

Thomas Erben Gallery

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Art in America

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Senga Nengudi: *Insides Out*, 1977, nylon mesh, metal and sand, 10 feet high; at Thomas Erben.

Senga Nengudi at Thomas Erben

Active since the 1970s, Senga Nengudi is one of those artists who seems to quietly slip through art history's cracks. Her works include performances, installations and sculptures that are

often performance-based. Now living in Colorado, where she teaches, she remains relatively unknown despite her influence on a number of artists and her association with such well-known colleagues as David Hammons. A recent show of her sculptures from the 1970s demonstrated the continued relevance of her output. Because of Nengudi's avowed disinterest in creating lasting objects or preserving her works, the sculptures on view in this show were all re-creations of earlier versions shown at Just Above Midtown gallery, a respected New York City venue for African-American art in the '70s run by Linda Goode-Bryant.

Consisting of stretched, tightly twisted and knotted configurations of pantyhose, sometimes filled with small amounts of sand to create pendulous sacs, the works often have an improvisational feel, perhaps partly inspired by Nengudi's background in dance and her use of found materials, such as rubber inner tubes. Though these are abstract constructions, Nengudi relates the material and forms to the human body. She fashioned the works from used pantyhose, usually in a range of tan and black flesh tones but sometimes using colorful varieties. The artist prefers to work with worn pantyhose because, she says, it has a "residue" of the body and the "energy" of the wearer. Her experience of childbirth made her consider the pushing and pulling on the human body, and its resilience. The effects of aging are evoked in the stretched forms that often resemble withered testicles or sagging breasts.

The exhibition's centerpiece

was a dynamic installation of 10 pairs of hose stretched across a corner of the gallery in a repeating V formation, the "trunks" of the hose filled with sand to anchor them to the floor.

R.S.V.P. (1975-77) reached from floor to ceiling and suggested an attenuated figure with knotted combinations of light and dark brown forming "arms" and "legs" ending in "feet" of sand. Most of the other works were wall-bound. Tacked up in a Y shape, *R.S.V.P. V* (1976) resembles a flayed specimen. *Inside/Outside* (1977) is an elegant example that has the gravity of a ceremonial garment. It features half of a rubber inner tube attached to the wall with large nails; pendulous appendages in pink, blue, yellow and dark brown dangle from the tube's ends.

Though Nengudi created these works at the height of the feminist movement, her use of pantyhose doesn't seem intended as a commentary on the oppression of the female sex. Instead, she made materially engaging works that transcend political commentary and passing art-world trends.

—Stephanie Cash

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516 West 20th Street New York NY 10011-2820
phone 212-645.8701 fax 212-645.9630
email info@thomaserben.com