trees that we have, and also it reminds me, in the West, of the big cottonwood trees that seem to kind of poof up like that. These remind me of the palm trees that you see, the tall palm in California. So really imitating nature. Reminds me of the atomic [00:47:00] weapons that we saw as kids, exploding on the screen. Those are incredibly beautiful. They just kind of exploded and exploded and exploded. Plumes. Plume after plume, one on top of the other.

Dziedzic: And in a natural shape, or shape that we recognize as—

Benglis: Yes. Mushroomed.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about using phosphorescence with *Hills and Clouds*?

Benglis: Yes, that really came from seeing phosphorus in the seawater, the lake, before it was polluted, and also seaweed out here in Long Island, and also, I was always interested in the [00:48:00] funhouses of New Orleans that I would beg my parents to stop to see in Pontchartrain. I loved to go in those little buggies in these dark places and have these things jump out at you. All of these things really were exciting, very exciting to me. Didn't stop in New Orleans as much as I would have liked to, but I later began to—I was invited to the Great Barrier Reef just—actually, invited to Australia—after they bought the Pollock, by the same man that had them buy the Pollock. They collected my work very early on in Australia. Because of the feminist movement, Lucy Lippard had just been there, and same in New Zealand. I went to New Zealand two or three times. Brought Margo Leavin there, my dealer [00:49:00]—she loved it.

I think it's very interesting, but both Australia and New Zealand were very interested in America and what was happening. The women particularly got organized, and so they wanted me down there, as well as Lucy, very early. Within a few months apart, we both went down there. Not together. Lucy was a minimalist, basically, because she was married to Ryman, but then she became a feminist. So, it went from minimalism to feminism just like that. But she wasn't, any longer, really, interested in any of that. She

was interested more in geology and [00:50:00] humanism, as I am, really. Because I often said, back then, “I’m not a feminist; I’m a humanist.” Because I didn’t want to be lumped in any situation, really. I really wanted to find out about things I cared about, and why. I think that was it: why am I interested in this? It’s physical. It’s beautiful. It’s scary. It’s something that I haven’t seen before, but I’ve felt. It looks like an egg⁸, but it may be poisonous. But if you look at Easter eggs, they have kind of dynamite there. I mean, what is a grenade but dynamite? It’s a curious [00:51:00] little bomb, that for someone that doesn’t know what it is, it might be beautiful. It might be something like a turtle. But it’s pretty heavy, and it’s not to be messed with. I think, apart from their mystery, there’s the beauty, so you can leave them alone and just look at them.

Dziedzic: And you’ve learned about them, as you have learned about people and places, through experience, in a sense.

Benglis: That’s it, yes. I’m still learning about these things, with the different light. Some look cold, some look hot. This one, back there, I can turn the light on it. I have a round one there. It lights from the top, and the mystery is gone, but when it—in the dark.

[Side conversation]

Benglis: This fellow that I was thinking of, that I met, is called Jack Larsen. So, if you ever come out to his estate, I have two pieces out there. I think one of them we might have—I’m trying to think if we took any of—yes, we did take them to Storm King.

Dziedzic: [00:58:00] Oh, they were the loans?

Benglis: Yes. They’re out there. I’m thinking. Is this all that was shown there [referring to checklist]?

Dziedzic: Yes. I wanted to ask you about the evolution of the exhibition, because Nora [Lawrence], when I spoke to her, said that the first plan was to ask—I guess she suggested that you show some of your brick works that you had made in India.

Benglis: Yes.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about how it became fountains, and this ceramic work indoors?

⁸ Referring to *Antheia* 1/3, 2017, *Calypso* 1/3, 2017, and *Thetis* 1/3, 2017, cast pigmented polyurethane works on view at Prince Street apartment.

Benglis: I always wanted to do fountains, and I have a drawing over—we could show you. [00:59:00] The first commission I had was in Albany, New York⁹. The first time I went to India, I did just one part of this kind of part of the piece. These are pieces from India. *The Manu* (2008) here. Because they're made with hands, like that, the hot wax, into stainless steel. This, it's like a torso. The first beginning pieces I made with cotton and bunting, I stretched over wire, like this one over there. See that silver kind of torso? And then the head, like a knot, sprayed—toward the end of the knots, I had done very large, big knots. Were any of the large knots in this show? I think [01:00:00] maybe so.

Dziedzic: Just the one that we have in our collection, *Nu*.

Benglis: Oh, right, that was it. Yes, that's a lovely one.

Dziedzic: Yes. Yes, it's beautiful.

Benglis: That has the awkwardness and feeling: like an elephant. That was a very important thing, because I went to the zoo very early, when I was three and a half, and rode the elephant. Maybe even not three. Before my sister was born. I think the idea of these big animals really was so exciting to me. I thought that I could draw an elephant after that, and I would—

Dziedzic: After riding one?

Benglis: Yes. Well, after seeing it and feeling it. [01:01:00] And I realized later that I wasn't drawing an elephant, or I wasn't really drawing at nine years of age, or eight years of age, a red rock, when I went to Colorado. I wanted to have this feeling of this huge rock. This red rock, I realized, for me, brought the feeling there, much like cave people brought the feeling of the animals there, with the light and whatever. I think the wanting to bring an experience that you've [01:02:00] thought of, I think that's very important in art. It's only like a gift to yourself and to others, to bring forth the experience. My Greek island, where my grandparents are from—and [01:03:00] my father is all Greek—I went there when I was 11. That experience allowed me to go into the world and not be afraid, basically. I was both protecting my grandmother, but she was protecting me. So, it allowed me to kind of hold somebody's hand, an older person.

