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Visual Arts

Artist Senga Nengudi uses pantyhose in surprising ways

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“Senga Nengudi: Improvisational Gestures,” at the Henry Art Gallery, surveys her sculpture, performance and video work since the 1970s.



LEFT: Senga Nengudi's "Nuki Nuki: Across 118th St.," created in New York in 1982, precariously balances wooden slats on an intricate pantyhose hammock. (Mark Woods, courtesy of the Henry Art Gallery).

RIGHT: Senga Nengudi's "Untitled (R.S.V.P.)" — with stretchable, wall-attached, sand-anchored pantyhose legs — will serve as a kind of elasticized jungle gym for dancers Joseph "jo" Blake, left, and Haruko Crow Nishimura to "activate" at 1:30 p.m. Oct. 1, with Lori Goldston's live cello accompaniment. (Robert Wade, courtesy of the Henry Art Gallery).

Pantyhose, on the face of it, don't seem like promising sculptural materials. But in the hands of artist Senga Nengudi, they trigger some surprisingly provocative social and sexual commentary.

“Senga Nengudi: Improvisational Gestures,” at the Henry Art Gallery, surveys her sculpture, performance and video work since the 1970s. Documentation of her early ephemeral, collaborative art happenings is as much a part of the exhibit as actual artworks. There's a marked gap between the sophistication of her recent video work and the technically crude recordings of her endeavors from 40 years ago. (Nengudi is now in her 70s.)

Still, the consistency of her vision is impressive. Working with the plainest of materials — nylon mesh, sand, wire — Nengudi creates a series of surprises. “Swing Low” and “R.S.V.P. Reverie (Scribe),” for instance, suggest quirkily distorted genitalia.

Nengudi trained as a dancer as well as a sculptor, and some pieces were conceived as “performance instruments.” “Untitled (R.S.V.P.)” — with its stretchable, wall-attached, sand-anchored pantyhose legs — will serve as a kind of elasticized jungle gym for dancers Joseph “jo” Blake and Haruko Crow Nishimura to “activate” at 1:30 p.m., Oct. 1. (Lori Goldston provides live cello accompaniment.)

On the other hand, “Nuki Nuki: Across 118th St.,” created in New York in 1982, almost dares viewers to destroy it as it precariously balances wooden slats on an intricate pantyhose hammock. “This piece was fragile — held together by a hope and a prayer — much like existence in Harlem in the 1970s and 1980s,” Nengudi recalls. “It was structured so that if anyone touched it, it would fall apart.”

The show's black-and-white photographs of Nengudi's work being put into action are striking. In “Rapunzel,” the “tresses” of the artist's pantyhose-headress hang down from the window of a citadel-like building (an old Catholic school in Los Angeles) about to be demolished. Elsewhere, performers bring Nengudi's cheap materials to antic life, pulling you into some grand ritual or ceremony.

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The show’s black-and-white photographs of Nengudi’s work being put into action are striking. In “Rapunzel,” the “tresses” of the artist’s pantyhose-headaddress hang down from the window of a citadel-like building (an old Catholic school in Los Angeles) about to be demolished. Elsewhere, performers bring Nengudi’s cheap materials to antic life, pulling you into some grand ritual or ceremony.

Videos of Nengudi’s dance performances from 1977 through 2005 are less impressive, although “Dance Card” (1986), in which she copes with two rivalrous male partners, has some goofy wit to it.

Her more recent video works, however, are the knockouts.

“Hands” (2003-2012), just over a minute long, is a trove of rapidly transforming and intertwining palm-, thumb- and finger-shapes, nicely complementing Nancy Wilson’s plaintive “Save Your Love for Me” on the soundtrack. “Masking It” is a video loop created from photographs taken in 1979 in which Nengudi wrapped herself in masking tape to create “a costume-like covering.” In the shifting stills of the video, she becomes a totemic figure charging forward, retreating and even levitating at times.

The crowning achievement in the show is “Warp Trance” (2007), a multichannel audio-video installation with a score by Butch Morris. Inspired by Nengudi’s visits to textile mills where Jacquard weaving cards (a forerunner of computer punch cards) are used to create elaborate rug patterns, it’s colossal, mesmeric, rhythmic and lush.

Note: Corrected to remove references to this being the artist’s first museum show.

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