

## SENGA NENGUDI

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### **Body Language Body Talk**

by Greg Angaza Pitts

“He who cannot dance, will say the drum is bad” – Afrikan Proverb

From the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century until the present, there exists a lingering notion, that argues that the only legitimate expressions of the Ameri-ka-n Afrikan (Afrikan-American) aesthetic can be found in a self-affirming realism, consisting of appropriated traditional Afrikan images and landscapes, or sets of domesticated generic scenes of Black life, marginalized, and locked into, a formulaic aesthetic, filled with pre-programmed “Negrotized” European sound bites, gross oversimplifications and (un)realist signifiers, baring no innate awareness, organic wisdom or “bush psychology” concerning their parallel abstract nature. This dilemma has provided easy access for culturally underdeveloped and insensitive critics, historians and other culture bandits to weigh in.

Speaking of culture bandits, let’s not forget, Picasso and Braque’s debt to “abstract” Afrikan sculpture in the formation of Cubism – or Giacommetti’s. Tutsi (Watusi) sense of size and proportion in his “abstract” figurative sculptures – or Louise Nevelson’s ceremoniously placing “abstract” Afrikan masks on her studio walls above her wooden constructions, as she deliberately and methodically took dictation and performed cultural transfusions that zapped and transferred the masks intangible vital essence into her work – or Barnett Newman reconfiguring two Afrikan geometric “abstract” forms specifically the pyramid and the obelisk in “Broken Obelisk,” (yes Egypt is still in Afrika after 10,000 years/seasons) - or what about the Afrikan and Aboriginal’s body adornment of camouflaged dot matrixes, that would later inform Pointillist, Op, and, Digital hi-tech dotting and marking systems. Y’all get the pixels. All of these examples clearly point to a strong pre-Columbian and post-Columbian tradition of Afrikan abstraction brought to America, by enslaved Afrikans, as a cultural retention, deeply imprinted within their visual memory, as part of the “invisible cargo” brought over to the new world.

In its most basic configuration, abstraction is “simplified realism”. Take an object and either zoom in, or pan away from it, and the resulting image shifts into an abstract visual field, that has the capacity to expose and reveal alternate parallels, and simultaneous levels of reality, with simple complexities, that can only be scientifically and “sphere-ritually” (spiritually) discerned, through a network of active or “living” metaphors and signifiers. It would miss the point to frame a discussion around Senga Nengudi’s work within a European margin or cultural index when its goals are incompatible to the sculpture’s Afrikan centered intent and content.

During the mid- sixties through the late seventies, Nengudi was part of an unidentified important Los Angeles/(L)il’ (A)frika LA based art movement involving some 30 or so Afrikan-American “artaculturalists” (artists). Watts was ground zero, They were a part of a collective that I call the Southern California- (L)il’(A)frika Urban Bush Aesthetic (SC-LA-UBA) that operated successfully under a mutual

“funknetic pull” that drew them toward Mao –Mau- “(M)ystically (A)ctivated (O)bjects)” in a “(M)eticulously (A)rranged (U)nified Field”, that routinely decoded layers of “abstract funk” in an improvised field where they “chopped it up” and “broke it down”. This sacred rite evolved into a neo- Twa green work ethic, This work ethic insisted that the choice of materials or objects are channeled through the artists, in a form of “mystical magnetic attraction,” while the artist awaits a voice message as clear as a thousand ancestors speaking with the clarity and depth of one voice emanating from the material or object, regarding it’s placement and usage. This practice is as ancient-future as George Washington Carver, conversing with plant life. Calling forth this intimate, invisible, inaudible call ‘n response system, with an aesthetic informed by what is indigenous to one’s immediate cultural geography and topographical environment is essentially “Sphere-ritual”(spiritual) consciousness. This natural gravitational pull or “magnetic attraction” has origins dating back to several ancient civilizations .i.e. Afrika and Asia, where indigenous people used indigenous materials to the max, without imposing a practice of excessive waste, manufactured scarcity and subsequent apocalyptic melt downs. Without placing a qualitative valuation on the work’s media, the only aesthetic criteria employed here was: 1. Does it, or does it not work, without ruining a balanced environment? 2. Does it look good? and 3. Is it talking loud and saying something...can your eyes hear what it’s saying? It’s not about finding the “chosen (found) object or media,” or making something out of nothing i.e. “rousing the rubble”, or “digging for the detritus,” but instead seeking the profound in the mundane, finding the jewels amidst society’s excessive waste, discovering and revealing the unseen within the seen, that the eye didn’t see, and the ear didn’t hear the first time.