[Portion removed]

⁹ *Nalia*, 1982, bronze and copper.

So, when I got to Greece, I was on a train, and I get a letter, and I remember the letter was sent to me in Greece. I had an uncle. It was my grandfather's brother. So, he was a great-uncle. And he wrote me, "Come see the cherries. I'm eating cherries now. Come see the cherries in France, Marseilles." So, we [01:05:00] ended up in Marseilles, but all I remember is he died. He died right before I got there. He had emphysema from World War I. I just remember standing on his grave there, next to his stone there, and looking at the ants, thinking, he's there, and the ants are eating him.

I think all these kind of very physical things, and all this sort of wandering around in the harbor—we went to a restaurant, and it was like the restaurant of Moulin Rouge. It was like where the curved staircases, like big curved—and balconies with wrought iron, and looks like New Orleans, where I went to school there. For me, that was—[01:06:00] all these things—the harbor was very small in Marseilles. Not like the big harbor in New York. So, we were on the Greek boat. We were having the Greek food. We came back on—the *SS Independence* and the *Constitution* were the largest sister ships of the Americans, the most beautiful sister ships, the most new ships of the world then, and I came back on one of them. It was just like—it seemed like so much happened to me.

Dziedzic: Wow, talk about getting your passport stamped!

Benglis: Yes. Yes, it was wonderful. The Cannes, the Riviera. I came back in early September. And nobody was in Cannes. It was just after the war. Nobody could afford to be there. [01:07:00] And there I was in Marseilles, and they didn't have—you were going to the bathroom in the vineyards. And even in Athens. There was one little bathroom. I remember I was there in Easter time, Greece, so it was this time. In Athens, they had a skewer of a goat in the backyard. A whole body of a goat. We went island-hopping with my grandmother and saw these different people. My grandmother, luckily, she was an adventurer, and just decided to take me. She had taken my cousin before, two years [01:08:00] earlier, and he was two years older than I. So, he was lucky, and he went, he said, snorkeling, and in these caves of Kastellorizo. I finally caught up with him with that. I finally went to the caves. I did go diving, not just snorkeling. But that can be very scary if you go into the caves, diving. You can get lost. In Athens, there's a cave like that that people go down under, and they don't know which way is—even though they might have enough air, they can—and I know about diving, the most you can suffer can be just two feet under, if you don't know—the most your body changes is really two feet. Then, of course, later, you get the rapture of the deep, if you [01:09:00] go really deep. Then I went to the Great Barrier Reef. There was the brain coral there. That's another thing that I thought was something that seemed familiar to me.

Dziedzic: In thinking about your interest in surface, the surface of your work, you talk about the surface of the water, oil slicks and everything. Then you go below the surface, in a sense, underwater, and find surfaces there.

Benglis: Yes.

Dziedzic: Like you were saying, the coral.

Benglis: Yes, yes. Well, you know, they're intelligent species, and just the fact that we're dealing with the same rules of [01:10:00]—either underwater or above water, we're dealing with gravity, still. We're dealing with an intelligence of any living thing. That's—the different patterns.

[Portion removed]

Dziedzic: Do you want to talk about your time in India, and how that kind of influenced these ceramic works that you mentioned, that were in this exhibition?

Benglis: Well, people would tell me that my [01:13:00] work looked Indian because of the volume, the fact that it was curved, and that it was gestural in different ways. I've still not understood it, because Indian work, especially when I think about the miniatures, the color, the intensity of the color, and the way they use color, it's so different from the West. Also, Native American Indian works have a lot of association with the way that color is used. But it's all natural, early Indian painting, if you look— [01:14:00] the reds and the yellows and ochres and all those, all natural. I think there's so much that's human that's, in origin, a basic thing from nature. And stylistically, I think that I came really from abstract expressionism. But I added the fact that I'm curious about recipes, as I'm curious about materials, and I don't mean just food. I'm curious about what these materials can do, how they react. Like this. This one, I never found any more like this, but this is a rock of volcano [01:15:00]—a volcano rock. Totally porous, totally rounded. So, it's volcano ashes melted together, and it weighs a ton. It's really heavy. I've never found a rock that big like that. When you go to Hawaii, I was excited to maybe—maybe I could find some rocks. The natives consider their rocks religiously important. They will not let you take a rock out.

Same when I was in Athens when I was 11, I was in front of the Parthenon, and saw the Acropolis also, with the women as pillars, holding up the capital. I got so [01:16:00] excited, that I wanted a piece of it, whatever it was. There was just this rock on the ground, like that, not being protected or anything, but I was trying to get a piece of the rock. I remember the guy came over to me and said, "Don't do that." As if every little piece of rock was very important. I mean, he just heard the sound. So, the Greeks are

passionate about their rocks, whatever they are. I don't even remember what exactly I was hitting. I don't know that it had a fence around it. I was just thinking, oh, this is here. I would like a piece. I remember then being embarrassed that I was doing that, and my grandmother was upset that I would have done [01:17:00] that. It wasn't a sculpture, I know that. But since then, of course, you can go into a museum, pay the ticket money, and then see some of this phenomena that they had scattered about. Because this was 1953. This was pretty early after World War II, ending almost in—well, in '45, almost '46. So, it wasn't many years after that that I was there, eight years after the war.

