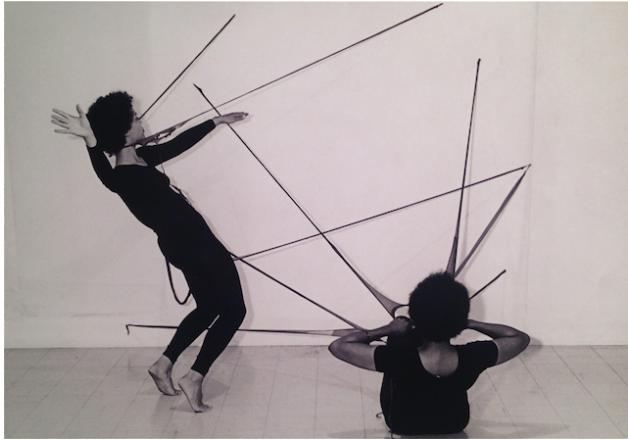


HYPERALLERGIC

The Improvised Body: The Reemergence of Senga Nengudi



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.

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 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.

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.

Black, Noel. "The Improvised Body: The Reemergence of Senga Nengudi," *Hyperallergic*, 6 September 2014.

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 panty hose 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.

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.

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.