

REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

NEW YORK

Lynda Benglis at Cheim & Read

Lynda Benglis's exhibition evidenced a striking revitalization for the artist. Gone were the gilded knots, bows and fans which had predominated since the 1970s. In their place were painterly sculptures—high-spirited and gravity-defying works. While Benglis continues both her formalist explorations of the hard/soft dichotomy and her efforts to bridge the gap between painting and sculpture, the end results are radically different.

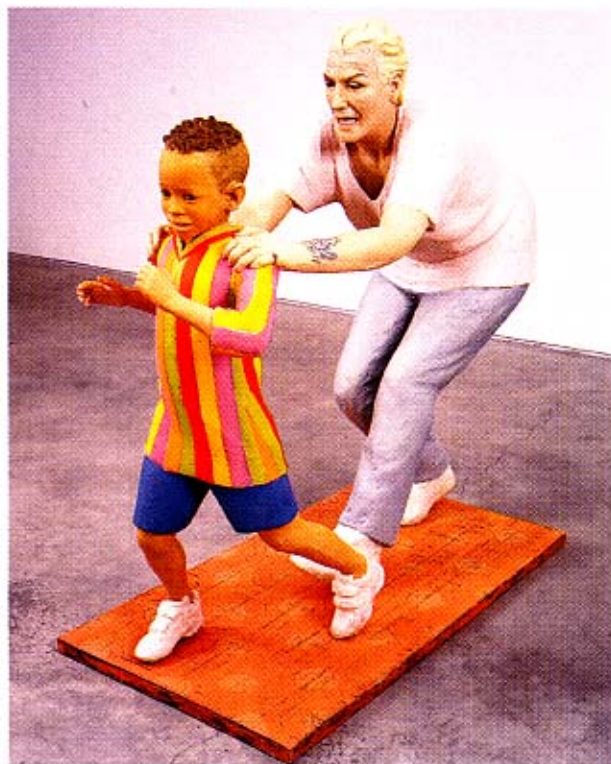
The show consisted of five small, glazed-ceramic pieces; two large, freestanding sculptures in bronze; one gilded-bronze wall relief; and (oddly) the 1973 video *Female Sensibility*, whose 14 minutes of two androgynous-looking women kissing once posed a challenge to traditional notions of "femininity" and gender. Placed on pedestals, the ceramic pieces looked like contorted biomorphic creatures. Smothered in variously colored Day-Glo glazes and comparatively intimate in scale (the smallest is 13½ by 11 by 12 inches), they hark back to Benglis's

idiosyncratic sculptures of the mid-'80s and testify to a renewed interest in process and dynamism. Unlike the fastidiously finished knot pieces, from which signs of the artist's hand had been eliminated, the new bulbous and protruding shapes show thumbprints and finger holes everywhere.

Natural form captured in frozen movement remains a consistent theme, and is best exemplified by one of the larger works, *Migrating Pedmarks* (1998). This enormous black-and-white-patinated bronze was cast from overlapped and curling sheets of cut clay. Topped by two large winglike elements, it appears poised to lift up from the floor, belying the sculpture's immense weight. Similarly, the eccentric character of the form seems at odds with the solidity of bronze, recalling Benglis's poured foam pieces of the early '70s.

There is a sense of renewal, too, in the bronze-and-gold-leaf wall piece. To create *Ghost Dance/Pedmarks* (1998), she first modeled her familiar torsolike motif out of soft clay (instead of fabricating it, as before, out of wire, cotton bunting and plaster). The rough-hewn, pocked surface

Lynda Benglis: *Cloak-Wave/Pedmarks*, 1998, bronze, black patina, 85½ by 86 by 42½ inches; at Cheim & Read.



John Ahearn: *East 100th Street*, 1996-98, pigmented resin, 56 by 55 by 27 inches; at Alexander and Bonin.

of this piece differs greatly from the gentle twists and suave regularity of the early torsos. She has again achieved a weightless quality, as well as a newfound playfulness: when viewed in profile, the piece looks like a large gold snake undulating up the wall.

Indeed, this sense of playfulness is what animates the show as a whole. The works are more lively, inviting, tactile, visceral and organic than anything Benglis has done in a long time. Putting to rest any art-world skepticism, she has proven herself capable of venturing beyond the knot. —Maura Reilly

John Ahearn at Alexander and Bonin

This exhibition was Ahearn's first gallery show in seven years. In the interval he has been preoccupied with numerous museum shows of his work. However, one suspects that he has also been trying to absorb the 1992 meltdown of his public commission for three statues in front of the 44th precinct police station in the South Bronx. As is well known, he voluntarily removed the works after a storm of protest from some of the

more vocal elements in the neighborhood, who charged him variously with racism, "raising a monument to the criminals," etc. The work in this show indicated that while the artist has struck out in some new areas, he has decided to hold his ground.

The most familiar sculptures in the show are from his ongoing series of bust-length children's portraits, which remain among the artist's most successful efforts. Like perfect snapshots, they seem to present us with the reality of these children, largely unclouded by any esthetic agenda. Particularly beautiful are *Kiana* (1998), a young girl with snaky black braids who wears a white T-shirt, and *William* (1996), a boy with a lovely open face. Like most of Ahearn's work, these are painted-plaster life casts. However, unlike George Segal, Ahearn carves the eyes of his casts open so they regard you with unaffected directness. The painting is thinner and patchier than before, but just as effective.

The most ambitious piece in the show is *East 100th Street* (1996-98), a pair of full-length resin casts of a heavy older woman chasing a mischievous