Greece, luckily—the English soldiers were there. My uncle was drafted when he went over there as a young man, and he had his photograph in the [01:18:00] soldier's uniform. I was told by my grandmother and people there, later, that he went over there, and he was drafted, and he had his photo done, and so I wanted my photo done. But the women's outfit didn't fit me, so they put me in the little boy's soldier's outfit when I was 11. There is a photograph of me like that, with the stockings on. I was so proud that my uncle had had it done, and I didn't realize that he was drafted. My grandmother went over there and got him out. That was after the war. Two years before '53, so '51, he was being drafted.

Just thinking about how dangerous it probably was to be over there, really. I could have been [01:19:00] stolen.

[Portion removed]

Dziedzic: I have some pictures here of you kind of adjusting—here, this one—working on *Crescendo* (1983–84/2014–15), [01:21:00] or what would become *Crescendo*. I guess I wondered if you could talk about this work, which was *The Wave of the World* (1984/2015), right?

Benglis: Yes. They wanted to move it, now, down to New Orleans. It has its own place in this bayou, and it is now installed there in City Park, and I just wrote them today.

[Portion removed]

[01:23:00] Anyway, so here, that's a very exciting piece, *The Wave*. The document—who did those photos, do you remember?

Dziedzic: I'm not sure. They might have come from your studio to Storm King.

Benglis: They did, but they're really wonderful. A pro did those. You can tell. Peter Bellamy. He also had me sit down—do you have any more of me there? These are of me on the scene there, right? Yes. Those are good, too.

Dziedzic: [01:24:00] I think this is somewhere else. I think this is when—I don't think this is when you were working on this.

Benglis: *Bounty* (2014)?

Dziedzic: Yes. I think.

Benglis: Yes, I think you're right.

Dziedzic: But I don't know where it is.

Benglis: It's Walla Walla. Yes, the trees are—now there's whole machinery there now. It's not like that.

Dziedzic: So, for *North South East West* (1988/2009/2014–15), that's something that we have—

Benglis: I'd love to get those, because you got the expression of that gaping—you know. I think of myself as being underwater a lot of times, and making an aquarium. That looks like a gaping mouth of squid. You know, inking squid.

Dziedzic: This was—there was one—one of these was a mold for the others, is [01:25:00] that right?

Benglis: No, I have four different ones.

Dziedzic: I see that there's many dates attached to this one.

Benglis: Oh, right. I kept working on them. Yes. I had one. Yes, one was a mold for all four of them, and I kept working on them differently¹⁰. That was fun. I did a lot of work for that show. I was just thinking about it. I was finishing the big one. I had the idea. I had the focus of that, plus I wanted to do these in a different way. Then these, I wanted to do them really tall, like columns.

¹⁰ One element was produced in 1988 called *Chimera/Cicada*. Three more casts were made in 2009 to make *North South East West*. Additions were made in 2014–15 to each element for *Water Sources*.

Dziedzic: This is *Bounty* and *Fruited Plane* (2014) and *Amber Waves* (2014).

Benglis: Yes, I like those. Just thinking about [01:26:00] how the *Hills and Clouds* look in stainless? I keep thinking that maybe this one could be in stainless, very highly polished. And now, I'm doing the bronze one, *Hills and Clouds*. The stainless one in bronze. I'm collecting all my pennies—to do something else, you just have to gamble, even if you don't have it. To just think, okay, [01:27:00] you've got to do it. That's how I've always been with it. You've got to do it in order to see it, what it will look like. That's how I feel. I want to do new forms, but something is telling me, you've got to do this. I had the original mold—we have to keep the molds alive. That's how I feel about it, so that they're never worn out, until I've done what I want to do, because I'm finding out I don't get to do what I want to do if I don't keep them going. I have to kind of be on top of it, be thinking all the time. And that is distracting. I can't live a normal life. I don't think there's anything normal about that. Being an artist is not normal. [Laughter] [01:28:00] Well, it's not. It really isn't.

I think this is a normal thing about me. Hey, Pi. Let's look at this. How normal are you? She's a normal dog.

[Side conversation]

Dziedzic: About these [tall fountains] [01:29:00] Nora showed me a picture, from when everyone visited you in Santa Fe, of a stack of Styrofoam cups.

Benglis: Yes.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about how that—

Benglis: Oh, well, I took it out there. I was going to do one that I had, a little one, and then they put a pipe in it. I said, "What is this happening here with the pipe in it? That's not my work." "Oh," he said, "to keep the Styrofoam on top." But he put a pipe in it. I thought about making a smaller piece, but it didn't work, and somebody just put a big, ugly pipe, like the size of a—I don't know, but that will not work with Styrofoam cups. [01:30:00] It broke when it was shipped to the East Coast in early 2015. It probably it broke the Styrofoam, and then they put that pipe there. I said, "What's that there for?" I could have made it that piece. I might have brought it here. But whatever happened to that piece, it's no longer that piece, and now it's too small a statement to—I mean, it's nothing. So Styrofoam cups, that's it, and foam. Looks

bad. In other words, it never became bronze. Because this is not Styrofoam, you see? And it's not foam. This goes beyond that.

I did think of ice cream. I did think of what happens when you stack the pleasure of the conical shape, because that cone shape is just great, and then the water runs over. I thought of something [01:31:00] like that having water—doing the other half, actually, and having water come off the sides, just streaming off. I think that could be nice, little holes here and there. But I think, in plastic, you encourage something to happen with the light that doesn't happen in the bronze. I have a black fountain, and somebody's really taken care of it, and it looks beautiful¹¹. It's one of these black ones. It looks like an onyx.

Dziedzic: So, it's painted black? It's a flat black?

