

REVIEW  
VILLAGE VOICE  
OCTOBER15-21, 2003  
PAGE 94  
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Senga Nengudi  
Thomas Erben Gallery  
516 West 20<sup>th</sup> St.  
Through October 18

*Stretch Marks: Rediscovering 'Legendary' Senga Nengudi*

Back in the '70s, Chicago-born, California-bred Senga Nengudi shared a studio with David Hammons. "We kind of bounced back and forth," she recalls. "In the beginning he was kind enough to let me use his space, which was an old dance hall, and then later he would use my space." Each had one foot on the West Coast and the other in New York. Her smart, scrappy work also straddled the divide between, as she put it, "the community and the extreme art that was happening." Swathed in paper, string, or other humble stuff, Nengudi, who had studied dance as well as art, turned herself into an imposing live sculpture in performances that were ritualized, formal, and improvised. She also made installations from old inner tubes, twisted bike tires, and worn pantyhose-knotted, stretched, bulging with sand—long before Maureen Connor, Annette Messager, Ernesto Neto, or Sarah Lucas. Old pantyhose appealed to her, she says, because of "a residue of stress. That's who we are as women." Along with Hammons, Houston Conwill, Fred Wilson, and Lorna Simpson, she showed at the Just Above Midtown Gallery—the first African American-run gallery on 57<sup>th</sup> Street. So how come we've barely heard of her?

Ten years ago, Lorraine O'Grady called her a "legendary avant-garde artist, overlooked in the discovery of black art...an artist's artist." Now Thomas Erben is showing a group of Nengudi's works from the mid '70s. Titled *Repondez S'il Vous Plait*, but known as *The Panty Hose Pieces*, they dangle limply, swell into clustered sacs of sand, or are stretched to spread eagle limits. Painful, vulnerable, grungy, and sexually ambiguous, they're powerful feminist statements, missing links, and eye-openers. Literally and figuratively, they've got balls. And Nengudi, having seen installation become a dominant global medium, is still thinking ahead: "It seems like there needs to be a shift in that vocabulary. Like OK—next?"