

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

Art | In Conversation

Senga Nengudi with Amadour

MAY 2023



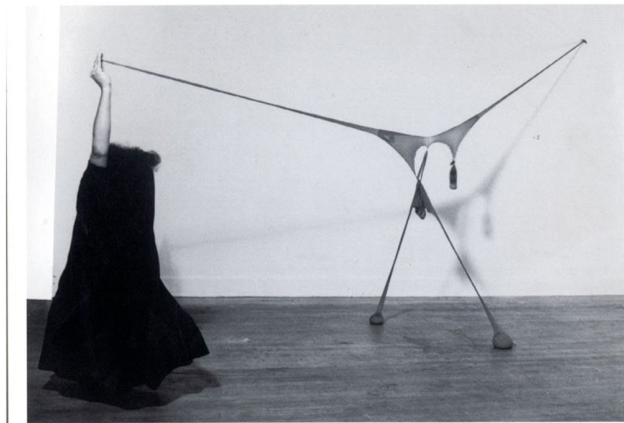
Portrait of Senga Nengudi. By Phong H. Bui.

Dia Beacon

Senga Nengudi

Long Term Installation

Known for her sand-filled, nylon stockings sculptures and performance works that mark the importance of collaboration, Senga Nengudi champions the importance of documentation and experimentation to build community. This year Nengudi has reached another peak in her illustrious career as the 2023 Nasher Prize Laureate. Jeremy Strick, Director of the Nasher Sculpture Center, remarked that, "Nengudi is a particularly powerful and compelling artist who brings new materials to the conversation and speaks profoundly to the times." Simultaneously, the artist opened a landmark retrospective exhibition at the Dia Art Foundation in Beacon, curated by Matilde Guidelli-Guidi, Associate Curator at Dia, that explores her multifarious art practice.



Senga Nengudi, *Studio performance with R.S.V.P.*, 1976. Silver gelatin print, 29 × 40 inches. Courtesy Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. © Senga Nengudi, 2022. Photo: Ken Peterson.

Amadour (Rail): With your show now open at Dia Beacon, and being honored as the 2023 Nasher Prize Laureate, how do you take all of this in?

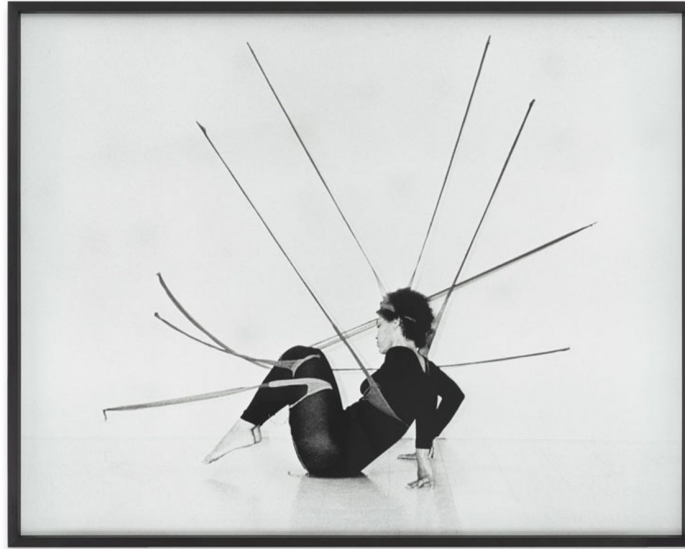
Senga Nengudi: It's exceptional. I'm happy that I'm alive to see it. You know, a lot of my colleagues are not. They had to leave this earth before this happened, before the acknowledgment. I am getting the chills because I am genuinely thankful to my friends, who are now ancestors, that we could work on this for so long until there was some recognition. Although we didn't have it then, we were doing okay. But to finally have others say "you exist" is something else.

Rail: In your discussion with filmmaker Linda Goode Bryant and artist Maren Hassinger at the Nasher Sculpture Center, you spoke about documentation and said your mantra is "documentation, documentation, documentation." I was thinking, as an artist myself, "You are so right." From here on out, I will have your voice in the back of my head; thank you. Especially in the 1970s, when you and your colleagues were recording on film and went out of your way to find a camera. Tell me about your time in New York when you first came up with the idea. Did anyone suggest that you document your work?