Benglis: No, no. It's in the plastic. But they wrap it up. They really take care of it. You don't get collectors like that. They wrap it up, they [01:32:00] drain it, they turn it on again and have to unwrap it in the summertime. It's incredibly beautiful in their garden, and their garden is just green, green. So manicured. So lucky to have that. It looks like onyx. It's a black fountain, in the translucent way. It's really beautiful. The pink fountains were beautiful, too. I have one more, but you have to find people that really care about them to really take care of them.

[Side conversation]

But you know what a fountain does? It gives back. [01:37:00] It really does give back, and the people that have fountains have water. We should have more fountains in New York. They should have more fountains even in—the coastline of Spain has a lot of fountains. It's dry. But fountains give pleasure.

Dziedzic: And they circulate water.

Benglis: They circulate water. Air conditioners circulate water. We need fountains. We really do. This bronze one I want to make into a fountain. The bronze *Hills and Clouds*. I'm going to go a little higher. I think that would be interesting. Because, remember, I wanted to float it firstly? Can't float it. Maybe—it looks like a flotation, but it would be very beautiful in a pool.

Dziedzic: It would still have its base supports.

Benglis: That's right. [01:38:00]

¹¹ *Faith*, 2010, cast pigmented polyurethane

Dziedzic: Yes, and it was beautiful. I wish that I could have seen it at night, especially.

Benglis: Yes, the phosphorescence. Yes.

Dziedzic: Was *The Wave of the World* the first work that you made outside?

Benglis: [01:39:00] Well. I'm thinking. It's a good question. No. Vera List—do you know who she is?

Dziedzic: Yes.

Benglis: She wanted something inside, firstly, and S.I. Newhouse wanted something outside on this patio¹². I had two really great people commission me after my show at Paula's, where I was going around corners and in corners, and not to mention—actually, it was after Janie C. Lee's show. I got commissions in Texas, too, by the Murchisons who owned the Dallas Cowboys¹³. [01:40:00] I remember Janie Murchison was going to go to Germany next. I had done it out. Clint Murchison had this idea of building a hotel in the city of New York for trailers, so that they could go with their trailers into these parks that were buildings. They would have everything. The trailers could go in, and you would have restaurants for the trailers. I mean, it's still a good idea, but—

Dziedzic: So, like an RV—

Benglis: Yes, an RV park in the middle of the city. Because he probably hated the city and hated hotels, and he just wanted his shaving cream around him and whatever. He wanted all his whistles. He had me do something [01:41:00] around—I was with Janie C. Lee. It was her birthday celebration, so we did this thing, and then later I did a commission, the same time, for the Dallas Fort Worth Museum, and that was my first museum in situ work, other than *Phantom*¹⁴. *Phantom* was later, in situ. So, I had that, and there was that show. Henry Hopkins was head of the museum at the time. Henry had been in Washington, and then went to Dallas. No, then he went to San Francisco after Dallas Fort Worth. Went to Washington, Dallas Fort Worth, and then, I think, San Francisco. So, the question was, [01:42:00] first—

¹³ *Dallas*, 1970, pigmented polyurethane foam. This was executed at the Murchinsons' in May 1970 and was later destroyed after an armadillo ate a part of it. This was executed before the List and Newhouse commissions.

¹⁴ *For Carl Andre*, 1970, black pigmented polyurethane foam

Dziedzic: Yes, outdoor work. There was Vera List, and—

Benglis: So, I did a piece—she liked the bathroom piece that I did, in this Day-Glo pink, right next to her toilet¹⁵. I said—because of the dimensions of the tile, which was this old '20s tile, which was probably about seven inches, like this, very narrow, maybe about four by sevens. It was beautiful white—white, white—tile, and with a black kind of design. There are photographs of it somewhere. I was just about partial way through—I was doing them both at the same time, and S.I. Newhouse was outside, around a corner, outside on this patio, up near Park Place, [01:43:00] major street, outside. Vera called me up and said, “I don’t like it.” She said, “Scrape it up.” She used those words. I said, “Well,” I said, “I’ll do it, but let me finish it first,” because I hadn’t finished it. So, I finished it, and she liked it. Then she wanted me to do another one outside¹⁶. Okay, so I had S.I. Newhouse done¹⁷, and Vera List, I had done hers and their flowerbed next to her steps. She had a place on the Sound.

Dziedzic: Right.

Benglis: Yes, did you know that?

Dziedzic: I know that from a work that Robert Grosvenor had [01:44:00] in the water.

Benglis: Okay, that’s right. She was something else. She was really something.

Dziedzic: What did the works look like that were outside?

Benglis: Well, they looked like finished works. Finally, the work was that color, but pink, and really beautiful.

Dziedzic: From the foam?

Benglis: Foam. From the foam, yes. It was in the corner, and she said, “Just leave enough room for my husband to back off from the toilet.” I saw them, sitting on the couch. He was lying down with his head on her lap, and he was happy. She was happy. [01:45:00] I went to visit, and everybody was happy. She was happy. He didn’t complain. But I found that amazing, that they allowed me to do that. She allowed it. I

¹⁵ *Pink Indoor Piece*, 1970, pigmented polyurethane foam

¹⁶ *Black Outdoor Piece*, 1970, pigmented polyurethane foam

¹⁷ *Untitled*, 1970, pigmented polyurethane foam

mean, whatever made her happy. S.I. Newhouse did it, and Victoria—later, S.I. Newhouse really wanted some of these new pieces of mine, and I'm thinking, what were they? He really liked them.

Dziedzic: I thought I read that it was one of your knots, maybe, that he expressed interest in, and—

Benglis: That's what it was. Did I tell this story before?

