



The artist, photographed with “Water Composition II,” circa 1970. Art work by Senga Nengudi / Photograph courtesy Tilton Gallery

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SENGA NENGUDI'S JOURNEYS

THROUGH AIR, WATER, AND SAND

In a show at Dia Beacon, the artist explores her poetics of the body and her philosophical belief in flow.

By Hilton Als

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It must have been in the fall of 2011 that I first saw the great Senga Nengudi's work. That was when the art historian and curator Kellie Jones unveiled her landmark exhibition "Now Dig This!: Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980" at L.A.'s Hammer Museum. An extensive and enriching display, the show included pieces by a phenomenal range of creators, among them Nengudi, John Outterbridge, Suzanne Jackson, Maren Hassinger, David Hammons, Betye Saar, Alonzo Davis, and Houston Conwill—artists who helped define a time and a place that their East Coast contemporaries knew little, if anything, about. Walking into the show was like entering a new atmosphere, especially if you primarily associated the two decades that Jones was exploring with Pop art and minimalism and the few "stars" of those movements. The artists represented in Jones's powerful "other" world operated out of what I now see as a sort of spiritual

necessity, a desire to use their materials—paint, wood, wire rope, what have you—to communicate the complexities of their inner view.

Of all the beautiful and startling art I saw in “Now Dig This!,” it was Senga Nengudi’s that wouldn’t let me or my imagination go. I knew nothing about her, except what I learned from the show’s catalogue—that she was born Sue Ellen Irons, in Chicago in 1943, and moved to Pasadena, and then Los Angeles, as a child. Later, I read that during her years at Dorsey High School Nengudi was subject to a kind of silent segregation, with Black students staying in a certain area at lunchtime. She trained with the dancer and choreographer Carmen de Lavallade at Lester Horton’s legendary dance studio in West Hollywood. (Horton had a great interest in Native American dance and rituals.) In 1965, as a student at California State University, she received a scholarship from the Modern Dance Club of Los Angeles, and, at about the same time, began teaching art at the Watts Towers Arts Center. Through a graduate program, she travelled to Japan in 1966, attracted by the idea of the Gutai Art Association, a group of young Japanese artists whose focus was on “happenings” and experimentation—breaking the frame to make work that was physically free, unbounded.



Detail from “Wet Night—Early Dawn—Scat Chant—Pilgrim’s Song” (1996). The flight of Nengudi’s figure feels like a form of release—of energy whirling and then landing somewhere. © Senga Nengudi / Courtesy Dia Art Foundation; Photograph by Thomas Barratt

Nengudi’s art from the early seventies reflects these experiences—and African culture, too. In 1974, a boyfriend from Zaire advised her on her name change. In Duala, the language of Cameroon, *senga* means “to listen or hear,” and a *nengudi* is a woman who comes to power as a traditional healer. The artist David Hammons, a friend of Nengudi’s, says that she couldn’t relate to the American Black nationalism of those years, with its inherently patriarchal structure. For Nengudi, the only reason to have a structure was to play within its parameters—and

then explode them. Included in “Now Dig This!” was a piece from a series called “R.S.V.P.” (1977/2003), which uses commonplace materials—pantyhose, sand—to create biomorphic shapes that evoke the body in extremis, women twisting and turning to slip into a material that basically encases them. In a statement about the series, Nengudi wrote, “I am working with nylon mesh because it relates to the elasticity of the human body. From tender, tight beginnings to sagging . . . the body can only stand so much push and pull until it gives way, never to resume its original shape.”

Nengudi draws on the tension between freedom and resistance, collapse and resurrection. From the beginning of her career, she established her own poetics of the body and how it moves through the world, a poetics that is unimpeded by racial distinctions; Nengudi takes from the cultures that have influenced her and recasts them all in her own image. As I looked at Nengudi’s nylon stretching from one wall to another, it occurred to me that her true soul sister, artistically speaking, was Eva Hesse. For her 1970 work “Untitled (Rope Piece),” Hesse dipped rope into liquid latex, then hung it from the ceiling and walls; the latex hardened, creating a weblike structure that dangled from the looped tangle of rope. It is art weighed down, just as Nengudi’s pantyhose are weighed down and stretched out by all those absent, accommodating women. Hesse made “Untitled (Rope Piece)” as she was dying, of brain cancer; Nengudi began her “R.S.V.P.” work after the birth of her first child.

Life and death and the transition between them, with art as an expression of both continuums (because in Nengudi's world nothing ever dies; it evolves): this is just one of the themes you can find in Nengudi's delicate and memorable eponymous exhibition at Dia Beacon, through February, 2025. With the curator Matilde Guidelli-Guidi, Nengudi puts the Dia's impeccable, calm space on notice. Unlike the fabulous John Chamberlain and Blinky Palermo showcases that are up concurrently, Nengudi's art doesn't sit still, content to be on display. While the show isn't a retrospective—you won't find the "R.S.V.P." pieces here—it does convey her now fifty-year-old philosophical belief in *flow*, in how audiences can move with, away from, or toward a work, depending on their own unique energy and the energy of the installation. But Nengudi is no show-off; she's both too humble and too self-assured to feel that she has to come out "on top." Instead of treating her concerns lightly—or heavily—she lets them just be; they are as natural to her as breathing.

The show is a kind of happening across five galleries. It has a sense of play that only adds to the feeling of intimacy. The first thing you see is "Wet Night—Early Dawn—Scat Chant—Pilgrim's Song" (1996), a multimedia work that includes a selection of spray-can paintings on cardboard, covered in bubble wrap and dry-cleaning bags. Bubble wrap makes another appearance here: at the center of the room is a large carpet of the stuff; Nengudi has said that it is meant to evoke the sound of firecrackers in potentia. You may not know specifically what she is referencing here, and that's O.K., because you can feel it: you are embarking on a journey in which art (those spray-can paintings) is at

home with impermanence (all that plastic wrapping). In the corners of the room, Nengudi has sprinkled earth-toned pigment, mixed with what looks like glitter, rivulets of color that likely shift and spread with foot traffic. On one wall, she has drawn a red body—it's the only figurative representation in the show—that appears to be flying in a circle. When Toni Morrison wrote “Song of Solomon” (1977), she was, in part, inspired by stories she'd heard of Black enslaved people flying back to Africa. The flight of Nengudi's figure feels like a form of release—of energy whirling and then landing somewhere. In our dreams, perhaps.



“Water Composition” (1969/2021). Nengudi's water compositions were, she said, “the beginning of my sensual self.” © Senga Nengudi /

Courtesy Dia Art Foundation; Photograph by Thomas Barratt



Detail from “Sandmining B” (2020). © Senga Nengudi / Courtesy Sprüth Magers / Thomas Erben Gallery

Movement, flow: Nengudi, a visual compatriot of the musician and spiritualist Alice Coltrane, is fascinated by water and what it can make us imagine. “Water Composition II” (1970/2019) and “Water Composition III” (1970/2018) share a gallery in the show. In “Water Composition II” (it is an especially large work—more than fifteen feet wide), a piece of plastic stretches between ropes anchored on either wall. Nestled in that plastic is a rectangular transparent vinyl bag filled with blue-tinted water. Two other bags of blue water sit on the floor. The piece as a whole feels like a kind of ark or boat that travels through your mind in its own expanse of blue. It wouldn't be hard to see in this exercise of color and form the influence of the artist Dan Flavin, but Flavin didn't sketch out his ideas about water and light until 1974, by which time Nengudi had temporarily stopped making these pieces. (She was put off by the growing popularity of water beds.) In a 2013 interview conducted in Colorado, where she has lived since 1989, she said that her water compositions were “the beginning of my sensual self”; the sculptures, she added, had a “sense of body” if you felt them.

When the water works have been absorbed to maximum effect, Nengudi and Guidelli-Guidi present a new visual field in the last big room. Viewing “Sandmining B” (2020) is like standing by a playground sandbox, full of bright-colored curved tubes and other beautifully fashioned detritus that has been forgotten or left behind to be picked up on another day. (A soft and lovely soundtrack plays in the room, featuring, among other artists, the California-raised

cornettist Butch Morris.) Pausing for a moment, we wonder where we are now, where we've ended up after all our travels through air and sea and land, accompanying Nengudi on her internal wanderings. The shores of our own being? Or smack dab in the middle of Nengudi's patch of the world, where, if we can place our trust in metaphors and art, we're bound to feel something like transcendence? ♦