Nengudi: Did someone tell me that? It was almost like an instinct. You know, "I better do this, or nobody will know."

Rail: Was it a performance that instigated this instinct? I sometimes think that impulse or drive is in direct exchange with the informality of art. It's like a clap or a rhythm.

Nengudi: Right. Now that I'm thinking about it, it came about because I'm so shy and still am. I would do a lot of private performances in my studio, and I knew that if the photographer and I were the only ones in the room, that documentation needed to happen. I had to prove that I did them since there was no audience, and I didn't want one. So that's why. And it just dawned on me that that was the case because of the importance of being visible and represented.



Maren Hassinger activating Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* at Pearl C. Wood Gallery, Los Angeles, 1977. Courtesy Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. © Senga Nengudi, 2022. Photo: Harmon Outlaw.

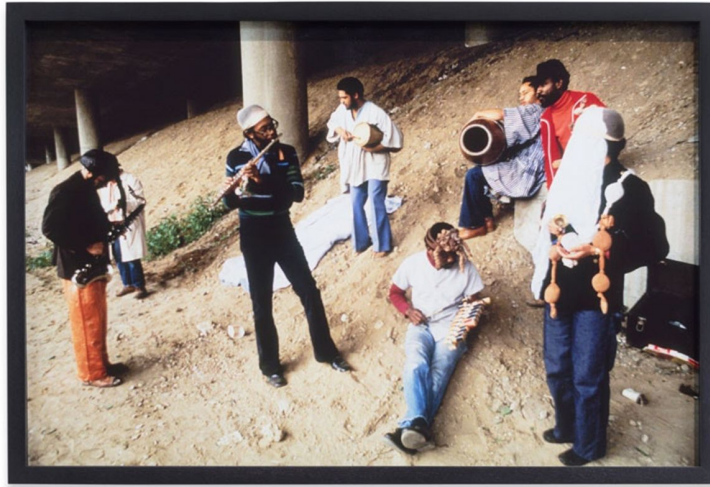
Rail: Where was your studio located?

Nengudi: Well, I had several. One was on La Salle Avenue in Los Angeles, and I had a tiny little studio. And it was amusing because it was where I grew up as a child. Right next door to me was a Latinx storefront that was also a church, and they would go to town there on Sunday and during the week, because it wasn't Catholic. It was Pentecostal or something. And down the street was a cinema, a theater I had visited as a child. It was fascinating. Before that, when I moved back to LA from living in New York, David Hammons let me share his studio on Slauson Boulevard for a time until he left town to move to New York. It was a great place. It was in a famous old dance hall, you know, erected in the forties, that he took over as a studio.

Rail: Ronn Davis was my professor at Santa Monica College. He was an outstanding artist and a nurturing person who transformed many lives. He was in Studio Z. When you were all with Studio Z, how did you collaborate and make performances, and how did you get involved?

Nengudi: So it was a loose grouping of people, and we did stuff like support the Art Ensemble of Chicago. It's wonderful. The Art Ensemble of Chicago makes very wild music in the framework of Sun Ra. Do you know about Sun Ra? As a musician, Amadour, you should know about them. Most of them are dead, unfortunately. But they were terrific. We would support musicians that came to town. Some of them we would have in David's studio, and others we would back in other venues. It was all about supporting each other. That was the main thing.

Rail: Given the current political climate, how do dance and sculpture create a vehicle for transformation?



Senga Nengudi, *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, 1978 (detail). 10 c-prints, contact sheet. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. © Senga Nengudi, 2022. Photo: Quaku / Roderick Young.

Nengudi: My answer might be a bit off, but I am concerned about how someone finds the truth in this environment and this atmosphere. And it feels like whatever is produced exists as truth. In dance and performance, there's no lying there. And how do you know what's real when it's such a misleading environment? How do you know what's true? The creative act allows that. There's no way it can be false. That's how I think about it. It's a sticky wicket, too. Because, you know, you create something, and all of a sudden, all the AI stuff comes into it. It's tough when somebody copies what you're doing, this or that. But the initial act, the pure creative act, is truth.

Rail: Within that truth, to me, your performances come from an unprejudiced place. It's a gut feeling—to recognize when something is right or wrong. Regardless of the outcome, it's about the intention from the concept's inception. I also wonder, with your works, given how bodily they are, how do you feel about the way the body reacts to truth or a lie in performance?

Nengudi: That's a lovely question. You said you could sense when it's not right and feel when it is honest. And that's what I am looking for initially. It's funny how the body responds. While we were doing our thing at the lecture at specific points, I got chills at what I was saying, what I was remembering, and so on. It's remarkable how the body has all these little things to alert you to something. You hear it all the time. Someone will have an unexpected idea or something and say, "Oh, I got chills." That's something you can't create. It's something that goes through your body.

Rail: It's also astonishing how the body stores memory.

Nengudi: Yes, absolutely.

Rail: Do your works store memory within the visceral elements of the materials for you?

Nengudi: For me, yes, they do. And that's why sometimes I talk about them as artifacts. They take in energy and hold that recollection.

Rail: They are harboring a piece of remembrance within themselves. What are your reflections on dance as activism, and where have you felt that during your career?

Nengudi: Oh boy. That's a hard one. My sculptures do that. Now, dance? I enjoy people-watching and being so fascinated with their movement that it would become a dance. I'm so caught up in it that I almost mimic their posture or gestures. I don't know what to say about it. You know, I am seeing a therapist. But I don't know. For instance, you're sitting there, and I'm noting how you're crossing your leg and leaning; it's all registering to me. And I can then say, "Oh, that's Amadour's dance." And, you know, it's another joy of mine that I can see someone, and that's the choreography for me. That's the dance for me. It's an individual. That person then becomes an individual as opposed to a part of a whole, a part of an economic group, a part of a cultural group, or anything like that.

Rail: I love that answer. That makes me reflect and observe. That's what you're good at doing.

Nengudi: I am.

Rail: It's your passion, and what you gift to other people is the ability to be recognized and present. It's powerful. For instance, when you see someone who most people may overlook, acknowledging them with a smile or hello changes their perception.

Nengudi: Lovely.

Rail: Can you speak about that?

Nengudi: No, you just did.

Rail: [Laughs] Well, returning to your sculptures, how do you decide where to place the stockings in their final form?



Senga Nengudi, R.S.V.P. Reverie "Scribe", 2014 (detail). Nylon mesh, sand and found metals. 91 x 54 x 67 inches. Courtesy Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. © Senga Nengudi, 2022. Photo: Timo Ohler.

Nengudi: It's a dance. Have you ever seen Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers? I look at it like that. I'm partnering with my sculpture and dancing with the work as my counterpart, twirling, moving, and curving. I'm getting this information from the piece, and that's how it evolves.

Rail: That reminds me so much of Ronn Davis. Do you know what he would tell me? He would say, "You know what you need to do? For your homework assignment, you will take your painting on a date. And you and your painting will sit there, have dinner together, and converse. You will find out what your work needs and what kind of relationship you want." Is that something relevant to you?

Nengudi: Totally. One hundred percent.

Rail: Oh wow! I want to go onto the fact that you have so many shifting identities. Can you speak about how you began changing your name?

Nengudi: I went into a bookstore, and they had greeting cards, and I saw this African card and said, "Oh, splendid," because you don't see many African or Black art cards. I look at it and go, "Oh, this is stunning!" And I flip it over. And a white person had done it. I was furious. I said, "Oh, my God." And then, all of a sudden, I thought, "Wait a minute. That person has a right to do whatever they want to do." And I thought about that. And I started playing with this idea of personas. It fascinates me that if there's a Black or African name, there can be an expectation about it before you even think about what it's supposed to look like. It's subconscious and unconscious and automatically is judged on what it should look like. You probably don't even know who Br'er Rabbit is, but it's ancient folklore.

Rail: I do. I spoke with Alison Saar about the Br'er Rabbit.

Nengudi: Of course, you did. [*Laughs*] It is about the trickster and how it plays, which is also very ancient. In that story they're trying to find the Br'er Rabbit, and he goes into a briar patch. They think, "Oh, he's caught." But he isn't because that's his dwelling, and he can work with that. I chose Propecia Leigh, Lily Bea Moor, and Harriet Chin to explore the peripheries of ethnicity and interchangeability. And so, even though my artwork has stayed the same, I put the name differently on each work. So people would have to deal with, "Well, what does this mean? Well, that's not what it should be; that's an African Princess. Why is Harriet Chin on it?" Do you know what I'm saying? So it's, again, making people conscious of the moment.

Rail: I love that. I find humor in it. But I also see the seriousness of it.

Nengudi: It's because society puts us all in boxes. I taught some of this in some of my classes. We, the people who are that culture, sometimes put ourselves in boxes too. For instance, "You can't do that. You're an African American. You're a this or that. And you cannot do an abstract painting. You cannot explore this. This is what you are supposed to do." So, you know, it's more than just the larger culture. For example, Daniel Salazar, a Denver artist, did a whole thing with tortillas and iconic revolutionary historical figures.

Rail: Pancho Villa?

Nengudi: Zapata. And he put a skirt on him. He got death threats. Everything. Some in the community said, “How dare you play with our machismo?” And so that’s a real example. He wanted to play. He wanted to make humor out of this. He wanted to play with this concept of machismo and challenge the concept.

Rail: You were in Japan early in your career, and I read that the Gutai movement influenced you. I just interviewed Simone Forti, and she told me about the Gutai movement, where Kazuo Shiraga painted with his feet, and Saburo Murakami cut through paper. I’m sure you know what I’m talking about.

Nengudi: Does he punch through the paper?

Rail: Yes exactly. But from the Gutai movement and your time in Japan, what’s a treasured recollection from that time?



Senga Nengudi, *Water Composition (orange)*, 1969–70/2018. Heat sealed vinyl, coloured water. 7/8 x 38 1/8 x 15 3/4 inches. Courtesy Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. © Senga Nengudi, 2022. Photo: Stephen White.

Nengudi: Would you believe I never saw one of them? I looked for them the entire time I was there. And I could not find them. I was so disappointed. They had meant so much to me looking through art books. I studied Japanese there and learned quickly that the hip people in Tokyo refused to speak English. With my limited Japanese I had a hard time having a level of deeply meaningful conversation. I stayed with a Japanese family. The head of the household was an animator, who made an award-winning anti-Vietnam War animation film. I went to Waseda University in Tokyo. Students were always protesting during the war. It was like being in Berkeley. Japanese culture continues to charge me up. Manipulation of paper, ritual, minimalist forms, grace in motion “oh my!”

Rail: As a final question, how did you end up in Colorado?

Nengudi: Well, the gangs were taking over LA. Proposition 13 passed in 1978, and changed how California funds education, and I’ll never forget when it was on the ballot. It cut out all kinds of extracurricular activities for teenagers, entirely out of the schools and completely out of recreation centers. Everybody said it was going to be a problem, and then after a year from when it passed, when it wasn’t a problem, they thought, “Oh, everything’s okay.” But it was just getting ingrained into the culture, and by the second year, it was horrible with the Bloods. I grew up in LA. And you know, my sons have a lot to do with it. My husband said, “I want to get out of LA.” And the thought of going to a smaller community clashed with what I initially thought. But after a while, I reached a dead end in LA creatively. And I said, “Well, okay.” So we just started roaming around. We went to New Mexico and Arizona and visited a cousin that had just moved to Colorado. And you know how you see things differently through other people’s eyes? Well, my cousin loved it because the people were friendly, so we settled in, and it felt good to me because no one was looking over my shoulder. So I could do my artwork, you know, and I could freely do what I wanted to do.

Rail: Thanks for sharing that history. It is fascinating where destiny can take you.

Nengudi: We have Pikes Peak in the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains there. Have you ever heard of our little mountain? It’s supposed to be “America’s Mountain.” [*Laughs*] Every day, it genuinely is a spiritual experience. Some people like the ocean; there are no bodies of water anywhere, despite that I love the mountains. That’s why we chose Colorado Springs; there’s something about the land.

Contributor

Amadour

Amadour is an interdisciplinary artist based in Los Angeles and New York City. Amadour investigates landscape, architectural forms, and our relationship as humans to built and natural environments. They received dual BA degrees in studio art and art history from the UCLA School of Arts and Architecture in 2018. For more information visit: www.amadour.com