Dziedzic: I don't know where I read it, but I must have—

Benglis: Well, he was interested. It was new work. The knots really began very early on. But all the recent sparkle pieces aren't knots. I deliberately told myself, no. They began like as totems, or they began just white and figures, like these. That one. But there were no knots at all. I just decided these—
[01:47:00] I can't do a knot anymore. No knots. All of them, they curve around. They're very convoluted. There's not a knot in them of the newer sparkle work. Or paper pieces, I should say.

Dziedzic: They're more kind of like that torso, right?

Benglis: Yes, they do all these different things, but they're not knots. In fact, I'm thinking—where's my phone? Was that it up there?

Dziedzic: It sounded like it was back there. Should I look for it?

[Side conversation]

Benglis: [01:48:00] Thank you. [Looking at images on phone] [01:50:00] These are a couple paper pieces that are on exhibit now at Sueyun Locks's place. And these are others. That's my studio. You can just look at all those.

Dziedzic: [Looking at images on phone] They do have a lot more—I see what you mean. They have a lot more twists and turns than this kind of earlier sort of torso.

Benglis: And complications, too, painted-wise. Illusion, the wire, a knot.

Dziedzic: So, these aren't metalized in any way? It's all—

Benglis: No.

Dziedzic: —painted?

Benglis: Yes, it's hand-painted, and sculpted, too. [01:51:00] I cast the sparkles solidly in the paper. I make the handmade paper, sheet-wise, and then some of it is just white paper, but more and more, I made this whole series. I haven't showed them at Cheim & Read yet, but three pieces of—some of those are at Cheim & Read now. They may show them soon, I don't know. But I just do the work. I don't work for shows.

Dziedzic: Do you lay the paper over it, like an armature, when it's wet?

Benglis: Yes. It's wet. It's like it's already been sparkled when I make the paper, because it's wet, with the sparkles in it.

Dziedzic: Oh, they're included in the paper.

Benglis: Yes, yes.

Dziedzic: I see.

Benglis: So that—it's like armor of different colors. I think they're kind of like [01:52:00] colorful fish, or lizards. Lizards took on different colors. That one Sueyun has up now in her show.

Dziedzic: They kind of remind me of the clay pieces, the—

Benglis: Yes, glazes.

Dziedzic: —extruder. Well, the glazes as well as—

Benglis: Yes, they're fast. Yes, I like that. I like an image that's fast. That you can get—it's iconographic. You can get it, but then you look at it a long time, and it's subtle, because it's reflective, it has different lights.

Dziedzic: It looks different from every angle.

Benglis: Yes. This whole series—here I am with a paper piece¹⁸. My nephew took that photo. [01:53:00]
My many doors. That's my cypress door. Double doors.

Dziedzic: Yes, and I saw the beams on the ceiling, too. How beautiful.

Benglis: Yes. Oh, good.

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask, there's some of the ceramic pieces—

Benglis: Do you want any of these photos, just as a document?

Dziedzic: Oh, yes. Yes, that would be helpful.

[Side conversation]

Dziedzic: And you're just sort of working quickly without a design?

Benglis: Well, I'm working with a form. Well, I like this flayed form—see? Jellyfish look like that when they're in the water, to move. Like in Atlanta, I've been there recently. They kind of move like that, and they have this stream of—they're really beautiful, all the fish. The Atlanta Aquarium is really beautiful. To me, they're like orchids, too. You just look at flowers sometimes, and if they're all together, you can see them.

Dziedzic: Yes, it's really beautiful. Again, it's kind of moving in more ways [01:57:00] than one.

Benglis: Yes. And the shadows. Yes, she has those two now up, along with—I'm not sure if that long one—*Geisha*, yes. But see, I've hung it that way, but there's a wire down there. You can also hang it the other way. I'm probably deciding. But it's okay. Some you can hang both ways.

Dziedzic: Well, you showed me the picture of you with one of the *Totems*, and it reminded me of a couple of the ceramic works that were at Storm King. [01:58:00] You talked about how they were inspired by the Santa Fe landscape, there, these stacked pieces. These ones.

¹⁸ SB#11 (2015–17)

Benglis: Landscape, yes.

Dziedzic: And I was interested in that, because so often—

Benglis: This is your-all's design [referring to a T-shirt], remember? You did this?

Dziedzic: Oh, yes.

Benglis: I liked it. I think it was a good design.

Dziedzic: Yes, that's the glow-in-the-dark T-shirt, I think. [01:59:00] There's another item in our shop that's an edition of a phosphorescent piece that you made. I wanted to ask about what inspired you to make that, the smaller editioned piece.

Benglis: The phosphorescence?

Dziedzic: Yes. Did that come about after *Hills and Clouds* was completed?

Benglis: Oh, this is really [referring to image on phone]—this is a sample that I think is in my window in Walla Walla. Just a sample of—see? [02:00:00] Sometimes it's like that. You get these things from the snow melting, and it's the same to me.

Dziedzic: Surface on surface?

Benglis: Yes. This is out in East Hampton. This is my rhododendrons when they get the snow on it. Then you have the sticks. Then you turn it upside down, you see? It could be like the *Hills and Clouds*, if you kind of did it like that. So, flows go different—because that's what I see every day. I have these double windows all over my building that I designed [02:01:00] for living out in the woods, and I'm never afraid in the woods, because I'm looking at everything outside, and it's really beautiful to see everything. It's like being underwater. That's the second floor. So, you go out, and you see these beautiful rhododendron with the big—so tropical-looking. We don't have rhododendron in the South. We have azaleas. But these collect the snow, so—it's so beautiful.

