

The Unseen, Inside Out: The Life and Art of Senga Nengudi

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Why do so many accept the risk of an artist's calling to become one among many members in the elusive pursuit of a visual expression of life? What is this driving force pushing an artist onward to make his or her life remembered as something more than a story of collected artifacts? To look at the work of Senga Nengudi is to bear witness to an artist whose work goes beyond the idea of material objects as it embodies the freeing power of spirit and change.

For twenty-five years, Senga Nengudi has made work that transcends self-importance and ego by allowing it to speak freely and of its own accord. Part of this process involves the artist looking into herself to gather energies for the main purpose of sharing openly with others. As she says, her artworks exist on a temporal plane where one can "have some sense of being able to go on - to be able to know a direction."¹ She is ultimately interested in the dynamic created when elements and concepts meet to make new beginnings.

Senga Nengudi was born, Sue Irons on September 18, 1943 in Chicago, Illinois. Her father died three years later. At the age of seven, she and her mother left Chicago to live in California. They moved several times between Los Angeles and Pasadena during her childhood. In 1961, she enrolled at Pasadena City College. A semester later she studied at the California State University at Los Angeles where she completed her undergraduate degree (Art major, Dance minor) and began her graduate studies in Sculpture.



"RAPUNZEL", 1980 Senga Nengudi, panty hose; spontaneous performance, Central L.A.

Aesthetic curiosity led her to Japan in 1966 where she spent a year between her undergraduate and graduate studies enrolled in a foreign studies program at Waseda University, Tokyo. The artist's principle motivation to go to Japan was to gain a better understanding of and exposure to Eastern thinking and ways of life, and to seek out Japanese avant-garde art movements, in particular, the Gutai Group.² Her intensive study of Japanese culture and aesthetic life built upon her ongoing curiosity in the traditions of other cultures.

While at California State, Senga Nengudi worked as a teaching assistant at the Pasadena Art Museum and as a teacher at the Watts Towers Art Center.³ The old Pasadena Art Museum at this time was a site for the contemporary avant-garde (i.e. Oldenburg, Kaprow, Rauschenberg....) with an explosive mix of experimental art forms, including happenings, dance, poetry and performances. Equally exciting and stimulating at the Watts Towers was the artistic exploration of alternative materials as well as growing interest in community and ethnically based concepts of art. Motivated by the 1965 Watts riots, the African-American artistic community pushed beyond traditional western artforms and articulated a new visual language out of the remaining rubble, discards, and discounted lives as exemplified in the work of Noah Purifory and John Outterbridge.

Early in 1971, the artist moved to East Harlem. At this time there was a distinction among African-American members of the art world between what was called "Uptown Art" and "Downtown Art". The Uptown Art world consisted of everything above 125th Street, essentially Harlem, whereas the Downtown Art world included art communities located around 57th Street and Downtown. Uptown Art was primarily more Afrocentric in

content, whereas Downtown Art concerned itself more with formal and mainstream art issues (as exemplified by the work of Sam Gilliam). Senga Nengudi developed friendships with artists connected with the Weusi-Nyumba Ya Sanaa Academy of Fine Arts Studies (which translates as "The House of Art" in Swahili), and the Studio Museum in Harlem. This group of artists in New York City concerned itself with the aesthetic rhythms of life, art, and transcendence in African philosophy. They tried to express for themselves what they found Africa to be as it merged with their American experiences. Of particular significance was her friendship with the late Charles Abramson, who stands out as a distinct and important influence in her artistic and spiritual life. Mr. Abramson's ability to consciously use African concepts and philosophies on a highly abstracted level, together with his vision of the artist as a vehicle rather than a personality, infused his art with electrifying power and energy. In fact, his quest for spiritual wholeness was so strong that it eventually led him to become a priest of Yoruba religion.

Although both artists were aware of each other in the late 60's, a closer friendship with David Hammons was established in 1973 when he stayed briefly with a group of other artists as guests in her apartment in New York. In turn, she was able to use his studio in Los Angeles upon her return in 1974.⁴ Both artists would switch studios back and forth during their bi-coastal activities throughout the 70's and early 80's. Hammons also introduced her to Linda Goode-Bryant, the owner-director of the now legendary Just Above Midtown gallery, who gave the artist her first solo show entitled, "RSVP," in 1977, exhibiting the pantyhose pieces.

Although the material nature of her work is important, Senga Nengudi has stated many times that the use of time resistant materials has not been of great importance to her:

Permanency has never been a priority for me- to the chagrin of many.⁵

I have fought the joy of creating impermanent objects most of my life. An artist's supposed greatest desire is the making of objects that will last lifetimes for posterity after all. This has never been a priority for me. My purpose is to create an experience that will vibrate with the connecting thread.⁶

For the artist, this "connecting thread" ties her work to a reality beyond time and space. It also embodies her African-American experience where through the democratic usage of readily available materials she is able to express a tradition motivated by the impulse of "keeping on."

