

Press Release

Senga Nengudi

August 18–October 30, 2020

Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles

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Since the mid-1970s, Senga Nengudi has threaded together sculpture, performance, photography and poetry in works that testify to both intensely personal and universally shared elements of the human experience. Always deeply connected to the body – whether formally, metaphorically or through careful spatial choreography – her projects invoke ritual, narrative and connections between cultures disparate in geography and time. Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are honored to present Nengudi's first solo gallery exhibition in Los Angeles in over forty years, which features the US premiere of two large-scale installations, *Bulemia* (1988/2018) and *Sandmining B* (2020).

The artist's ties to Los Angeles run deep: Nengudi moved to the area as young child in 1951, growing up between Pasadena and LA and attending California State University, Los Angeles for both her undergraduate and master's degrees. In 1974, after a few years in New York, she returned to LA where she soon developed her celebrated sculptural series *R.S.V.P.* In these groundbreaking post-minimalist works, nylon stockings stretch between walls, corners and floors, weighted down at strategic points to evoke the sensuality of limbs, breasts and vertebrae. Originally inspired by the ways in which bodies (and particularly female ones) must change and adapt over time, the sculptures' request to RSVP, or "please respond," was in part literal: in improvisational performances, dancers moved around and through the stockings' fibrous structures, reshaping both the nylons and their bodies in the process.

Nengudi's interweaving of sculpture and performance remained at the root of her formal and conceptual explorations across various media, including in the monumental installation *Bulemia* (1988/2018). First presented at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore as part of *Art as a Verb: The Evolving Continuum* (an influential exhibition of thirteen African American artists working in installation and performance) the work functions as "a kind of hideaway or utopian place, revetted with newspaper," as Nengudi explained to *Spike Art Magazine* in 2019. Papers from different time periods fill a tightly packed room, which closely recreates the scale and layout of the work's original presentation. In the upper half of the installation, newspaper pages appear in rows and columns, each revealing their full context of articles, illustrations, advertisements and miscellany. Below, the papers are pinned to the wall to create a flowing, skirt-like formation that force viewers to get close to take in their stories; and

at the base, dozens of tightly packed balls of newsprint, tinged with metallic paint, concentrate *Bulemia*'s roiling energy of material and information. These physical strata and fields of text and image give the impression of archaeological remnants, or of an ancient tomb flecked with gold and replete with rich, layered iconography.

In this version of a "utopian place," news items relating to African Americans and Black subjects around the world take center stage through the artist's deliberate selections, presentations and excisions via gold spray paint. Nengudi's foregrounding of Black narratives – which comes from both her and her mother's collections of newspapers that they found to be worth saving over the years – highlights positive elements rather than negative ones: "I chose to pull out that which can build your confidence . . . instead of it saying, 'A Man Kills a Woman and Nothing is Left but a Diamond,' I would black that out – not cut it out, but spray it out – and then find the words within that article that were self-affirming or positive" (Oral history interview, The Smithsonian, 2013). Difficult narratives are nonetheless present among the papers – the global AIDS crisis, Hurricane Katrina – and stories of other cultures appear as well, all of which roots Nengudi's reconfigured history in reality, and thus points to a potential future in which the breadth and vitality of African American life is attended to and celebrated.

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Opposite *Bulemia*'s concentrated intensity, the exhibition also includes *Sandmining B* (2020), one of the artist's expansive sand installations. Nengudi worked with sand already in her *R.S.V.P.* sculptures, whose sinuous nylons often contain pendulous bulbs of sand. She first used the material at a larger scale for the 54th Carnegie International, where her work *One Source, Many Rivers* (2004) gave form to her longtime considerations of the power of ritual and ceremony, both in art and everyday life, and its shared importance across different cultures and eras, from African masks and regalia to the ritualized nature of Japanese daily life that Nengudi encountered while studying abroad in Tokyo in 1970. Sand is closely associated with healing in many traditions, including the elaborate, colorful sand paintings of the Navajo people, whose designs are believed to absorb the illness and pain of those who sit upon them; and the practice of Rangoli in India, in which women in particular create patterns in sand and other natural materials each morning on the threshold of their homes to repel evil forces and give strength to those who pass through them.

Sandmining B extends this line of inquiry with its breast-like mounds of sand topped with intensely saturated pigments, and metal car parts that snake through and extend upward from the tinted field. A tall piece of muffler is adorned with dozens of tightly knotted nylons in shades of black, brown and blue, picking up the material that has featured so prominently across Nengudi's work. But where stockings in her past projects have usually evoked the female body, here the appendages are distinctly male, with graceful fragments of hose inferring femininity as well. Splaying out from the wall behind this charged object are splashes of the same vibrant pigments that appear on the floor below, which broadcast traces – as do the footprints visible across the sand – of the installation's making. If *Sandmining B* is a vehicle for healing from toxic forces, the work's sound piece, playing every ten minutes, makes clear the ailment: the trauma that has shaped the African American experience from its beginnings amid ultimate oppression. The text, penned by the artist's writer-persona Lily Bea Moor, along with improvisational refrains from Nengudi's son and the renowned cornetist Butch Morris, offers a prayer to ancestors past and a clarion call to citizens today to act upon this moment of heightened recognition of racial injustices and inequities. As with *Bulemia*, Nengudi has produced a work that is at once approachable in its modest materials, visually arresting in its form and content, and politically incisive.

Senga Nengudi (*1943, Chicago) lives Colorado Springs Colorado. Selected solo exhibitions include Denver Art Museum (forthcoming 2020), Museo de Arte de São Paulo (2020), Lenbachhaus Munich (2019), Henry Moore Institute, Leeds (2018), USC Fisher Museum of Art, Los Angeles (2018), Art + Practice, Los Angeles (2018), Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami (2017–18), Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans (2017), Henry Art Gallery, Seattle (2016) and Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver (2014). Selected group exhibitions include 57th Venice Biennale (2017) and others at Brooklyn Museum, New York (2017), Tate Modern, London (2017), Whitney Museum, New York (2013), Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (2012), Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2011–12) and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2007).

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Opening hours: By scheduled appointment, Tuesday–Friday, 12pm–5pm

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