Dziedzic: Yes, I was surprised by, I guess, the verticality of this, in both these clay works, and also your fountains were [02:02:00] 25 feet high—over 25 feet high.

Benglis: Yes.

Dziedzic: And so often with landscape, I think there's a horizontality.

Benglis: Yes.

Hey, Pi. Pi, don't do that. No. You want to take up your papers there?

Dziedzic: Pi is on the notes.

Benglis: Yes. Oh, Pi. She wants to come loving you. That's what she wants to do. You want to close your notes so then she can—

Dziedzic: Nuzzle up.

Benglis: Yes. Put your notes on the other side, then she can nuzzle up.

[Side conversation]

Dziedzic: How did *Hills and Clouds* end up in South Fields, the area of Storm King where it was sited? Was that your decision, or was that a conversation—

Benglis: I liked it, because that didn't have anything on it, and it was high, and you could see it from the highway, and it would glow. And I liked it because you could also see it from the house, [02:05:00] and it would glow. So, nobody would know what it is, like a flying saucer or something. So that's why. If you had put it close to anything, you would have compared it to something else. The di Suveros are so differently—

I have to say this. Di Suvero asked me if I wanted to pour on one of his platforms. He wanted to make a platform for me, and I was truly insulted. But I answered in a very sexist way, because I thought he was trying to date me or something. I said, "If you want to date somebody or something"—I said, "If you want to date me," I said, "but I'm not interested in one of your platforms." I said, "Why don't you ask somebody

else if you want to date me?" Something really bad. I was really bad-ass. [Laughter] [02:06:00] I think it was when he was involved with the Park Place Gallery, because I was living in a tenement, six-floor tenement walk-up. I realized he—it angered me. That's all.

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask about the *Cloak-Wave/Pedmarks* (1998) and *Migrating Pedmarks* (1998) pieces, too. There's a photo in here of them as well with some of the native grasses that are all around in the meadows area. I think this is—I don't know where this is in relation to the—

Benglis: In the drive, when you drive up. Yes. It's the first thing when you take the first curve. Yes. That's where they were, on the left. We agreed where those places were. We agreed on—and I like that hill, because—were the di Suveros out there? I don't remember.

Dziedzic: Not by those, no.

Benglis: That's right, because I knew that this was the place that [02:08:00] really—something had to really command the space, number one. Nothing to distract. So that was, to me, very obvious place for it. And it was great, because it was its own *Hills and Clouds*. There were other things they said had happened below—there's something else in that—

Dziedzic: I think it was a Serra, Richard Serra back there.

Benglis: That was it. That was it.

I saw Serra at a party. I was very stoned. He walked in and something that he did really bothered me. [02:09:00] So, I went over—had boots on. Just stamped on his foot as hard as I could. And he went like this—he walked with his back about 40 feet, and then spun around—and then came back and was ready to sock me. He said, "Why did you do that?" But he said it really slowly. I said, "In the South, that's the way we flirt." [02:10:00]

Dziedzic: So that was your deflection? Protective measure, I guess.

Benglis: I had to. I said, "In the South, that's the way we flirt."

Dziedzic: I kind of wonder, when you're working in a museum context, and there are stories and histories with all the other people who have artwork—your artwork makes these debates and disagreements visible sometimes, but then to have to negotiate this physicality. Especially at a place like Storm King,

which is 500 acres, and you're still trying to get yourself a little space with [02:11:00] maybe no history behind it, and have your work be presented by itself, in its own context that it creates, and not in a dialogue with the other work around it. I think about that sometimes, where you think the sculptures all look wonderful together, but then the artists themselves might have a tension, for one reason or another.

Benglis: Well, for sure. You did mention that I was near the di Suveros. Did you mention that?

Dziedzic: It's in the same area where the di Suveros are, but I don't know—

Benglis: Was it? I thought it was in an area where there was sort of a stepping area. It was high and low, and it was a high point. But I thought it was—and there were woods around, but it was a clearing.

Dziedzic: Yes. I think it's way past the area where the—

Benglis: That's what I think was, and they said it was okay. But I didn't [02:12:00] really want to be near anything. In fact, it was one of the nicest experiences I've ever had.

I pulled out of the Whitney show when I was first there, because it was a big latex painting, and Marcia had some—she didn't stand up to the situation, finally. It was like they thought they were giving me a good space by putting half of it on a ramp, and half of it out on the floor. I said no thank you, and I saw my name go down, and as I had just pulled out the piece, because I didn't want to be in the show. A lot of that had to do with Serra and Ryman, at the time, complaining that my piece was in color, and it was called *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*. That was—I just had to do that.

Dziedzic: So rather than thinking, oh, you're taking this to a new level, you're working within this theme, you're subverting our work, maybe, it was, you don't get it. Get out.

Benglis: Well, that's what I thought: "Get out. Leave." Because I didn't name it *Anti-Illusion*. They didn't tell me that. But the thing is, they took it literally. I could have said, okay, that's just paint on the floor. In a way, I saw it as paint on the floor looking good, because I had a black floor, and illusionistically, it popped up. So, I [02:14:00] was making a point about illusion. This is what I had seen in the Carl Andre at the Jewish Museum. He came out of one room—*Primary Structures* show, the Carl Andre—with one brick, continuing the brick like that, a line out of that room. You walked into that room, and the whole room was going like that, because he drew the room. What I thought I was doing was popping it from the floor, which I was. That's how I felt about—so the Serra story makes sense, because this happened later. [02:15:00] He was always like that. I'm the same sign as he, Serra. I just was playing his game, too.

