

LÉVY GORVY

The Armory Show

SENGA NENGUDI

MARCH 2 – 5, 2017
NEW YORK
PIER 92, FOCUS, BOOTH F8

Presented in collaboration with
Thomas Erben Gallery



LÉVY GORVY

SENGA NENGUDI

Senga Nengudi came to performance through her study of dance while she was a graduate student at California State University, Los Angeles in the late 1960s. After traveling to Japan and New York, she returned to Los Angeles in the early 1970s and became an active member of an emerging community of African American artists whose work engaged with the radical political movements developing in the United States while moving toward the more abstract, dematerialized, and conceptual artistic modes of the period. It was at this point that Nengudi began to incorporate elements inspired by Japanese Gutai and Mono-ha, African ceremonial dress, African-American improvisation, and Western vernacular vocabularies into a new visual language that would result in her seminal *R.S.V.P.* series.

Nengudi, along with David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, and several other artists, formed a loosely structured group called Studio Z, where they collaborated and experimented with discarded and overlooked materials and forgotten spaces. They came together at Hammons' studio on Slauson Avenue—a large former dance hall with a wooden floor—to engage in spontaneous actions, some of which were performed on the streets of the city. Soon after her son was born in 1974, Nengudi began to use secondhand pantyhose as her primary medium. She stretched the nylon garments into various forms across walls, frequently also extending them onto the floor, and then invited a collaborator (most often Hassinger) to “activate” the works, either through dance or other types of interactions and movements. In the words of the artist, “there is a charging that takes place, an activation of mutual energy, in concert with the sculpture.”

The nylon and sand sculptures of Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* series (two of which will be presented at the Armory Show) were first exhibited in the artist's breakthrough exhibition at Just Above Midtown Gallery in 1977. Made of dark-hued, previously worn women's pantyhose that have been pulled, knotted, and filled with sand, the sculptures resemble bulging, pendulous bodily sacs and tautly outstretched limb-like forms. Nengudi has explained, “I am working with nylon mesh because it relates to the elasticity of the human body... From tender, tight beginnings to sagging. . . . The body can only stand so much push and pull until it gives way, never to resume its original shape.”

Nengudi's work is in the permanent collections of many major museums worldwide, including: Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, Studio Museum in Harlem, Brooklyn Museum, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Hammer Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Tate Modern, London; and Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

On March 16, Senga Nengudi: Improvisational Gestures, the artist's traveling retrospective organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, will open at the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans. This summer Nengudi will participate in the in the 57th Venice Biennale, Viva Arte Viva, curated by Christine Macel.



