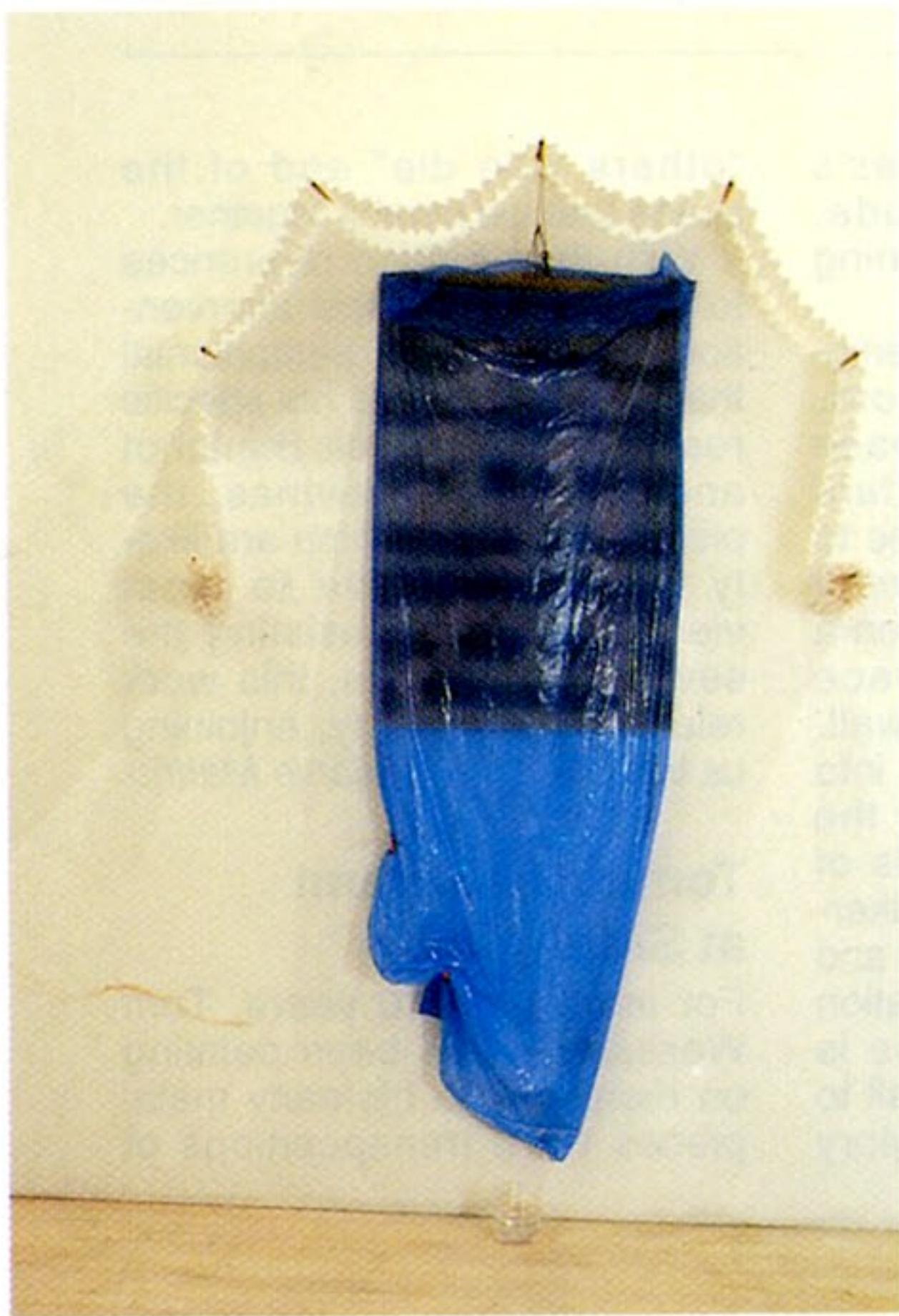


Thomas Erben Gallery

International Art Trade and Editions

Senga Nengudi: *Pilgrim's Song*, 1996,
mixed mediums, 14 feet square;
at Thomas Erben.



Senga Nengudi at Thomas Erben

Although she left New York in the 1980s to raise a family, Senga Nengudi had established herself in both the New York and Los Angeles art scenes in the 1970s and '80s. In New York, she worked with the Studio Museum in Harlem and with Linda Goode Bryant's Just Above Midtown gallery. Known for her stretched pantyhose pieces and performance works, she has continued to use the discarded objects of domestic life, as was evident in this room-size installation, her first in a New York gallery in many years. Consisting of wall assemblages and a floor piece, the show was marked by an atmospheric and idiosyncratic spirituality.

Nengudi makes high art on a low budget, using gracefully spray-painted works on paper in combination with cheap household stuff (dry cleaners' plastic, bubble wrap, plastic bottle caps, pans, chopsticks). Three shrine-like wall assemblages combined gestural wall drawing and lyrical, painterly effects within a sculptural format. *Early Dawn* consisted of bubble wrap wound around plastic tubing, and strung across a spray painting on paper which was draped with commercial plastic wrapping whose transparent soft focus blurred the painting's edges and produced subtle shifts in color. In *Pilgrim's Song*, the markings and colors of the painting are transformed into hazy orbs and chunky lines of wan blots. Veiled by transparent blue plastic, the painting was suspended under a paper overhang—an elegant linear structure done completely in accordion folds—which was supported by chopsticks mounted in the wall. There was a small vessel of water at its foot and a windchime-like collection of plastic soda lids suspended above the overhang by blue string, swaying in reaction to the room's unseen currents. The work suggests both the world of real and ordinary things and the glimmerings of something beautiful beyond the banality of its utilitarian materials.

In the back room there were more solidly constructed floor sculptures, using baking pans and deep red clay soil in one piece, and Santería candles and heating spirals in others. Exuding a quirky religiosity and evoking African, Afro-Hispanic and Asian sources, Nengudi's works display a Zenlike serenity, a spooky, often fetishistic iconography, a gracefully imposing sense of personal liberation and an otherworldly calm. Her installation suggests that the transcendent is near and that the world's oldest cosmologies can address and transform the products of our own revved-up secular culture. —Calvin Reid

ART IN AMERICA, February 1997