Dziedzic: What sign is that?

Benglis: Scorpio. [Laughter] It can be maligned, too, easily. Poor Richard, that's all. When I stepped on his toes, it wasn't very nice. And I would never do it, sanely, again. I mean, I would never do it. But just the circumstances were that way. Now you know why I was defensive. Actually, I did a first show with a lot of people for the Y—Joan Jonas, in one of her first shows. [02:16:00] I think Joan did one of her first mirror pieces there, where she was carrying around a mirror and looking at her body. But you saw her body carrying around a mirror, as wide as she was, and tall as she was. It was a great piece, the tension. Fourteenth Street Y, maybe a handful of people were there. I also remember Vito Acconci's piece, with the chair—one foot above, one below. [02:17:00] That was in the early '70s. It was maybe even her first or second or third performance, and one of Acconci's first performances. It was just a lot of good stuff going on, early on, about these subjects that we're talking about.

Dziedzic: You mentioned the experience of working at Storm King. I guess I wanted to know if you wanted to say more about what it was like to organize the show.

Benglis: [02:18:00] Well, I have to say how it's like a family, and the art world isn't always like that. But I think I've been very lucky to have had this show. Also, my two dealers in the world, Cheim & Read and those people that work there, and Paula and those people that worked with her, I've been very lucky to have the best. Really. It doesn't hurt. It doesn't hurt at all. It hurts different ways, differently.

[Side conversation]

Benglis: The Museum of Modern Art just did something, because I have a piece there, the gold piece that you may have seen near the door. They're going to keep it up for [02:28:00] a while. They said they'll keep it up and put it in another show. They'll keep it in this show, and they'll keep it up. It's a gold piece called *Ghost Dance/Pedmarks* (1998) with the gold leaf, and it's bronze. It's after those very primal ones. I don't think I showed it in your show, though, did I?

Dziedzic: No.

Benglis: Well, I don't know why I didn't. Oh, probably because the *Migrating Pedmarks* were the ones that moved, like a bird and then the other one that was like a wave. This was just on the wall. But it's made the same way as those other two. [02:29:00] But I made it, finally, over at Modern Art [Foundry]. I

have two castings. The Kellogg lady, Agnes Gund, bought it when it was in the show. I failed to mention that. Are you still recording?

Dziedzic: Yes.

Benglis: Good. Agnes is an amazing person. She did buy *Ghost Dance/Pedmarks* and later MoMA accepted it is a gift. I think she's probably the collector that I respect the most—sort of sticking to her own guns, so to speak. [02:30:00] I think artists are very lucky if they can ever meet collectors as I have, even though some do not exist anymore. But they were very helpful for me to go on with what I needed to do. The foundries have gotten so expensive.

I would like [02:31:00] to be giving—Louise Nevelson was giving a lot of her work away. Did you know that? There were collectors that supported her, but, in a way—I mean, she was good, and finally—I think, if you think about it, though, the women never have gained as much power, so they have to empower themselves. That's what I've always felt. Don't walk away from it. Face it.

[Portion removed]

Dziedzic: But I think there are ways [02:33:00] where women artists have kind of had to make certain moves because they haven't had this sort of graceful, invisible support that some artists do. And so, any move that you make is sort of criticized. That happens on a smaller scale, too, I think, sometimes.

Benglis: Yes. It does. I mean, I'm sure you've seen it in your work life. It's easier for men out there, perhaps. But I never really felt that way, because I think probably, with Serra, I felt that I was speaking his language, and that's why I did it. Because I recognized him. I liked him. But I kind of had to do it. [Laughs] You know. [02:34:00] He's a Scorpio.

Dziedzic: A language of brute physicality? Is that what you mean?

Benglis: Yes, because that's what he was. I know that they complained about me at the Whitney. That's why I was moved out of being right there, in front of them, right next to them. Then I was offered right as you enter the museum, where you take your hats and coats off. They made me a plank. They wouldn't let me be in the same room with Ryman and Serra, because the guys complained. They said it detracted. Marcia Tucker told me that, and I accepted it, because I didn't want to be half on a ramp and half down, because that's—

Dziedzic: In the coatroom of the museum?

Benglis: [02:35:00] Well, it wasn't in the coatroom. It was as you walk in. There is that wall as you walk in. But for me, it was like the coatroom, yes. Then they did another little room after that, in the back. But it was just as you walk in, where now they have maybe a desk there, so it would have been on a ramp, before—I was thinking where the coats were. They have that little back room, but that came later, I think.

Dziedzic: Your use of color wasn't just criticized in that instance. That seemed like a theme that continued for a lot of your career, of looking at the color and critiquing its use.

Benglis: Well, I [02:36:00] remember—this is a story about Leo Castelli and Jeff Koons. When Jeff Koons came to the forefront, I went to a party that—I think this is one that was right when I was doing something that S.I. Newhouse might have gotten, another work. I can't remember exactly. Oh, I was doing the big knots, those bright, shiny, huge, push-pull things. That's what they are. They go like this, like accordions. They're making music. There are all these [02:37:00] kind of light and action and gestures. Like this, push-pull. Jeff was—actually, he had been working on Wall Street, so he was just beginning, and I liked his work, and Leo was kind of handling him. Leo might have shown me. But I didn't want to leave Paula at the time, and I didn't—he was flirting with the idea, so he asked for a small knot, one of the small knots. He was showing all my videos. He hired somebody to do the videos, and said, "Lynda, I want to do a small show." So, he did the videos and the knot. He wanted to do the work. He kept asking me, "Why don't you do a big knot?" He kept wanting to—only now, after all these years, [02:38:00] am I doing a big knot, because I felt like, well, why not? I've found a way of including the gesture in a larger cast work. I decided I'd tackle that, because I didn't rise to the occasion then, and I didn't need to. I had all these other things I had to do, because they were doing different things.