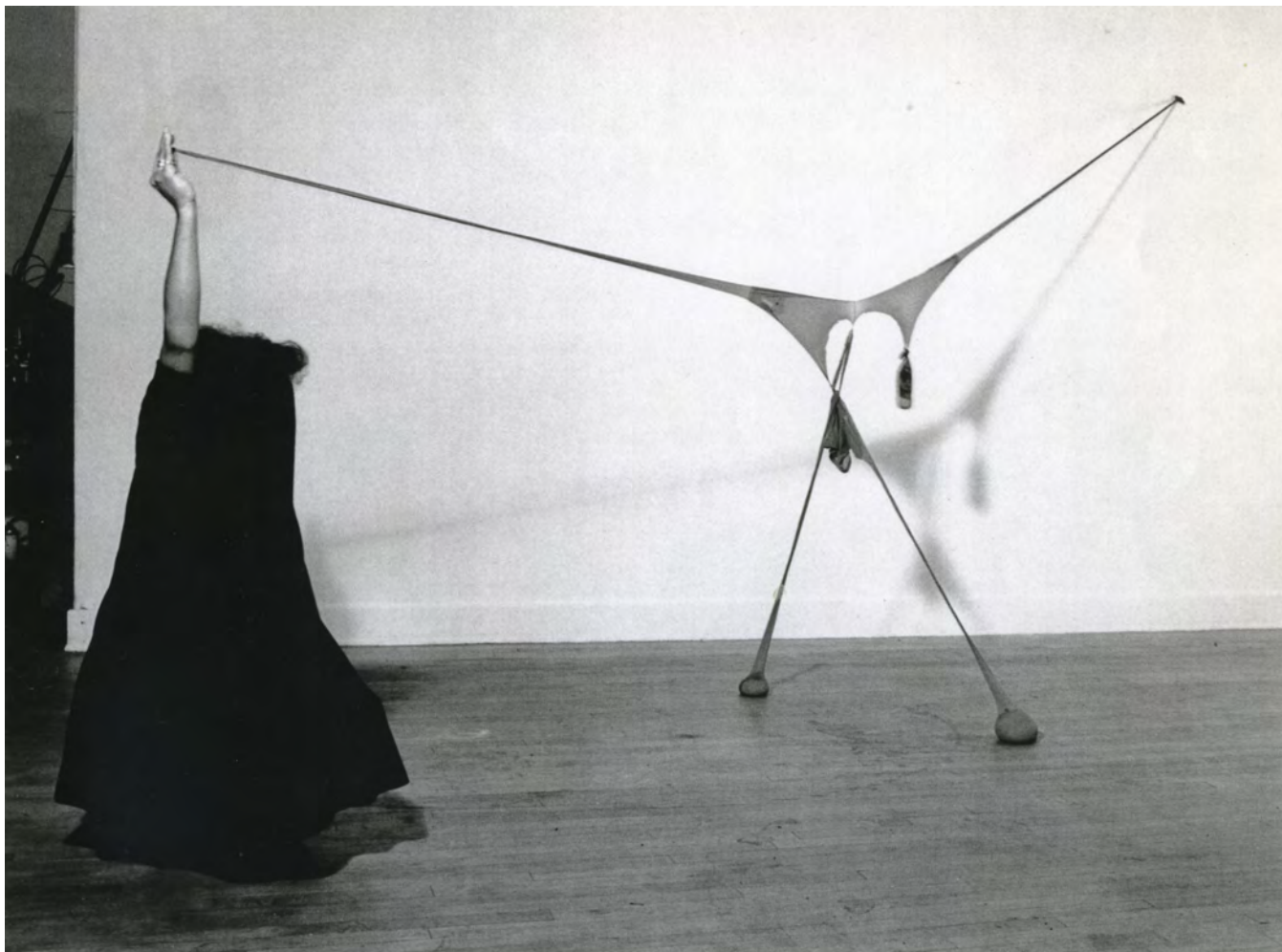
Eggactly
1996
Dry cleaner's plastic bag and spray paint on paper
45x25 inches (114.3x63.5 cm)



Study for 'Mesh Mirage'
1977
Silver gelatin print
40x26 1/2 inches (101.6x67.3 cm)
Edition 5/5 (+1 AP)



Performance with 'Inside/Outside'
1977
Silver gelatin print
40 x 29 inches (101.6 x 73.7 cm)
Edition 5/5 (+1 AP)



Studio performance with R.S.V.P.
1976
Silver gelatin print
30 x 40 inches (76.2 x 101.6 cm)
Editions 3/5 and 5/5 (+1 AP)



R.S.V.P. Reverie "Scribe"
2014
Nylon mesh, sand, and found metals
91 x 54 x 67 inches (231.14 x 137.16 x 170.18 cm)



R.S.V.P. Reverie "Scribe"

2014

Nylon mesh, sand, and found metals

91 x 54 x 67 inches (231.14 x 137.16 x 170.18 cm)

(detail view)



R.S.V.P. Fall 1976
1976 / 2017
Nylon mesh, sand, and pins
41 x 19 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches (104.1 x 49.5 x 6.4 cm)



R.S.V.P. Fall 1976
1976 / 2017
Nylon mesh, sand, and pins
41 x 19 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches (104.1 x 49.5 x 6.4 cm)
(detail view)

Selected Press

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

New York

Senga Nengudi

DOMINIQUE LÉVY | NEW YORK

909 Madison Avenue

September 10–October 24

Senga Nengudi trained as both an artist and a dancer in the 1960s and continues to work across a variety of mediums: sculpture, performance, photography, and more. As is evident in her current presentation, her practice abstracts and dematerializes bodily form while referencing its kinetic energy and elastic potential. Nengudi's most moving group of works is her nylon mesh sculptures fashioned out of used pantyhose, three examples of which are included here. *Untitled*, 2011, features four of the leggings stretched tightly to the floor and weighted gracefully with sand. The ready-made garments are secured to a pole fastened in the gallery's corner, evoking ballet dancers in tights in the midst of barre work. An adjacent photograph, *Performance Piece*, 1978, pictures artist Maren Hassinger performing within one of the twisted weaves of Nengudi's pantyhose pieces, activating Nengudi's sculptures and embodying them with a dynamic dancer's presence.



Senga Nengudi, *Untitled*, 2011, nylon mesh, sand, pole, 60 x 48 x 18".

