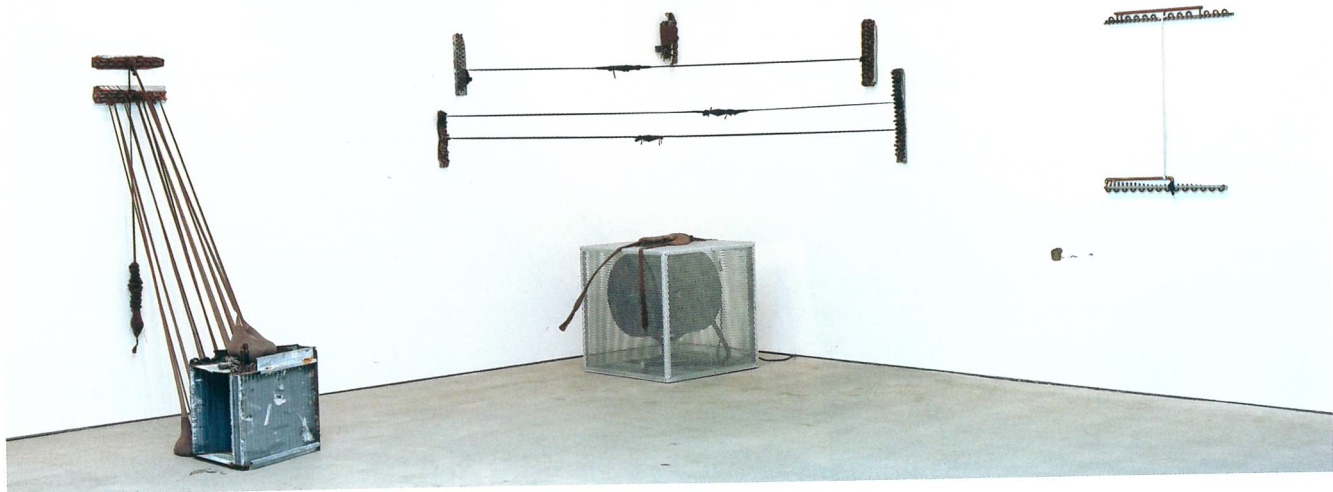


# reviews

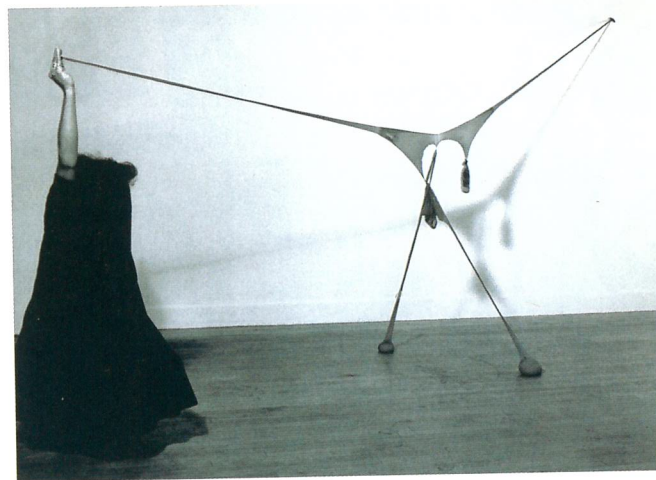


## LOS ANGELES Senga Nengudi Art + Practice

As far as symbolism is concerned, certain materials arrive ready-made, freighted with meaning. The protean sculptor/dancer Senga Nengudi, a major influence on Los Angeles's African American art scene of the '70s and '80s, employs a material whose sole function is to be in contact with the female body. In her *R.S.V.P.* works, she uses pantyhose as a symbol of the female persona: capacious, resilient, able to stretch and come back into shape. The flesh-tone colors of the material draw out such difficult and fundamental aspects of identity as race, gender, sexuality, and the physical characteristics of the female body. By collecting pantyhose donated by friends and bought from thrift shops, Nengudi accesses what she calls the "residual energy of what it means for a woman to wear these garments." The *R.S.V.P.* works had their origins in Nengudi's pregnancy, as she observed changes in her body's shape, balance, and movement and related them to the shared experience of womanhood.

Above: Senga Nengudi, *A.C.Q. (I)*, 2016–17. Refrigerator and air conditioner parts, fan, nylon pantyhose, and sand, installation view. Right: Senga Nengudi, performance with *R.S.V.P.*, 1976.