So, Jeff Koons was very excited to meet me. And then Leo said, "Jeff," like, "Calm down." You know, "Hold yourself." Then I knew he was being groomed. This is just how it's done. He can't be—"No, no," like that. That's because I didn't exactly do what Leo wanted me to do, or this or that. And that's okay. [02:39:00] That's what it's about. Leo was a lawyer. Ileana Sonnabend had all the money, so he was able to shuffle ball change easily. But I remember once I was invited to sit on Leo's lap, because that's really what he wanted to do with the girls. I thought that was okay. I'm not—he's an old man. Let me make him feel good, just sitting on his lap. I was careful not to get him too excited. All that's okay, but I never really wanted to go there, because it seemed to me I was in my place, I was in the right place, not trying to be someplace else, and not sitting on his lap in [02:40:00] reality. I could do it, feigning it, playing the game, but not for work. Not for work.

Dziedzic: And that's why you wanted to stay at Paula Cooper?

Benglis: Yes.

Dziedzic: One example.

Benglis: Yes, one example. When Douglas left Paula and had a lot of the Paula Cooper stable there at Pace, I felt very sad, because, well, we lost Douglas, and he was a good salesman. He is a great guy, very smart, and had even asked me to go on a vacation with his parents. I was trim then, so I wasn't frightened to be with somebody that really wasn't—it was no threat to me, and it was a fun vacation, because I liked his quips always. [02:41:00] So I went on a vacation to—I think it was Puerto Rico. I'm not even sure where it was. Somewhere in the Bahamas, maybe, the Bahamas. I've forgotten. It was fun, just for the weekend or whatever it was.

When he went to Pace, I really didn't go there. When I did leave Paula, I was gone and nowhere for a year, because I really wanted to see what it felt like, the reality of things. I was with my parents as they were dying, so to speak. They were. It couldn't—it was a better place for me to just deal with what I had to deal with, the reality of things. Then somebody, a close friend, mentioned that the Cheim & Read Gallery had a new space, and it was interesting. So, then I just went in and asked, and [02:42:00] John [Cheim] said, "I have to ask my partner, Howard [Read]." John—I didn't know him, but he was always—had a sweet smile when I'd go to where they were. It was just always nice to see that he liked art, and I knew that they liked art. So, he asked John, and then they said they'd show me. So that's kind of how it happened. But I haven't ever been really aggressive in the situation. I just—I was lucky, like I said earlier. Right place in the work, understanding just—I think it's a matter of life dance [02:43:00] working. Living is a life dance.

Dziedzic: Yes. You mentioned the quality that Paula Cooper had earlier in the interview, that she kind of knew what she wanted and didn't hesitate. She committed, and it seems like it's not just luck, but maybe you have those qualities as well, and that has benefitted you both in this—

Benglis: I think passion, too. To have belief and passion. I realized art, for me, took the place of religion, because when you feel that you don't have a religion or you don't have a belief, and the something that's going to take care of you from the outside, you have to have a belief of something, or a willingness to give into [02:44:00] something. When it's not a total social, organized, rule-playing thing, then what is it? It's some other kind of organization of habit. What are you going to do with your time? It's the best way of passing your time, thinking about art.

[Side conversation]

I'm lucky right now that I have a nephew that I'm helping along a bit, but he's also helping me. He's 22. I took him under wing in Santa Fe, here, and Walla Walla, where I have—I bought a house [02:46:00] there, an old wood Craftsman house, 1910. He just arrived on my doorstep. I taught him how to make paper—and he's been with me since. I left him for the first time in Santa Fe now. He's going door to door, knocking on doors, to sell passive solar, and then he was even thinking about another door-to-door thing that he'd like to do. I said, "How are you doing this?" Of course, I think he—because he wants to. He wants to see who's out there. He wants to meet the mayor. So, he told me, he said, "I called up and I said to somebody, 'I want to meet the mayor.' I just said, 'I want to meet the mayor.'" I said, "What did they think you were doing? They thought you were crazy. You just said, 'I want to meet the mayor?'" "Yes." [02:47:00] And so that's the kind of kid he is. He's from Lake Charles, Louisiana, and I realize I was like that, too, but I found something to funnel this energy, like you were saying, the black and the—you know. There's a funnel there that has to take up some of that energy, some of that light. And so, let's see what he's going to do with it, but he has a lot of it. I think there's so many people out there that have some of that energy. You see it every day on television, and then you see it when there were thousands of people marching in Washington. Thank God they're doing that again. Thank God it's happening. Thank God there's something out there that tells us, we've got to do something about it. This can't be ignored.

Dziedzic: Or wasted. Energy wasted.

Benglis: Or wasted. Energy wasted, exactly. Ignored. Wasted is the [02:48:00] thing, yes. That's it. So, when a kid's beaming with energy like that at 22, you can't tell him, "Why are you knocking on doors?" That's the last thing most people want to do. You know? [Laughs] Hey, Pi. You ready to knock our door down and go out, huh? You ready to go out for a walk, huh? Are you? You want to go? Okay.

Dziedzic: All right. Well, thank you so much.

Benglis: Well, thank you.

[End of interview]