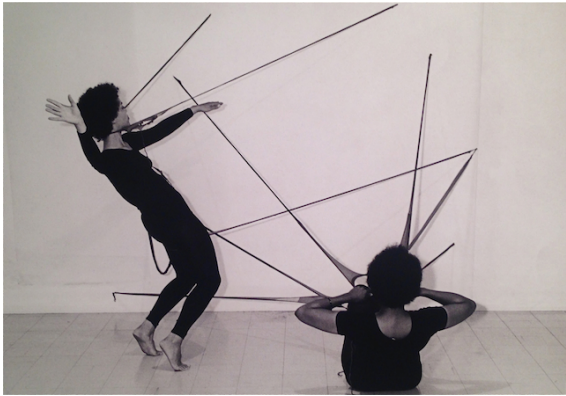
Nengudi's 1978 performance *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* is also chronicled, in eleven vivid photographs. At the time of its creation Nengudi was involved with Studio Z, a loose affiliation of artists in Los Angeles, including Hassinger, David Hammons, Barbara McCullough, and others who experimented collaboratively with discarded materials and abandoned spaces. Set under a nondescript freeway overpass in the car-bound metropolis, Nengudi wrapped the supporting columns in her sculptural nylon mesh forms and outfitted her performers in these customary creations as headdresses and drapery. Bodies bound across the images in flitting festivity, sculpture and performance creatively enmeshed. Nengudi's work, as an antecedent example of the current commingling of the plastic and the performative, remains pioneering for our contemporary moment.

— Alex Fiahlo

HYPERALLERGIC

The Improvised Body: The Reemergence of Senga Nengudi

Noel Black | September 6, 2014



R.S.V.P. sculptures activated by Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger in “Performance Piece—Nylon Mesh and Maren Hassinger,” (1977) (Photo by Harmon Outlaw, Pearl C. Wood Gallery, Los Angeles. Courtesy RedLine Gallery.)

The artist Senga Nengudi was recently honored with dual retrospectives of her work at Denver’s Museum of Contemporary Art ([*Senga Nengudi: The Material Body*](#), April 10 – July 13, 2014) and RedLine Gallery ([*Senga Nengudi: The Performing Body*](#), June 6– July 20, 2014).

The MCA featured the black and brown pantyhose of her long-running *R.S.V.P.* series, which was stretched, contorted, and knotted into abstract echoes of everything from hair and genitalia to masks and musical notation. At the Redline Gallery, there were videos, artifacts and photo documentations of performance works dating from the 1970s, with her improvised ritual dances under Los Angeles freeways, to her more recent conceptual investigations into the visual, musical and dance patterns of everyday labor. And these two surveys didn’t even touch the photography, poetry and painting she does under the pseudonyms Lily B. Moor, Harriet Chin, and Propecia Lee to investigate the boundaries of race and identity.



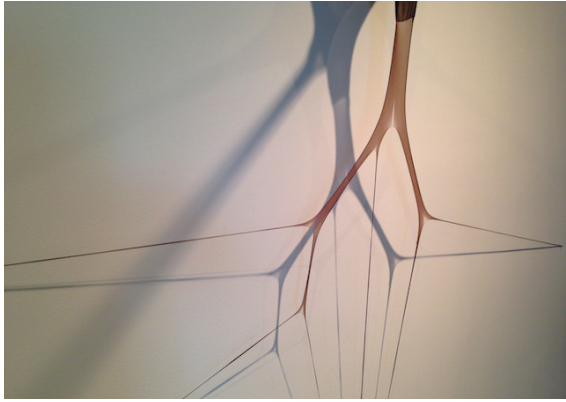
Senga Nengudi, "R.S.V.P. 1977" (1977/2014), nylon mesh, sand, found metal object (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

It isn't hard to gather why it took so long for her evasive and uncategorizable work to find broader recognition. Now 70, Nengudi has long been known in avant-garde circles, and admired in the small community of artists in Colorado Springs where she's lived, worked and taught for the past 25 years. But seeing so much of her output in a comprehensive survey across two institutional spaces was revelatory.