The "found" in Senga Nengudi's work speaks about survival (of a people). She often feels drawn to discarded materials which have a history of their own. Water, dirt, paper, wood, hosiery, even air are examples of materials she has used to construct her artworks. All of these elements have for her a direct connection to her psyche as an artist and as a human being.

Senga Nengudi was first recognized in the art world with her nylon mesh (pantyhose) pieces made between 1975-1980, a time that corresponded with tremendous changes in her life. She married Elliott Fittz in 1975 and gave birth to her two children, Sanza Pyatt born in 1974, and Oji born in 1979. Pregnancy and its accompanying changes had a profound effect to the degree that it inspired her to construct a conceptual-material manifestation of these bodily changes. The nylon mesh pieces are reflective of her idea of the body and the corresponding mental states

asking how much stretching a body/form can endure and how much resilience is left after the pulling and tension cease. They also make a historical note of the female body as an indentured servant taking on duties and responsibilities forced upon it.⁷

These ideas of stretching and servitude are brought to painful extremes in "*Inside/Outside*," 1977, and "*Rapunzel*," 1980. "*Inside/Outside*" draws out effects akin to a twisted distension as nylon mesh is weighed down with sand to create a visual rhythm of swinging pendulous forms suggestive of exposed internal organs. The artist's spontaneous performance piece, "*Rapunzel*," made in Central Los Angeles, gains its title from that fairy tale in which the princess is asked by her lover to let down her braided hair so he can climb up to save her - claim her.⁸

From 1978 throughout the 80's, Senga Nengudi expressed herself through performance art both spontaneous and crafted. Most often collaborating with the artists Maren Hassinger, Ulysses Jenkins, Franklin Parker, Houston Conwill, as well as David Hammons, dancer Cheryl Banks and composer/musician Butch Morris. She used performance art as a tool for expansion and stimulation, and as a way to utilize her other selves (dancer/choreographer, mythologist, etc...). In late 1989, she and her family moved from Los Angeles to Colorado Springs, Colorado. Always committed to art education, she put her focus on community related art programs. This allowed her to reevaluate her relation to art and her own process of art making.

In 1988, the artist completed the radio art piece titled "*Mouth to Mouth: Conversations on Being- Doublethink/Bulemia*," originally initiated by Charles Abramson, who passed away before its completion.

"*Doublethink/Bulemia*" is a philosophical treatise for the practice of art making- a sort of Tao of Art made for sharing with anyone wanting to learn. "Charles just picked the word 'Bulemia' out of the air. It was to be understood as a state of mind and not to be related in any way to the clinical physical disorder."⁹ The tape consists of Senga Nengudi interviewing Darryl Sevad who speaks in character as "The Minister of B.S." Mr. Sevad speaks freely on the tape of beliefs held by both Senga Nengudi and Charles Abramson on creativity and its process. Interview inserts on the tape also include Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor and others.¹⁰

The installation piece "Bulemia" constructed in 1988 as an elaboration of the radio art piece, consisted of a room and entry-way papered from floor to ceiling with vintage newspapers. Waded newspaper balls were painted gold and piled in the middle of the installation. More than halfway down the walls, a border of ruffled newspapers created a layered petticoat effect. Gold spray paint was used to delete certain words, and to redirect patterns of thought. "*Bulemia*" situates itself as a great library of life where one enters to freely collect information from the newspaper covered walls. Paper plays an important role as a transformative material. When recalling the installation, the artist spoke of the intense heat that was generated by the paper in the room making note that homeless people often use paper to hold in body heat.

Sound is incorporated as a working element in a series of sculptures and drawings made in 1995. "*OA (Through Here)*," "*OB*," and "*OI (It's Hairy)*" are named as such to make the spectator participate by issuing forth the title in speech. The titles are not to be spoken as letters, but rather, to be called out as sound (i.e. "*OA*" equals OAHH). An important factor to consider in the titling of these pieces is the aspect of the

collective/connected experience expressed in the African-American tradition of speech. A quote from Molefi Kete Asante's book, The Afrocentric Idea, identifies very well the historical importance of speech in African cultures:

The enunciation produces what it names. Naming is an incantation, a creative act. What we cannot conceive of is unreal; it does not exist. But every human thought, once expressed, becomes reality.¹¹

In Euro-American societies there are clear distinctions made between the artist/speaker and the audience, whereas in more traditional African societies the relationship between speaker and audience become collective activities and experiences.¹¹ The sound pieces in particular bring the audience into play and further confirm Senga Nengudi's greater desire to join with others in spirit.