Best known for her “R.S.V.P. (Nylon Mesh) Series”, it’s important to assess her work’s impact through it’s “ Sphere-ritual”/environmental/cultural filter of a largely undetected co-centered gender (masculine-feminine) context, that offers a visual summation and synthesis of her two earlier series, by introducing R.S.VP’s emerging infrastructure. I contend that the master key that unlocks and decodes her intuitive formulas is the conversion of West Coast Southern “Cali” aerospace sensibility into a “comme-unity” centered solar energetic, employing a set of context-object vertically sliding “frame shifters” or “abstract sliders” that isolate and focus on “fresh” tangible/intangible – material/immaterial relationships moving, above and below the vast panoramic sweep of the ocean’s horizon line affecting an “atmospheric synchronicity.”

Like Eva Hesse, Nengudi hijacked the male “hard edged minimalist” discourse, arriving at a more relaxed and less rigid version, while their male counterparts , condescendingly labeled it “post-minimalism” (to suggest their minimalist contribution was an afterthought). Due to her media’s formal, functional, and cultural relationships, Nengudi has, what might be termed a “phenotypical feminist edge“, without consciously negotiating the traditional feminist’s “us” (women) vs. “them” (men) critique.

**The artist’s specific “frame shifters” or “abstract sliders” are adjusted, to ear mark and identify 1)aerial sweeps that include objects in flight 2) ocean water 3) oil,**

**typically found below the ocean floor , two oil by-products, specifically 3a.) vinyl and 3b.) nylon, 4.) sand 5.)and unidentified funky objects (u.f.o.'s) swept onto a littered shoreline, resulting from possible industrial fallout\***

#### FRAME SHIFTING -DANCE DIAGRAM 1 (1-2-3-3a\*)

Nengudi's earliest series of "Water Compositions" were completed, in Southern "Cali" (California) between 1969 -1971, and employed vinyl bag's filled to various levels with "colored" water, that drooped, dropped and flopped, and took in all the AfriCobra kool aid "hollerating-coloration" her sculptures could possibly stand. There's an "atmospheric synchronicity" between the ideas the artist entertained, juxtaposed with certain visual conclusions arrived at by the harmolodic that Nengudi tapped into, from merely vertically "frame shifting" or reorganizing material relationships, and rearranging the visual strata that usually defines the Southern "Cali" aerospace. Her spacial sense of "active stillness" articulates a Kemetic (Egyptian) solar-wisdom. The transparent vinyl skins form pockets of pure light, that eloquently speak of West Coast expanses of light space and shadow. Though their empty areas appear to suggest inactive space, these active air pockets are teaming with her system of "intuitive physics" that, calibrated, and tested levels of stress, strain, stretch, tension, gravity, water/mass weight and a range of other physically demanding properties.

The artist's unique physics system becomes a metaphor to frame and record Post Slave Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PSTSS), indexing breaking points on the Afrikan "Spheret", soul, and body (particularly the female) in AmeriKKKa, and reappears later in the R.S.V.P. Series forming a visible and invisible structural strategy. The "Water Compositions" reference the human body, as a water vessel and mass, on the verge of a "kinetic breakthrough." The H<sub>2</sub>O factor creates a parallel, linking our experience of the work with a heightened body awareness of our bodies as water, while externalizing internal color coded vital fluid levels, through the vinyl's transparency.

#### FRAME SHIFTING-DANCE DIAGRAM 2 (1-2-5\*)

In 1971, Nengudi moved to Spanish Harlem in the NYC, and embarked upon "The Flag Series" (1971-1973). A series of forms fabricated from canvas/flag material were casually constructed to suggest abstracted human/spirit forms, installed high above New York's back streets and alley ways. The flag figures paid homage to discarnate spirits and hovering ghost forms, for their indomitable will to thrive just beyond the celestial threshold, not having entirely yet crossed over. Bobbing, weaving, and swaying, in an improvised urban ballet dance performance, interfacing with the

street “drama” just below, and performed by “hood legends”, “street vets”, junkies, winos, the homeless, etc. A wind aided gestural vocabulary read like an obscure dialect of semaphore, signaled the artist’s strategy, as the elements interfaced with, and environmentally altered and transformed the appearance and face of the work, to a point where surrender, through disintegration and material dissolution carried an “atmospheric victory; a kind of “street resurrection”, underscoring the notion that there is a paper thin etheric veil, where these “street” ancestors are walking through us, as we are simultaneously walking through them – the difference is as dense as the diminishing flag material, blending into the ancestral atmosphere, where material decay is followed by regeneration. Regeneration is followed by reincarnation and renewal- as the flags became the victims of seasonal weather changes, tattered and torn by climatic cycles and stages of transition. Do I hear a cosmic drama. Nengudi’s abstract figures acknowledge and celebrate the human body as a space ship composed of light, space, and shadow, dancing through the Astro-Black oceanic space ways, like a worn down hoodoo flag with a slight glimmer of flashin’ just before disappearin’. Go on and do that cosmic dance anyway. Sun Ra is smiling!