Born in Chicago in 1943 and later raised in Los Angeles, Nengudi knew from an early age that she loved art and ritual in all its

forms. Her early heroes were those who defied genre. Picasso, in particular, seemed unbridled by a need for consistency of style or medium, and he provided a cursory first window into her African heritage. When she entered college at California State University, Los Angeles, she studied art and dance with a wandering eye toward the broadening possibilities of performance, sculpture, assemblage and ritual that she discovered in Yoruba, Pop and Fluxus. By the time she graduated in 1965, Nengudi also found herself in the midst of the civil rights sea change. She saw the Watts rebellion firsthand while teaching at the Watts Towers Arts Center. Like many of her peers — David Hammons, Barbara McCullough, Noah Purifory, and John Outterbridge to name a few — Nengudi began looking beyond the traditional forms and materials of her training for a new language that would fit the moment. But she also felt constrained by the inadequacy of the

moment. But she also felt constrained by the inadequacy of the American visual vernacular, and shortly after the Watts rebellion, she left Los Angeles to study art in Japan. There, says Nengudi, she absorbed the stark, minimal elegance of Japanese culture that would strongly inform much of her later work.



Senga Nengudi, "Internal I (detail)," (1977/2014), nylon mesh (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

After returning to the States in 1967, Nengudi got a master's degree in sculpture in CSU-LA, then made the requisite pilgrimage to New York, but she couldn't find the fit she was looking for there either. Neither the uptown scene where the Black Arts Movement was in its heyday, nor the downtown scene felt right to her.

It was only when she moved back to Los Angeles that she connected Japanese Minimalism, African ceremonial dress, African-American improvisation, and Western vernacular vocabularies into a new visual language that would result in the *R.S.V.P.* series. Along with McCullough, Hassinger, Parker and, peripherally, Hammons, she formed the loose collective — Studio Z — where they felt free to collaborate and experiment with discarded and overlooked materials and forgotten spaces.

Soon after her son was born in 1974, Nengudi began to work with pantyhose as a material. For her, it reflected the elasticity of the human body. She stretched the pantyhose in various lines across walls and to the floors, and then invited a collaborator — usually Maren Hassinger — to “activate”, or dance with the pieces. The results are spectacular: conjuring bondage, weaving, lynching, sex, birth, and jazz, the works point to — yet always resist — direct reference, while clearly defining their sculptural relationships to the female body. Even as standing

pieces, the *R.S.V.P.* installations seem to bear the traces of movement both sensual and constrained. The clear awareness of Eva Hesse, who died in 1970, only adds to the sense that Nengudi takes great pleasure in visual conversation.



Senga Nengudi, “Untitled (R.S.V.P.)” (2003), nylon mesh, sand, mixed media (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The performative aspect of Nengudi’s work was more carefully traced at the RedLine exhibition, *Senga Nengudi: The Performing Body*. Curated by Elissa Auther, the exhibition made great use of photographs by Barbara McCullough and others along with artifacts from some of Nengudi’s early *R.S.V.P.* activations and performances that weren’t filmed.

Using uninhabitable or

“disregarded” public places like freeway underpasses — “Ceremony for Freeway Fets” (1978) — and an abandoned Catholic school — “Rapunzel” (1980) — as ritual space, Nengudi and some of the members of the Studio Z collective would bring instruments, make costumes on-site from castoff materials and employ panty-hose (already a staple ingredient in 1977-78), taking pictures of their improvised ceremonies that invoke a new communal identity of dislocation and possibility amid those forgotten landscapes. Looking at the photographs, it’s difficult to imagine that Nick Cave wasn’t aware of Nengudi, her “what’s at hand” aesthetic approach, and Studio Z’s improvised music and dance activities when he first conceived his sound suits.



Senga Nengudi, "Rapunzel" (1980), nylon mesh (Photo by Barbara McCullough. Courtesy RedLine Gallery)

Nengudi continues to push herself into new mediums. Among the most ambitious works at RedLine was a video installation titled "Warp Trance." Employing conceptual social practice, Nengudi used a 2007 residency at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to explore the sounds, rhythms, patterns and the movements of workers in textile mills to explore the unconscious dance and ceremony involved in labor.

Senga Nengudi has had many solo shows, and her work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Los Angeles

Museum of Contemporary Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Brooklyn Museum. She's been part of major group retrospectives including *Now Dig This: Art and Black Los Angeles 1960 -1980*, which opened in 2011 at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. But her work still needs to be seen more widely. Reflecting on the recent Michael Brown shooting and the improvisation it takes to make it through each day as a black person, Nengudi said in an interview for this article:

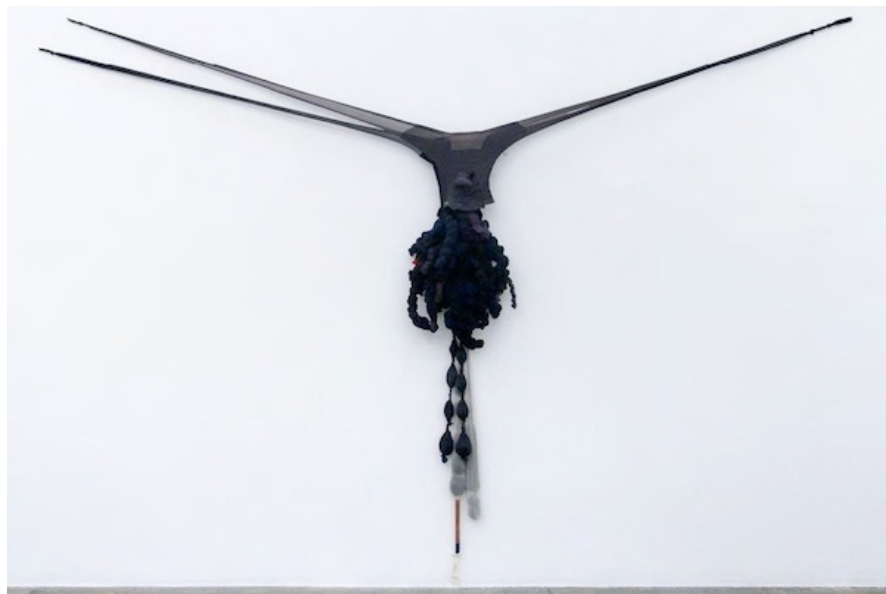
When we were kicked off the boat, improvisation was the survival tool: to act in the moment, to figure something out that hadn't been done before; to live. And the tradition goes through Jazz. Jazz is the perfect manifestation of constant improvisation. It has to be in place at all times. Constant adjustment in a hostile environment, you have to figure something out right away... Being born black in America is still a political event. We're in an odd time where we have a black president and all these things are happening, but there are these weird things that prove that we haven't flushed out the issue of race.

Nengudi's improvised rituals in all their forms may speak to these issues even more clearly now.

Note: Curator Elissa Auther is already working on a monograph and a version of this retrospective that will be exhibited at the Gallery of Contemporary Art at UCCS in Colorado Springs sometime next year. The exhibition will then be available to tour.

Senga Nengudi

04.03.14



Senga Nengudi, *Untitled*, 2011, nylon, mesh, sand. 60 x 72 x 8".

Los Angeles-based artist *Senga Nengudi* came to prominence in the late 1970s with her sculptural work—some of which will be on view in her latest exhibition, “*Senga Nengudi: The Material Body*,” at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver—and with her performance, which will be featured through documentation in “*Senga Nengudi: The Performing Body*” at *RedLine*, also in Denver. The exhibitions are on view from April 10 to July 13, 2014, and from June 6 to July 20, 2014, respectively.

WHEN I BEGAN WORKING, it was very personal. I wanted to express how I was feeling about my body and my mind. I had just had children, so I was investigating what my life looked like as an observer as well as a person experiencing it. This led me to work with nylon stockings because I wanted to find something that had the elasticity, the texture, and even the coloring of the body. Horrific things that are done to women, like rape, as well as what we women do to ourselves, like plastic surgery, are powerful afflictions that the type of distortions made by the nylons can directly speak to.

When I was in college, I was an art major and a dance minor. I studied modern dance but did not have a dancer's body. Still, though, I appreciated this blending between the female form and a love of action. But in dance, there is only so much time to perform; with art, you can seemingly go on forever. In a sense, we all have our dance with materials on a day-to-day basis. Traditionally, pantyhose is worn in stressful situations: at a party, a job interview, a meeting. I've incorporated used pantyhose from friends and thrift stores for this very reason—because they contain a residue of energy of stress left over from the person that had worn them before. It's an ideal material for this type of reflection because it can mostly come back into shape after it has been tested to its extreme limits.

After studying abroad in Japan in 1965, I began teaching at the Watts Tower Arts Center and the Pasadena Art Museum in California. At Watts, performance was being investigated and the medium was being opened up to new interpretations. That's when this issue of materials came into the picture; we had literally begun stretching ourselves and our conceptions of what was possible in our practices. Some artists, like *Noah Purifoy*, created work from what was destroyed. *Jim Dine* and *Claes Oldenburg* created happenings out of nothing. I soon got involved with them—in this place between art and movement—and found people like *Lygia Clark*, *Hélio Oiticica*, and the Gutai group because of their sense of impermanence. There is permanence in the impermanence, however. Even though we as humans are impermanent, there is a continued sense of how events will unfold. History repeats itself, and that at first seemingly singular moment will just occur, perhaps in a different form, someplace else.