

Thomas Erben Gallery

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Art

Stretch marks: Rediscovering 'legendary' Senga Nengudi

SENGA NENGUDI
Thomas Erben Gallery
516 West 20th Street
Through October 18

Back in the '70s, Chicago-born, California-bred Senga Nengudi shared a studio with David Hammons. "We kind of bounced back and forth," she recalls. "In the beginning he was kind enough to let me use his space, which was an old dance hall, and then later he would use my space." Each had one foot on the West Coast and the other in New York.

Her smart, scrappy work also straddled the divide between, as she puts it, "the community and the extreme art that was happening." Swathed in paper, string, or other humble stuff, Nengudi, who had studied dance as well as art, turned herself into an imposing live sculpture in performances that were ritualized, formal, and improvised. She also made installations from old inner tubes, twisted bike tires, and worn panty hose—knotted, stretched, bulging with sand—long before Maureen Connor, Annette Messenger, Ernesto Neto, or Sarah Lucas. Old panty hose appealed to her, she says, because of "a residue of stress. That's who we are as women." Along with Hammons, Houston Conwill, Fred Wilson, and Lorna Simpson, she showed at the Just Above Midtown

Gallery—the first African American-run gallery on 57th Street. So how come we've barely heard of her?

Ten years ago, Lorraine O'Grady called her a "legendary avant-garde artist, overlooked in the discovery of black art . . . an artist's artist." Now Thomas Erben is showing a group of Sengudi's works from the mid-'70s. Titled *Répondez S'il Vous Plait*, but known as *The Panty Hose Pieces*, they dangle limply, swell into clustered sacs of sand, or are stretched to spread-eagled limits. Painful, vulnerable, grungy, and sexually ambiguous, they're powerful feminist statements, missing links, and eye-openers. Literally and figuratively, they've got balls. And Sengudi, having seen installation become a dominant global medium, is still thinking ahead: "It seems like there needs to be a shift in that vocabulary. Like, OK—next?" **KIM LEVIN**

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