### FRAME SHIFTING-DANCE DIAGRAM 3 (1-3b-4-5\*)

After shuttling between Lil’ Afrika /Los Angeles (LA) and the Big Apple /NYC for a brief period of time Nengudi eventually landed in Lil’ Afrika and in 1976 experienced a natural birth through her 3<sup>rd</sup> eye bringing forth RSVP. which seemed ecologically efficient, culturally balanced, personally aligned, a logical extension, politically correct, and natural (art) birthing, resulting from wire tappin’ the ancestor’s subconscious/ filing system. Though pantyhose were designed to carry feminine energy/consciousness, have a gender specific function and designation point (women’s underwear), historically Black men used nylons for “stocking caps” (the precursor of today’s “wave cap”) to keep their “process,” or “conks,” (hair do’s) together-slick, fried, dyed, laid -potato lyed” to the side - knotted at the top, emblematic of the Christ or Buddha wisdom knot over the 7<sup>th</sup> / Crown chakra in a “saturated pomade anointing.” Sometimes one will observe the repeated use of knots scattered like acupuncture points planted over strategic locales on the artist’s sculpture, like “home-made” prayer beads or objects of devotion. The most obvious difference is the use of sand in place of brotha man’s head. This bifurcation of form, function, “hand me down-ups”, and multi- generational usage as a means of cultural transfer, became critical components and objects of contemplation. “RSVP” explores the conceptual, formal, structural and occasional modular strategies begun in the two previous series, converging into a “harmolodic energetic.”

A dance minor in college, Nengudi approached the series with a depth of understanding of herself as mediator between finite and infinite movement realities, and an awareness that the Black female body is the original microcosmic reflection of the greater Big Mac-rocosmic ocean, and the first kinetic sculpture, ( a visual artist performing). Her sculptures carry a keen autobiographical awareness, and become astro - projections of the artist, while collectively as a group signify a surrogate dance company, with the artist as principal choreographer/ artistic director, as subsequent sculptures exhibited aspects of the “Nengudi Method”, where each

sculpture represents a dancer caught in suspended animation's mid-air movement, amidst the backdrop of a constellation of dancers/choreographers, including the Katherine Dunham, Alvin Ailey, Arthur Mitchell, Lester Horton, Debbie Allen, Lula Washington, and Donald Mackale, offering other fields and movement opportunities options.

Along with the more pronounced sculptural and dance presence, there exist a much subtler set of artistic nuances in her sculpture's holistic view, that contribute to their "energetic"- specifically the remaining artistic disciplines, i.e. music, literature/spoken word, and theater. Stacking the work with the remaining set of disciplines and issues, opens the field up, to suggest additional avenues of expression. The works hi-frequency inaudible "visual voiceings" sing, moan and echo field hollers to the blues, to Freedom Songs and beyond, wailing like Ma Rainey, Big Maybelle, and Bessie Smith, to Sweet Honey In The Rock and Women of the Calabash. The sculpture's formal configurations, speak a unique call 'n response language of their own. Their gestural attitude says volumes: invoking the gravity and weight of the current human dilemma, with a resiliency and resolve that suggest: "Still I rise." All of this exist in a theater of cultural codes, with all of it's post - traumatic drama surfacing in a multitude of contemporary subtleties.

Infrequently seen in performance pieces, is the successful integration of the visual arts with the performing arts. Traditionally, the typical scenario presented is the visual components functioning in a subordinate role (such as a prop) to the performing art's counterparts. Nengudi, resolves this in her performances, by "putting on" her sculptures (a scaled down version of Nick Cave) and becoming natural extensions of her work, while seeking equity and balance amongst the remaining performance components.

The artists engages the viewer in a type of body alignment and energy balancing through her sculptures, in order to restore the body's original poetic balance through the sculpture's physical forms, moving energy through a network of body's, transporting subtle energy through a holographic universe of bodies: astral and cosmic/celestial and terrestrial/heavenly and earthly/water and aerial/firey and Sphereritual(Spiritual)/physical and etheric/ visible and invisible/ solar and moon/ immaterial and material/ skeletal and muscular/ nerve and mineral. The theory is that you can dance your way back to perfect alignment, in harmony with the movement of the spheres in the greater universe. Wait...I think I hear the theory being proved... Do you hear a sanctified storefront church in the background...gittin' happy!

Again, the artist's "RSVP Series" created a focal point and mutual site for a "harmolodic energetic," that was co-centered in form and resolved itself in the serie's unified-field that was simultaneously static and kinetic; while assuming a dual identity of non-figurative abstraction and figurative abstraction. choosing the Afrikan body type as the universal archetype, demonstrating a complimentary unity, as well as a logical synthesis between the two previous series, by exploring body consciousness. In the "Water Compositions" the clear vinyl membranes (of "colored" water) are replaced with the Flag Series', use of opaque material, as both find middle ground in RSVP's translucent media, calling attention to the pantyhose's ability to simultaneously conceal (like the canvas material in the Flag series) and reveal like the clear vinyl in the "Water Compositions". In addition, is the energy exchange that is discharged through the artist personal and physical interaction with the work, giving the sculpture a unique "touch-tone." This level of engagement is equivalent to

solving the riddle or “koan” of what inhabited the vacated shell on the ocean’s shore? If you listen with your 3<sup>rd</sup> eye, you can hear exactly what happened!

