

SPRÜTH MAGERS

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By Anna Souter

Sprüth Magers, 7A Grafton Street, London W1S 4EJ

Senga Nengudi



Title : Installation view, Senga Nengudi, Sprüth Magers, London, 7 June - 13 July 2019

Website : spruethmagers.com

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In 2017, I was thrilled to see work by Senga Nengudi in the Venice Biennale, and last year, I was fortunate enough to have the chance to interview her in advance of her long-overdue retrospective at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds. The exhibition then successfully travelled to Edinburgh, and it felt then that the international art world was finally waking up to the significance of Nengudi's career, and her contribution to the artistic developments of the 1970s and 80s.

It seems to be an accepted trend that women artists often only get widespread recognition towards the end of their careers, and significant efforts have been made recently to 'rediscover' artists such as Geta Brătescu, Carmen Herrera, Carol Rama and Etel Adnam. Nengudi's confident, moving work certainly holds its own among this illustrious company, and beyond, as is shown by her current solo show at Sprüth Magers.

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The exhibition features many of the same works as the Henry Moore Institute retrospective, including a selection of pieces from her well-known 'R.S.V.P.' series (1975-ongoing). In these sculptures, Nengudi utilises nylon stockings in various shades of brown; stretching them tight, filling the gusset with sand, or allowing them to flap around in front of an air conditioning vent. The 'R.S.V.P.' sculptures are powerfully evocative, alluding to the female body and to the racialised body, even while they explore a formal approach to the industrial, the quotidian and the found object. The exhibition also hints at – but perhaps doesn't make quite enough of – Nengudi's performance practice, through which she 'activates' her stocking-sculptures through dance, adding yet another layer to the ways in which these pieces can be experienced.

Other sculptural pieces on show similarly evoke a variety of associations. For instance, sealed clear bags filled with coloured liquid are settled on the floor or draped over a white plinth, simultaneously suggesting cool-aid dressings, children's lollipops and medical containers for bodily fluids. Partially covering the floor of the basement, 'Sandmining' (2018) is a field of sand shaped in places into mounds and interrupted by metal exhaust pipes. The aesthetic is reminiscent of both industrial mining and child's play, while also drawing inspiration from Native American healing rituals and Japanese Zen gardens.

Nengudi's work is joyfully multiplicitous, moving easily between different media, aesthetics and associations, permitting contradictions and ambiguity. The pieces on show at Sprüth Magers come together in a powerful presentation of an unexpectedly cohesive oeuvre, which deserves even greater recognition than it's already received.

Most presentations of Nengudi's work seem to want to pin it down too much, to fit her into one of several boxes that may appeal to collectors, institutions, funding bodies or academics: African American; feminist; overlooked woman artist. But Nengudi's work breaks free of these boxes. The gallery notes at Sprüth Magers claim she was 'a key participant in the young African American avant-garde in both Los Angeles and New York in the 1970s and 1980s'. This is true, of course, but she was also part of an avant-garde that went beyond a particular racial or geographical community, and to imply that her work is only relevant because of its significant contribution to African American art is to do her a disservice.

The spirit of Nengudi's practice is perhaps best captured in her 2016-2017 work 'A.C.Q. III' (short for Air Conditioning Queen). The work reprises her use of nylon stockings, which are stretched out to echo the shape of a body. Nailed directly to the wall, the sculpture suggests both majestic flight and bodily or even sexual violence. It's beautiful and subtle; embodying both the experience of being pinned down and a refusal of the same.