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VARIABLE WEST

How to say friendship: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi at Cooley Gallery

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Review



"A zillion sisters ain't enough. To be a girl among girls, I feel as if I am at the height of courage and creativity." — Lisa Jones

As our worlds prioritize digital communication, our archives are beginning to weigh less—the postcards, grocery lists, posters, rough drafts, tapes, love letters, and recipes illustrating lives lived are no longer stowed away in the file cabinet or in a shoebox under our beds, but exist in figurative clouds. *Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi* is heavy, not in subject matter, but in the exhibition's reverence for the artists' multi-decade material kinship that lives in between and alongside their individual and collaborative artistic practices.

Nengudi's choreo-sculptural work *R.S.V.P. X* (1976/2014) and two of Hassinger's agrarian wire and rope objects, *Splintered Starburst* (1981) and *Leaning (maquettes)* (1979), are foregrounded in the single room gallery. Together Nengudi's fleshy nylon burst, pulled tautly between two white walls and punctuated by sand and rose petal filled sacks that droop irregularly, and Hassinger's piercing, voltaic sculptures—positioned both on the ground and on the wall—foretells the pair's commitment to experimentation in material and process that proves enduring for Nengudi and Hassinger. These more acclaimed pieces are couched within a cosmology of correspondence that is inseparable from either artist's oeuvre. Curatorially speaking, giving the audience some of Hassinger and Nengudi's most acclaimed work is a bold, but thoughtful choice that requires digging beyond what is expected of this exhibition. Pushing past these touchstones, respectfully, into the minutia of their ceaseless exchange is when the exhibition and its ambitions take shape.

The archival material—artworks in their own right as the documents and objects construct a clear view of Hassinger and Nengudi's singular mark making, rhythm, and poetics—not only illustrate the artists' steadfast artistic collaboration that survived multiple cross-country moves and interpersonal and institutional hurdles, but a sisterhood forged through intentionality and consistency.

"Time Travel" from *30 Day Exercise* (2004), composed of an archival inkjet print of ghostly body moving through an undefined space and a handwritten, diaristic confession from Nengudi, collapses praxis, practice, and friendship. The long-exposure image is dancery as is the winding text where she tells her friend that her blackness is at odds with her continual "yearning to time travel." The artist's solution is to turn toward history, a deep study of her personal visionaries. On one hand this letter is a life update—Nengudi goes on to speak casually about recently reading and enjoying a Benjamin Franklin biography—and on the other, this is an assemblage of larger ideas that persist in rough drafts and final works.

Their cyclical letter writing and mail-based collaborations exist within Hassinger and Nengudi's choreographic grammar. As evident in the performance documentation in the exhibition, movement

as a means of connection is the bedrock on which all artworks are built. In footage of *Art Moves* (1983), Hassinger, Nengudi, and other members of the experimental performance group Studio Z push and pull languidly as they goad each other to step into the center of the floor. What does it mean, artistically and otherwise, to reach out and bring someone with you?

Whether prompting the other to build upon the sender's words and images or a tender birthday card filled with the type of praise and fellowship that comes from true love or dance choreography drafted on the backsides of scrap paper, these lines of communication shape my understanding of both Hassinger and Nengudi as artists self-actualizing in tandem. Nengudi's tongue-in-cheek *Chain Mail* (2001), a series of circular paper collages strung together with brown pantyhoses, similarly arouses the notion of giving and taking. The presence of Nengudi's signature nylon material—a symbol of her career defining exploration of the quotidian object as it pertains to her body from “tender, tight beginnings to sagging ends”—in this format confirms that these letters between friends are serious artistic experiments where the receiver and the sender are engaging in a reciprocal creation and critique to this day.

I like to imagine receiving this work in the mail and opening the envelope to find a chain of images of Black women and girls looking at me. I'd smile back at them. I'd let it blow in the wind like a wind chime on my front porch or drape it above the kitchen table like a “Welcome Home” banner. These artworks and their related ephemera conjure feelings of familiarity, bringing a layer of warmth to this slightly overwhelming amount of material. The physical excesses of friendship affirm that even our most brilliant artistic endeavors cannot and do not happen within a vacuum. In making their partnership visible on this scale, the show refuses the singular-genius-artist trope in exchange for a genuine embrace of artistic interdependency. The gentle, overlapping sound of the multiple video works within the gallery only aids in rendering the presence these two have in each other's practices/lives.

Hassinger and Nengudi's experimentations and improvisations, and to some degree their friendship, are always earthbound—using the outdoors as an elastic site where the human body intersects organically with the natural world. From the inclusion of Nengudi's *Proposal: Afro-American Pop* (1982)—in the artist's words, “an environmental piece” about Black girlhood—to *Talking Book* (1986), a moss covered audio-book, which according to the wall text reveals that this work is their first long distance collaboration recorded by sending the cassette tape back and forth through the mail, it becomes clear that flowers, branches, moss, water, and gravel are indispensable to their ethos. At each turn within the gallery, I was brought back to earth. It would be easy to read this as a representational reclamation, but in the context of the exhibition, nature reads as an extension of a dance studio, as a site of play and sovereignty.

In the object label for *Talking Book*, Hassinger notes that she is always thinking about “ever-vanishing nature.” The depleting, fleeting natural world mirrors our body over time—ultimately limited, but bountiful when cared for. The backyard, or a field or a park or an ocean, then becomes a stage for positioning the physical frame up against itself in an audio-visual-embodied entanglement that gently probes at the boundaries of the body, particularly the gendered/racialized body, and of our earthly settings in an effort to explore an alternative ecology and the limits of personhood.

She Said (2024), a pair of LED screens installed high above the other works on the walls, proves the collaborators haven't run out of things to say to one another. The continually scrolling black screens present a glowing text that reads like both instructions and a journal entry. I stood and watched the phrase “the air is thick with fear, become a river...” roll over and over. Just like “Las Vegas Ikebana,” the playful compound created by Nengudi and Hassinger to encompass their worldbending approach to artmaking that welcomes absurdity and duration, the pair are sharing secrets with each other publicly, we just aren't hip to the spells and annotations they are making yet.

The messages emanating from *She Said* cast a glow onto the ephemera encased in glass and onto the screens within the gallery. The words dance across Hassinger and Nengudi's papers and prints from all vantage points. This visual bleed gets to the root of *Las Vegas Ikebana*, making visible the technologies of friendship that are the scaffolding for the artists' five decade-long embodied transmission of ideas and dreams.