With the photo documentation on view at Thomas Erben Gallery, we see an artist dipping both feet first into the creative “Nile-stream” (not to be confused with the “mainstream”) of infinite variation and expanding possibility, in the “changing same” (Baraka), to capture examples from the sacred Afrikan dance trinity: of hands, hips, and feet, stomping down celestial orbits, trajectories, planetary patterns and chemtrails, reflected in terrestrial perpetual rhythmic- mantras that flow-go something like this... hit it:

Do dat thang

Repondez s’il vous plait RSVP (respond if you please)

Cum on now

Do dat thang

Do dat thang

do da Watusi ...

The Orlons

do da Jerk,

The Larks

do da Slide,

do da Hully Gully...

The Olympics

Cum on now

Do dat thang

Do dat thang

do da Harlem Shake...

P. Diddy

do da Slop...

Louis Jordan

do da Mashed Potatoes...

The Orlons

do da Shake...

Otis Redding

Cum on now

Do-dat thang

Do-dat thang

do da Twist...

Chubby Checker & Hank Ballard

do da Uncle Willie,

do da Jittter Bug...

Cab Calloway

do da James Brown...

Godfather of Soul

Cum on now

Do dat thang

Do dat thang

do da Swim...

Bobbie Freeman

do da Funky Broadway...

Wilson Pickett

do da D.C. Hop

do da Funky Worm...

The Ohio Players

Cum on now  
Do dat thang  
Do dat thang  
do da Harlem Shuffle... The Ethiopians  
do da Funky Four Corners,  
do da Swim... Bobby Freeman  
do da Temptation Walk... The Temptation

Cum on now  
do-dat thang  
do dat thang  
do da the Bird,  
do da Pop Lock... Shabadoo  
do da Walk... Morris Day  
do da Cake Walk...

Cum on now  
Do-dat thang  
Do-dat thang  
do da Moon Walk ... Jeffrey Daniels  
do da Crip Walk... Snoop Dog  
do- da Running Man... MC Hammer  
do da Hustle... Van McCoy

Cum on now  
Do-dat thang  
Do dat thang  
do-da Hop,  
do da Lindy Hop,  
do da Electric Slide, Marcia Griffith  
do da Stroll,

Cum on now  
Do-dat thang  
Do-dat thang  
do da Snake... "Snake hips" Tucker  
do da Wiggle...  
do da Butt,... E.U.  
do da Tootsie Roll... The 69 Boys

Cum on now  
Do dat thang  
Do dat thang  
do da Steppin... Chicago Steppers  
do da Fly  
do da Pickett... Wicket Pickett

do da Robot... Ron Cornelius

Cum on now  
Do dat thang  
Do dat thang  
do da Four Corner Rock... The Time  
do da Oak Tree  
do da Bizmarkie  
do da Funky Penquin... Rufus Thomas

Cum on now  
Do dat thang  
Do dat thang  
do da ChaCha Slide  
do da Sanctified dance... Get Happy Sistahs  
do da Praise dance  
do da Ring Shout... Freed Africans

Cum on now  
Do dat thang  
Do dat thang  
do da Tighten Up... Archie Bell and the Drells  
do da Slauson Shuffle  
do da Ballin' the jack  
do da Walkin the Dog... Rufus Thomas

Cum on now  
Do dat thang  
Do dat thang  
do da Four Corners  
do da Funky chicken... Rufus Thomas  
do da Shingaling  
do da the Stroll

Cum on now  
Do dat thing  
Do dat thang  
Do da Calenda  
Do da Counjaille  
Do da Babouille  
Do da Capoeira Angola... Enslaved Afikans



Cum on now  
Do dat thang  
Do dat thang  
Do da Robot... Michael Jackson  
Do da Vogue  
Do da Pony  
Do da Butterfly

Cum on now  
Do dat thang  
Do dat thang  
Do da Breakin'... Break Dance crews  
Do da Hitch-Hike... Marvin Gaye  
Do da Windmill... Break Dance Crews  
Do da Capoeira Regional... Enslaved Afrikans

Even with the systematic de-evolution of Afrikan people and Astro-Black Angels  
into a post-black twilight zone, RSVP

Sun Ra is still calling  
Dance  
James Brown is calling  
Dance  
Fela (Kuti)is calling  
Dance  
The drums are calling!

Greg Angaza Pitts  
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