Nengudi describes her work as "stationary performance pieces." Pairs of malleable pantyhose act as both a conceptual and physical vector for her ideas; her constructions are simultaneously sculpture and props for a dancer. Nengudi performs a number of actions on the material—tying, knotting, twisting it together, stretching it between nails on the wall. When these objects are not being used to define movement, they hang in ways that suggest biomorphic forms, skins, and body parts. She further transforms the fabric by filling it with sand at its base or between knots. The sand swells, distends, and activates the hose, determining the position of one point in space relative to another. When a dancer interacts with the works, the sand defines the sphere of motion as well as the scope of the space occupied by the object. The elasticity of the



nylon mesh relates to the elasticity of the human body, and the sculpture becomes a dance partner. Videos and photo-documentation reveal how the sculptures change as the dancers occupy them—bending, reaching, becoming entangled; stretching the pantyhose further and moving the sand pockets around.

Nengudi's pendulous sculptures have aspects that are both masculine and feminine; her collaborative performances with artists of both sexes suggest a focus on social situations that equally affect men and women. Her work shows the influ-

ence of African, Asian, and Native American aesthetics, while Western art forms such as Arte Povera, with its elevation of throwaway materials, certainly enter the mix. Nengudi's three-part installation, *A.C.Q. (I)* (2016–17) consists of junked refrigerator and air conditioner parts, a fan, nylon pantyhose, and sand. This kinetic multi-sensory work evokes the sensations essential to life—breath, subtle motion, and small changes over time.

"Head Back & High: Performance Objects 1976–2017" included early and recent performance pieces and





sculpture. Featured videos and photo-documentation underscored the artistic collaborations that have typified Nengudi's practice from its beginning. The list of her collaborators over the past 40 years, which reads like a Who's Who of the African American art scene in Los Angeles, includes Maren Hassinger and David Hammons among many others.

—Kay Whitney

**WASHINGTON, DC**  
**Martha Jackson Jarvis**  
**Dumbarton Oaks**

A perfect match of artist and venue, "Outside/IN" (whose outdoor component remains open until December 16) shines an overdue spotlight on a substantial body of work by Washington, DC, sculptor Martha Jackson Jarvis, while illuminating the collections that led to the creation of this Harvard research center as a "home of the humanities." The exhibition is the fifth in a series of contemporary art installations designed to provoke fresh interpretations of Dumbarton Oaks' famous gardens and tightly focused museum—the public faces of a scholarly paradise. The mixed-media works on view in the garden include 20 sculptures and assemblages made of wood, wisteria vines, sumac, stone, glass, and concrete. Inside, a dozen works on paper, composed of botanical images (both drawn and digital), black walnut ink, and other earthy pigments, are juxtaposed with objects selected from the renowned Byzantine and Pre-Columbian collections, locating Jarvis's work in relation to much older traditions.

Top: Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P. Reverie—A*, 2011. Nylon mesh, sand, and found wire object. Left: Senga Nengudi, *Insides Out, Spring 1977*, 1977. Nylon mesh, metal, and sand. Right: Martha Jackson Jarvis, *Pod Forms*, 2018. Stone, glass, mortar, and wood, installation view.

The strong resonance of Jarvis's work with the interests of Dumbarton Oaks founders Robert and Mildred Bliss is evident in their shared fascination with mosaic techniques. Abstraction, texture, biomorphic form, and organic materials are other common interests. Many of Jarvis's titles, such as *Flying Colors*; *Path of Healing*, *Spores*, reference the transformational power of nature, a theme not at all out of place in an institution committed to the values of the humanities—plants and "noble trees" explicitly included.

While the title "Outside/IN" alludes to artistic and curatorial intent, it also serves as a guide to exploration. At the eastern edge of the 16-acre garden, the huge, twisted vines of *Pod Forms* (2018) seem to dance up a terraced green hillside, as if stepping over the crusty, zoomorphic forms half-buried beneath them. "Are they art, or part of the garden?" one visitor asked. Another playful yet puzzling work, *Reclamation in Bamboo* (2018) is located nearby. A series of poles bound with copper tubing and garden hose, the seven structures could be impossibly tall, skeletal tipis. Yet they seem so intrinsic to this working garden that an image

of one appeared, unremarked, in a photograph illustrating a *Washington Post* story on the recent renovation of the water system.

One of the most striking sculptures can be viewed only from the museum looking out. *Earplugs/Listening* (2018) glints through the glass walls of a corridor that connects the Byzantine and Pre-Columbian galleries. The two dozen rough round shapes could be vessels, perhaps water jars, scattered around what might be an archaeological site. On second glance, through one of the curved glass walls of a domed gallery, the blue-green, mosaic-on-concrete forms appear as enlargements of, or a riff on, the centuries-old Maya, Mixtec, and Aztec ear ornaments, made of jadeite, obsidian, gold, and crystal, that seem to float in their Plexiglas vitrines in the Pre-Columbian Pavilion.

The biggest surprise here is how Jarvis's contemporary works bring the collections into sharper focus in relation to each other. The pivot point is her passion for mosaic. She pursued it to its source, studying in a workshop in Ravenna, an important northern Italian center of early Christian and Byzantine art. In the Courtyard Gallery, *Umbilicus I* (2011) stands surrounded by older exam-

