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Why Are So Many Artists Making Work That Lies on the Floor?



Sam Moyer's "More Weight," 2014. Credit Fluorescent lights, polysilk, dyed fabric, aluminum frames, marble. Photo by Jose Andres Ramirez. Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York

During the summer of 1969, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York organized a show of what it described as "disordered" art, much of it sculpture that was difficult to classify. In the exhibition, the post-Minimalist artist Lynda Benglis was meant to debut her work "Contraband," a rainbow-colored pour of pigmented latex, alongside pieces by Richard Serra, Eva Hesse, Carl Andre and Rafael Ferrer. When the curators told her that the piece, which was designed to lie flat on the ground, was going to be positioned half on and half off a ramp, Benglis pulled out of the exhibition. Recently, I asked her why she had begun making these flat sculptures. "When you see a curve and when you see things that flow on the floor, you physically feel them in a gravitational way," she said. Flat, I took her to mean, doesn't mean inert.

Benglis was inspired by the painters Morris Louis and Jackson Pollock, among others. Pollock's practice of working on the floor earned him a spread in *Life* magazine and made him famous. (In her 1997 essay "Horizontality," the critic Rosalind Krauss described Pollock as "bear[ing] witness to the horizontal's resistance to the vertical.") All sculpture has some relationship to the ground, of course, whether it shoots up, extends over or sits perched on a pedestal, but art that lies down is intentionally antimonumental, opposed to the basic logic of standing upright.

Recently, we have seen a new movement in the art world of sculpture and installation that lies down. Whereas Minimalist and post-Minimalist art was sharp — even Hesse's organic or draped forms had a distinct precision to them — this new wave of floor-based art is soft and a little

rumpled. It lies down out of exhaustion but not defeat; it's down but not out. In a time of economic precarity, environmental chaos and racial protest, when many of us spend the majority of our waking hours thumbing screens, there is something comforting and even restorative about art that sinks into the floor. It lets us see from a new perspective — that of a child crawling, say, or a person just waking up.



Lynda Benglis's "Contraband," 1969. Credit Dayglo pigment and poured latex, collection Whitney Museum of American Art, all rights reserved Lynda Benglis/licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy of Locks Gallery (installation view), Philadelphia, and Cheim & Read, New York

It's perhaps not surprising that art retreats to the earth in times of acute political or social unrest; the phrase "lying down" may conjure sleep and relaxation, as when one drops into bed after a hard day, but it also suggests surrender, as when one refuses to fight back, or brings to mind radical political actions such as lying in the road to block traffic or staging a "die-in." The floor is an asylum in times of turmoil and change; the emergence of the first generation of modern sculptors to make widespread use of the ground coincided with both America's increasing entrenchment in Vietnam and the rise of second-wave feminism. The first show at Paula Cooper Gallery, Benglis's former dealer and an early champion of Minimalism, was a 1968 benefit protesting the Vietnam War that included austere floor works by Andre and Donald Judd. Ree Morton, who died in a car accident at 41 in 1977, and whose work has seen renewed interest of late, focused on "poetic reversals," in the words of the curator Marcia Tucker. Morton made art in a wide variety of mediums, including drawing and painting, but her sculptures that lay flat on the ground are the most memorable, a kind of an antiphalllic statement that seemed to rebel against art-historical tradition, and sculpture's monumentality in particular.

Artists in the '80s and '90s also looked to the floor, this time in response to the culture wars and the AIDS crisis. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who would die of an AIDS-related illness in 1996, created installations of stacks of paper, which viewers were encouraged to take; over the course of the

exhibition, the stacks were slowly depleted, until the only thing left was the empty ground. Of his contemporary Roni Horn and her sculpture “Gold Field,” consisting of a sheet of gold lying flat on a gallery floor, Gonzalez-Torres wrote in 1990 that the work is “a new landscape, a possible horizon, a place of rest and absolute beauty . . . That gesture was all we needed to rest, to think about the possibility of change.”

If the turmoil of the '80s was defined by death and moral panic, our current era of protest is marked by a struggle between vulnerability and resilience. “I would think that this moment would create the most chaotic works in the world,” Paula Cooper says. “And I think it would be flat on the floor, so depressed . . . And just something collapsed.” Today’s artists haven’t fallen apart, however; they use the floor with humility and strength, suggesting that the two aren’t so different. We perceive vulnerability as soft and weak, and resilience as hard and strong. But resilience is a consequence of vulnerability, not its absence. And it needn’t be brittle, either — resilience can be soft, like a spring; it can have a quality of elasticity that allows one to bend, absorb, spring back, take new shape.

The floor sculptures we’re seeing now feel less like something deflated, in need of resuscitation or repair, than like something lying in wait, or planning its next move. Lorna Simpson, best known for her photographic installations, debuted her first new sculptures in 25 years at the Frieze art fair in New York last spring: One of them, “They Cheated Death,” consisted of short stacks of vintage Ebony magazines, held down by pieces of glass that looked like blocks of ice. The stacks were being oppressed in the most literal way, but they hadn’t buckled — they resisted. Karla Black’s “Includes Use,” a sprawling installation of brown, pink and white dry powdered paint and plaster, was sprinkled on the floor of New York’s David Zwirner gallery last year. The soft, glowing pools of color were ringed and separated by lengths of brown, pink and white toilet paper. It called to mind a painter’s palette, a spreading stain or a species of luminous mold. But to really examine it, you couldn’t remain standing. You had to crouch down. Then there’s Polly Apfelbaum’s “Black Flag,” a “fallen painting” of dyed velvet fabric shapes from 2002 that re-emerged at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art last December. The original piece was made, Apfelbaum said in a recent interview with Lacma, during a politically “black time.” And yet the work now seems to gesture toward possibility. “I loved this idea of malleability in form — that everything can change and nothing’s set in stone,” Apfelbaum explained.

“When I think of people looking at the ground and working on the ground, it’s a way of redefining your space, the way that ivy crawls across the floor,” says the artist Alex Da Corte, whose freaky installations often include elements (plastic swans, hoagies) scattered on the floor. “It’s not a bad thing. It’s just searching for a way to grow.” He continued: “I think a lot of artists are feeling, maybe in the state of our world, which is so noisy, and so aggressive, that the way to cope with aggression is to lie down — and adapt like a sponge.”