"OA" is constructed of paper, wood, PVC tubing, twine, cement and lint. A cool blue/gray color permeates the installation. Cement based, twine wrapped columns crossed with a wooden bar form a portal/doorway to a sea of lint. Paper fringe hangs centered over the wooden bar and the cement bases are adorned with metal amulets. Strung PVC tubings strike out in different directions to create a sense of celebration.

"Temple," an earlier installation completed in 1993 contrasts with the openness presented in "OA." A more static piece, "Temple" exists as a domesticated sanctuary. Purple dust peppers the floor within a circular shape outlined by small rocks and illuminated by a skylight. White paper hangs down from the ceiling like curtains which gracefully follow the shape on the floor. The hanging paper is creased in measured-off segments, adding to the installation's details of formal decorum. Safe within this space, one can see triangles made of tightly rolled newspaper

painted gold which hang at different intervals from the ceiling. Gold is used here, as it is in "*Bulemia*," for its spiritual and alchemic connotations; she strives to make "a golden situation" out of the bleak. A womb-like quietude emanates gently from this shelter of spiritual replenishment. What becomes evident in this installation as well as others is the need of a human presence, a humanity to activate the work.

In artworks like "*OA*" and "*Temple*," Senga Nengudi displays the highest sense of strength within openness and vulnerability. She brings together what appears to be a mere insignificance of material to construct pieces that hold rooms with bristling potential energy. Where "*OA*" opens itself up physically to the entire room, "*Temple*" exists as a closed and private space defined by its form. The artist's facility to manipulate materials into new forms as well as to work actively with the surrounding environment/space proves that nothing is ever made useless in her work.

Senga Nengudi ultimately challenges myths of what it means to be an African-American, a woman and an artist. She goes to a place high and most profound while avoiding that pained and bitter state where growth stagnates into self-hate. In this, she has spent her life dealing with the human ideal of the Transformative Self where growth and change become paramount in the development of the human consciousness.

I guess when people are with my art I want them to have an experience- for it to be an event. Sort of like spending time with Monet's "Water Lilies." To go above and beyond the human condition on to higher ground. To straddle the worlds of reality and light.¹³

I create a peace/piece. I wipe it out with my hands, my feet, my body. It remains in the fabric of time threading through the millenniums remembered and forgotten a thousand times over, yet there. Seen-not seen-experienced as a part of the air.¹⁴

Notes:

1. Senga Nengudi. Telephone interview. 19-21 December 1995.
2. Ibid. While at Cal State, Senga Nengudi picked up a book on Modern Japanese Art. A small section of the book contained information on the Gutai Group. She spent some time in Japan searching the group out, but was unable to locate them. What interested her was the series of art activities and concepts they employed in their performances bridging several different artforms.
3. Greenfield, Mark. Current Director of Watts Towers Arts Center. Telephone interview. 11 April 1996. The Watts Towers located near the Watts Towers Art Center were built by Simon Rodia, an Italian immigrant, purportedly as his monument to America consisting of eleven hand-built towers made of scavenged materials (mainly broken glass, broken bottles and an assortment of tiles and cement).
4. Senga Nengudi. Telephone interview. 19-21 December 1995. In 1974, she left New York for Los Angeles, California. It was there that she changed her name from Sue Irons to Senga Nengudi.
5. Senga Nengudi. Letter to Thomas Erben. 15 February 1995.
6. Senga Nengudi. Artist statement. 29 August 1995.
7. Senga Nengudi. Artist statement. Late 1970's. "I am working with nylon mesh because it relates to the elasticity of the human body. From tender, tight beginnings to sagging end...The body can only stand so much push and pull until it gives way, never to resume its original shape. After giving birth to my own son, I thought of black wet-nurses suckling child after child - their own as well as those of others, until their breasts rested on their knees, their energies drained. My works are abstracted reflections of used bodies - visual images that serve my aesthetic decisions as well as my ideas."
8. Senga Nengudi. Telephone interview. 29 May 1996. "Rapunzel" was staged at an old catholic school in the process of being demolished. With "happening" spontaneity, she rushed to the site and installed the piece. Barbara McCullough, a filmmaker, photo-documented the event.
9. Senga Nengudi. Telephone interview. 19-21 December 1995.
10. Senga Nengudi. Telephone interview. 29 May 1996. Charles Abramson was included on the "Conversations on Being-Doublethink/Bulemia" tape as a voice insert.
11. Jahn, Janheinz, Muntu: The New African Culture. New York: Grove Press, 1961. p. 134. (qtd. in Asante, Molefi Kete. The Afrocentric Idea. p. 70.).
12. Asante, Molefi Kete. The Afrocentric Idea. pp. 66-67.
13. Senga Nengudi. Letter to Thomas Erben. 15 February 1995.
14. Senga Nengudi. Artist statement. May 1993.