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The
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Gallery

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Senga Nengudi

My sculptural work deals abstractly with the human body and the effect the psyche has on it. Senga Nengudi

Senga Nengudi (b.1943, Chicago) studied at California State University in Los Angeles, graduating with a B.A. in Art and Dance in 1966, and an M.A. in Sculpture in 1971. Between the two degrees she spent a year at Waseda University in Tokyo studying Japanese culture. Here she became interested both in traditional Japanese ritual practices and in the Gutai group, a movement of avant-garde artists who prioritised action and performance. After graduating, Nengudi spent some years in New York, where she became associated with an important group of African American artists – including David Hammons and Maren Hassinger – who, like Nengudi, brought performance into their work. However, her 'outrageously abstract' work, as Hammons called it, was often dismissed by a prejudiced art establishment that could not accept work made by a black woman that was not explicitly concerned with issues of gender or racial identity. While she does not address these issues in an overt or polemical manner, they are underlying forces throughout her practice.

Continues until 26 May 2019
Open every day, 11am–6pm
Free entry

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HENRY MOORE INSTITUTE

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The earliest works on display are a series of ***Untitled Water Compositions*** (1969–70/2019) made using heat-sealed vinyl filled with coloured water. When they were first made and shown for short periods of time, they were designed to be activated by the audience, to be pliable and responsive to touch much as flesh might be, challenging the static, intransigent nature of much Minimalist sculpture of the 1960s. The works we are showing have been recreated for this exhibition. We ask you not to touch them as they become extremely fragile over the longer time of the exhibition. The Information Assistants have a sample that you may touch if you would like to.

Nengudi's experimentation with material and form has continued throughout her career, as is apparent in ***Bulemia*** (1990/2018), unseen since it was first shown in 1990. The installation was named after an imaginary utopian state that Nengudi dreamed up with fellow artist Charles Abramson as a perfect place to live and work, where creativity was the language. *Bulemia* uses historical newspapers collected by the artist, and adapted with gold spray paint, creating a collage of events that make statements of encouragement and hope: 'remain unshaken', 'just hold on', 'it's time to come together'. The paper insulates and almost sound-proofs the room, so that it becomes an intimate chamber-like space, recalling a shrine or temple.

The importance of ritual and ceremony is brought to the fore in ***Sandmining*** (2019), with its arrangement of found objects and coloured powder pigment. Nengudi's use of pigment points to western Modernism, in particular its uses in Abstract Expressionism, but it also makes reference to ritual practices, as does her use of sand. The work points to the way that sand has been used ceremonially across cultures, in practices ranging from Native American healing to elaborate Rangoli designs in East India.

The artist first started using sand in her ongoing series of ***R.S.V.P.*** sculptures begun in the mid-1970s. These works are made primarily using nylon tights, stretched, knotted, pinned to the wall and weighed down with sand to form abstracted anthropomorphic forms. When making these works, Nengudi also had portability and practicality in mind: 'I could take a whole show out of my purse … and there would be no costs for installing or shipping. I liked this idea that a woman's life is in her purse.' The works were first shown at Just Above Midtown (JAM), a pioneering New York gallery founded by Linda Goode Bryant in 1974 to foreground the work of African American artists.

Imploring the viewer to respond *(Répondez s'il vous plaît)*, the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures form a web of tensions that can be made visible through interaction, as can be seen in the photographic series ***Performance Piece*** (1978), in which Nengudi's collaborator Maren Hassinger interlaces her body with the forms of the work. The works resulted from the artist's experience of pregnancy and childbirth, as she 'became fascinated with the way the body stretches to a near breaking point then returns to its original shape – almost.' The nylon mesh of a garment worn so close to the skin became an apt material with which to express and explore the elasticity of the body, as well as obliquely represent the specificity of gender or skin colour. More generally, the works speak of bodies that have been used up, fatigued and exhausted by time and trauma, but at the same time retain an inherent strength.

Nengudi understands her sculptures as 'stationary performance pieces', part of a wider performance-based practice. The exhibition includes photographs and video of various actions orchestrated by the artist in the 1970s and 1980s. Using nylon tights, netting, fabric, paper, rubber, wire and found objects, she made appendages and extensions for the body – as in ***Study for Mirage Mesh*** (1981) or ***Performance with 'Inside/Outside Winter 1977'*** (1977) – finding that costume allowed one to alter the way one moved and occupied space.

In ***Ceremony for Freeway Fets*** (1979), for example, Nengudi found the experience of performing in a mask to be hugely liberating, allowing her to be more expansive and expressive in her movements. This work is recorded in a group of photographs and in Barbara McCullough's documentary, ***Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*** (1980), of which we are showing a short section. Taking place under a highway overpass on Pico Boulevard, Los Angeles, the performance involved David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, and members of the Studio Z collective. An improvised ritual-like ceremony, *Freeway Fets* aimed to bring male and female energies together, since as the artist recalls, 'at that time, in the black community, men and women were really having a time honouring and respecting each other', something that perhaps emerged from the patriarchal leadership of the Civil Rights movement meeting the rise of second-wave feminism. Festooning the space and dressing her fellow performers in costumes and headdresses, the artist drew influences from across cultures, creating an atmosphere that 'was African and Kabuki-like at the same time', as she put it. Pushing at the boundaries between sculpture and performance, as well as drawing together cultures and people, *Freeway Fets* laid the groundwork for Nengudi's ongoing practice and influence today.

Exhibition organised by the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds.