

SENGA NENGUDI: HOURGLASS

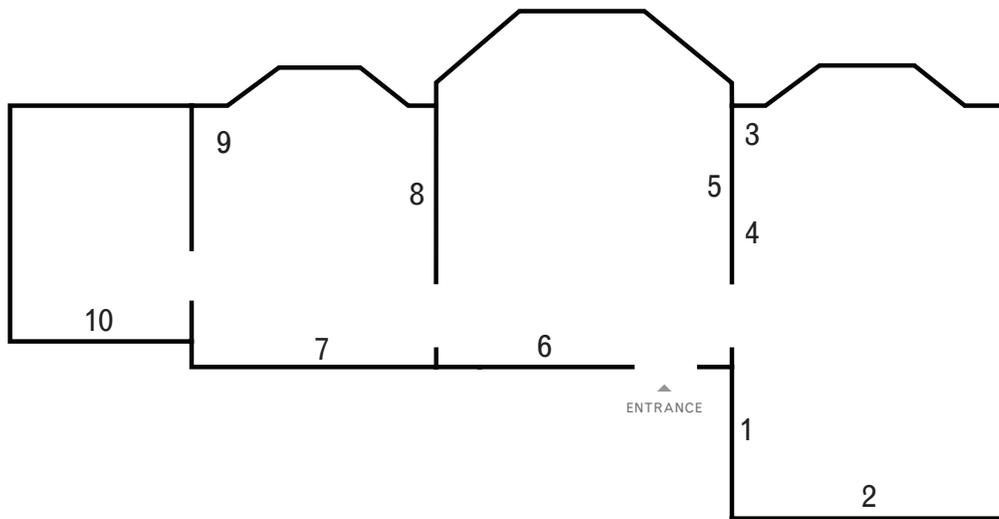
on view through 10 April 2021
Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens

My art is like a butterfly landing on one's knee
while sitting in a garden or at a bus stop.
The moment is fleeting—but remembered.
The memory is recalled when needed.
(Artist's statement from the late 1970s/early 1980s)

Since the 1960s, Colorado-based Senga Nengudi has developed a ground-breaking practice that brings together sculpture, performance, and dance. This exhibition—her first in Canada—presents a selection of recent and older works that foreground her innovative use of found materials, such as sand, pantyhose, water and plastic. Nengudi has written: “What is in a name? I propose plenty. That is why I have a different name for each medium I use.” The writings of Lily Bea Moor—one of Nengudi’s personas—are also featured in the exhibition in written and video form. Through her rule-breaking, playful, and eclectic reflections on the body, spirituality, materials, and movement, Nengudi has made an undeniably important contribution to the history of contemporary art, and continues to have a resonant and vital voice that speaks to the key issues of our times.

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- 1 **Untitled R.S.V.P** 2013
nylon, sand, mixed media

Courtesy of the artist, Lévy Gorvy, New York, Sprüth Magers, Berlin, and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

In 1977 around the time of the birth of her son, Nengudi began to make a series of installations entitled *R.S.V.P.* These were created using pairs of nylon stockings (a material that can be easily carried in a handbag), which were fixed to the wall at various points and then pulled, knotted, and weighed down with deposits of sand in the feet or the crotch. Made to sit against the skin, pantyhose has the skin-like ability to expand and collapse. It is sometimes durable enough to bounce back to its original form and sometimes so fragile it will be forever altered. These works allude to similar transformations in the human body (especially the female body), as it comes under pressure during pregnancy, the process of aging, and other moments of transformative change.

- 2 **Performance Piece Tryptich** 1977
gelatin silver print

Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

The acronym R.S.V.P. comes from the French *répondez s'il vous plaît*, meaning "please respond!". A number of photographs from this period show how Nengudi has responded to and interacted with these limb-like sculptural installations in improvisational performances with a number of collaborators, most notably her friend the artist and dancer Maren Hassinger. Nengudi studied dance alongside sculpture at California State University in the 1960s, and her interest in movement has characterised many of her works over the past five decades. The choreographed "responses" to these works have also at times been accompanied by music. Percussive elements or the sound of a lone cello accompany the dancer's movements, as they bend into, become entangled with and gently manipulate the work, stretching and releasing. This triptych of photographs shows Hassinger in one of the earliest documented performances at the Pearl C. Wood gallery, Los Angeles.

3 ***Storm*** 1996-2017
paper, plastic, and bubble wrap

Courtesy of the artist, Lévy Gorvy, New York, Sprüth Magers, Berlin, and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

Storm was originally made in the mid 1990s, and then remade for an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Miami in 2017. For this work, Nengudi draped bubble wrap, plastic, and dry cleaning bags over delicately coloured paintings in a series of altar-like wall and floor-based sculptures. Installed at intervals around the room, the work suggests points along a journey or the spiritual transformations of a pilgrimage. The work on view in the corner of the room here is one piece from that series. Made from bubble wrap and plastic wound with strips of paper, this tornado-like work challenges our understanding of 'waste', imbuing everyday throwaway materials with a new spiritual dimension.

4 ***Hands*** 2003/2012
video, colour, sound, 1: 22 minutes

Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

Nengudi has written: "What is in a name? I propose plenty. That is why I have a different name for each medium I use. In Black culture naming has great significance. We have been 'called out of our names' so much that controlling that aspect of our lives with a B'rer Rabbit sensibility is important." In this video, we see the work of one of Nengudi's personas, photographer Propecia Lee. Animated to the soundtrack of Nancy Wilson's 1962 "Save Your Love for Me", hands fold and unfold in a series of gestures, as though speaking an emotional language of the hands. Music, particularly jazz, has been an important influence on Nengudi's practice, and has also featured frequently as an aspect of her work.

5 ***Ceremony for Freeway Fets*** 1978
eleven c-prints, photographs by Roderick "Kwaku" Young

Courtesy of the artist, Lévy Gorvy, New York, Sprüth Magers, Berlin, and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

In 1978, Nengudi received a CETA and CalTrans art in public spaces grant. She used this to create *Freeway Fets*, an installation in which she draped the columns underneath a freeway overpass on Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles with clusters of hanging, knotted, twisted pantyhose fabric. Reminiscent of hair, clothing or parts of the human body, the artist has described this work as a "fusing of male and female energies". These 11 photographs document an unrehearsed opening "ceremony" or ritual for the work, which Nengudi initiated and performed together with Studio Z, a loosely-affiliated and now legendary group of Los Angeles-based artists, who often staged artworks in public space. The event, which incorporated costumes and rapturous, improvisational music and dance, included key figures associated with Studio Z, including Franklin Parker, Houston Conwill, David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, and Roderick "Kwaku" Young, who also took these photographs. Nengudi is the masked figure in yellow.

Early in her career, Nengudi worked as an education instructor at the Watts Towers Arts Centre. There she worked with artist and director Noah Purifroy, who was creating work from the urban detritus of the 1965 Watts Rebellion. Imbuing the 'junk' he found on the streets around him with new form and meaning like a phoenix rising from the ashes, he advocated for the therapeutic, community-building benefits of art education. Speaking in 2018 about working in the public realm, Nengudi has described public art as the "best kind of art", saying "art is for everyone and should always be accessible."

6 *Performance with Inside Outside* 1977
gelatin silver print

Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

This work is one of a number of interactive "nylon mesh" works the artist created around this time, in which she collected worn pantyhose from friends and second hand shops and pulled and stretched them over various found objects. Here, an inner tube and coloured pantyhose weighed down with sand have become a pendulous crown or halo-like adornment, worn by the artist as though in ceremonial dress.

7 *Study for Mesh Mirage* 1977
gelatin silver print

Courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

Nengudi came across the work of the Gutai Art Association in the early 1960s, and in 1966 spent a year studying at Waseda University in Tokyo. In her use of inexpensive materials, such as water and plastic, and the dynamic, interactive, social dimension of Nengudi's work, a clear link can be drawn between her practice and the interests and activities of this group. Japanese Noh Theatre, West African dance, Fluxus, and even Catholic religious ritualism are also reference points in her use of masks, costume-like coverings, and ritualistic modes of performance. In this photograph for a later performance we see the artist covered in a tarpaulin and paper neck-piece, the only visible body part a nose protruding from the crutch of a pantyhose head-covering.

8 *Untitled Water Composition III* 1969/70-2018
heat-sealed vinyl, coloured water, rope

9 *Untitled Water Composition VI* 1969/70-2018
heat-sealed vinyl, coloured water

Courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

Nengudi's interest in the transformative, shape-shifting qualities of materials such as nylon and sand can also be seen in her malleable and sensuous "Water Compositions" from the 1960s, in which she filled vinyl plastic with water. Remade in 2018 for an exhibition at the Henry Moore Foundation in Leeds, U.K., these works show the influence of Nengudi's encounter with the Gutai Art Association, in particular a work by Sadamasa Motonaga, in which vinyl sheets filled with dyed water were strung between trees. When they were first shown, the artist invited audiences to touch the works and feel these translucent membrane-like forms ripple and rebound beneath their hands.

10 *Gravel Gurdy* 2016
video, colour, sound, 01: 44 minutes

Courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

In this work the artist sits almost perfectly still on a heap of gravel while we hear *LILIES OF THE VALLEY UNITE!* or not, a "manifesto of sorts", written by Lily Bea Moor (another of Nengudi's personas). With its connotations of raw material and labour, the industrial setting resonates with the artistic principles she sets out in the text, which include working with a lightness of gesture, an emphasis on process over product and monumentality, and an awareness of how we assign recognition and value within art's systems.

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