

REVIEW
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SENGA NENGUDI
Thomas Erben Gallery

In the '70s and '80s Senga Nengudi was at the forefront of the African-American avant-garde in Los Angeles and New York. Along with artists like David Hammons and Suzanne Jackson, she exhibited at Linda Goode Bryant's *Just Above Midtown*, or *JAM Gallery*, which was the first African-American-run space in the Fifty-seventh Street area. (Before closing in the mid-'80s, Bryant also introduced Lorraine O'Grady, Howardena Pindell, Lorna Simpson, and Fred Wilson to a New York audience.) Nengudi caused quite a buzz with her *JAM* solo debut: a group of nylon-stocking works called "*Repondez S'il Vous Plait*," or "*The Panty Hose Pieces*," 1975-77. Most of the original nylon sculptures from that show have been damaged or are now lost; we're fortunate that Nengudi decided to re-create those seminal works (nine in all) for her recent exhibition.

As she did in 1977, Nengudi used only previously worn pantyhose as material, knotting, tying, cutting, and stretching them into anthropomorphic sculptural installations. She filled the legs of stockings of various hues, opacities, and textures with sand, creating penile or organ-or breast-shape forms that at times also function as anchors or weights, draped over or tied to, say, a cut-off control-top. Sometimes the fabric is pulled over rubber tubing or bicycle tires; in one piece, nylons are pulled from floor to ceiling into an X configuration recalling attenuated limbs.

There's a pleasing element of wit in Nengudi's reconfigurations of this alternately protective, constrictive, and "improvising" article of women's clothing, as the dissected nylons demonstrate the absurd practicality of their own construction. Nylons are also a potent visual and tactile metaphor for human flesh: Like skin, the fabric gives and stretches but gradually loses its elasticity. In fact, Nengudi made "*The Panty Hose Pieces*" in part as a response to the physical changes her body underwent during pregnancy.

Nengudi has a dancer's understanding of the way the body stretches and moves and how far it will go. Many of the original pieces were initiated on-site through performances in which she would wear and pull the nylon, testing and expanding it as far as it would permit. For Nengudi, these actions are as significant as the works that result. This ritualistic aspect particularly informs *Inside/Outside*, 1977/2003. Constructed of horseshoe-shape foam rubber hung swags of brightly colored hosiery weighted down by sand, the work suggests a tribal headdress (the fact that the stockings are previously worn further imbues the piece with totemic quality). One hopes that these refabricated pieces will be preserved, but, as Nengudi wrote in 1995, "An artist's supposed greatest desire is the making of objects that will last lifetimes... This has never been a priority for me." More valuable, then, is that the works contain traces of personal history, invite psychic and physical connections, and, as in Nengudi's title, kindly request a reply.

