



SENGA NENGUDI

Thomas Erben

Born Sue Irons in Chicago in 1943, Senga Nengudi studied art and dance in Los Angeles in the 1960s, with a year between undergraduate and graduate school spent at Waseda University in Tokyo. She began her career among a group of avant-garde black artists working in Los Angeles and New York during the 1970s and early 1980s, one that included her frequent collaborators David Hammons and Maren Hassinger.

Nengudi is best known for her abstract sculptures from this time, particularly her biomorphic nylon mesh series, “Repondez s’il vous plait” (1975-77), made from panty hose that the artist stretched, twisted and knotted, as well as filled at intervals with sand to create sagging breast- or testiclelike bulges. In contrast to the works of many of her African-American peers, these sculptures abjured specific political content or ethnic associations, even as they powerfully evoked fragility and resilience, both bodily and psychic.

Examples of Nengudi’s “R.S.V.P.” sculptures have appeared in the traveling group shows “Now Dig This! Art & Black Los Angeles 1960-1980,” recently at MoMA P.S.1, and “Blues for Smoke,” recently at the Whitney Museum of American Art, a sign that a reappraisal of her sensual,

witty art may be under way. Running concurrently to these exhibitions was “Senga Nengudi: Performances 1976-1981” at Thomas Erben, a presentation of documentary and staged photographs and videos that revealed the integral role sculpture played in an oeuvre encompassing performance art, ritual, music, dance and theater.

The exhibition opened with still photos of a 1978 performance piece in which Hassinger and Nengudi improvised dance movements while entangled in a web of stretched lengths of panty hose. The work, which, according to Nengudi, alluded specifically to restrictions “both inwardly and outwardly imposed” on women, incorporated a clear feminist message at a time when the feminist movement was overwhelmingly white. For the most part, however, Nengudi’s sculptures (with their simultaneously masculine and feminine aspects), her staged photographs (in which she frequently appears as an anonymous, genderless being) and her collaborative performances with musicians and artists of both sexes suggest that her primary focus is on social structures equally damaging to men and to women.

Pictures taken in 1978 show the artist, dotted with bits of pale masking tape and dancing in a dark room, as a ghostly, atomized presence triumphantly eluding definition. A 1977 photograph captures her as a hieratic figure wrapped in a cape of paint-spattered, heavy paper and wearing a mask made out of cut-off panty hose. Here she is one part Irving Penn model, one part Noh actor and one part robed Egungun performer.

Such cultural crisscrossing—particularly between African and Asian forms—recurred throughout the show. In *Performance with ‘Inside/Outside’* (1977), Nengudi stands within a panty-hose sculpture incorporating an inner tube. Her back to the viewer, with the inner tube forming a kind of halo around her head, she resembles alternately one of the Zen master Enku’s carved Buddhas and a Native American kachina.

Other works in the exhibition included a group of color pictures of a 1978 outdoor event in which participants—among them a leaping Hammons wielding a ritual staff—were costumed in masks and headdresses created by Nengudi. A 2012 video featured excerpts from performances that Nengudi and Hassinger staged with colleagues and friends between 1977 and 2005. It brought to vivid life their collective formulation of a new and vital art.

—Anne Doran

WALT KUHN

DC Moore

Sexual humiliation, anger and homoeroticism are unexpected themes in shows of early American modernists. But Walt Kuhn (1877-1949) was an artist who subverted expectations.

When Kuhn’s militarily hatted showgirl was quoted by David Salle in a 1986 painting, *Blue Paper*, its juxtaposition with naked women posing in submissive postures empha-

Senga Nengudi:
*Study for Mesh
Mirage*, 1977, silver
gelatin print, 40
by 30 inches; at
Thomas Erben.