

Thomas Erben Gallery

Artforum, March 2015

Senga Nengudi

WHITE CUBE, BERMONDSEY

Around the bottom edge where pristine white gallery walls meet buffed concrete, Senga Nengudi spread thin strips of sand, forming an alternative baseboard, as if the earth were seeping up into the room. From the walls hung sculptures from the series “R.S.V.P.,” 1976–, formed of sheer panty hose in tones ranging from pale cream to dark brown, with a little dark green, white, and black. Some of these malleable, visceral, yet delicate sculptures were stretched across corners—one, *Internal I*, 1972/2014, monumentally from floor to ceiling in a gallery of its own, as if marking a territory. The material invokes a body by metonymy through form (tied into balls and nipple-like bumps) and a relationship to nature via its content (sand and flowers). Nengudi has previously used worn hosiery—donated by friends or bought from thrift stores—that therefore reflects its own “experiences,” although, in this instance, historical works were remade with new hosiery. In the catalogue accompanying “Alt,” Nengudi’s first solo show in London, scholar Kellie Jones writes of the strictly feminine nature of both the materials used and the shapes of the sculptures. However, the sculptures evoke both masculine and feminine characteristics, in a gently playful sexuality, in which balls are also breasts, and genitalia are suggested by hollows and protuberances.

Senga Nengudi,
R.S.V.P. Reverie
“Scribe,” 2014, nylon
mesh, sand, found
metals, 91 × 54 ×
67”. From the series
“R.S.V.P.,” 1976–.



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REVIEWS

When Nengudi first began making the “R.S.V.P.” pieces, they were often presented as both sculptures and performances, and as such take their place in a post-Minimalist lineage that has addressed the phenomenological relations between artwork and viewer, user, or performer—for instance, the more widely recognized work of Robert Morris, Yvonne Rainer, and Carolee Schneemann. Nengudi herself has cited the influence of artists such as the Brazilians Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, who made artworks-*cum*-clothes or as extensions of the body, to be performed and worn. The series title, of course, means “please respond,” and I did desperately want to touch and tug those tights, which served at once as art objects and as relational props. But Nengudi’s stretchy sculptures don’t need to be worn to be filled with a sense of motion and life. Deeply anthropomorphic in both their bodily qualities and their relations to one another, many of the sculptures exist as couples or quartets—for instance, *Swing Low*, 1976/2014, and *R.S.V.P. Reverie ‘B/W’*, 2014—some posed as if conversing or dancing.

Here in London, Nengudi presented a one-off performance, *R.S.V.P. X activated by Maren Hassinger*, 2014, featuring Nengudi’s longtime collaborator. Dressed in black, Hassinger cast a stately figure as she slowly began to manipulate the sculpture by detaching one end from the wall and embarking on a dance with it, leaning in and out, stretching and reconfiguring the piece, accompanied by a cello improvisation by Laura Moody and the noise of the audience shaking receptacles filled with grit. The sounds summoned an out-of-doors atmosphere, while the movements seemed to recall the tussle of a relationship. The panty hose were initially just an object to be looked at—then touched, danced with, loved, stretched, pulled, and used, eventually to be hung back in place, seemingly the same, but ever so slightly moved by the encounter.

The exhibition formed part of the gallery’s “Inside the White Cube” program, which generally features younger, emerging artists, or older, “overlooked” and “rediscovered” (both highly problematic terms) figures. The catalogue and press release quite rightly discuss Nengudi’s work in the context of debates around gender and race. In a recent interview for *Hyperallergic*, around the time of the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, last summer, Nengudi spoke of how living as a black person in the US necessitates “constant adjustment in a hostile environment,” likening the art of basic survival to jazz improvisation. “Being born black in America is still a political event,” she says. To be black and a woman in the art world must call for an extra measure of improvisational genius. Nengudi has it.

—Kathy Noble