

# A DAY WITH SENGA NENGUDI

Saturday, April 14, 2018, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.  
California African American Museum  
and the USC Fisher Museum of Art

“I prevail with ‘what is at hand.’ My installations are subtle and intimate, involving issues of time and personal change. They are durable like a bird’s nest with viewers feeling welcome enough to shift from observers to participants. Utilizing masking tape, gravel, dirt, newspapers, powdered tempera, seedpods, stripped pantyhose, photos and found stuff is a statement in itself.”

—Senga Nengudi

*Excerpted from Nengudi’s artist statement at [sengasenga.com](http://sengasenga.com)*

## ABOUT SENGA NENGUDI

- Senga Nengudi (b. 1943) was born in Chicago, grew up in L.A. and Pasadena, spent a year studying in Tokyo in the mid-1960s, and currently resides in Colorado. She earned a bachelor’s degree in art and dance, and a master’s in sculpture, from Cal State L.A.
- Nengudi has been exhibiting work since the 1970s, when she began her career in the avant-garde Black arts scenes of L.A. and New York.
- In addition to the Black avant-garde, Nengudi’s influences include feminism, jazz, religious rituals, and African and Japanese dance.
- She works in conceptual and performance art as well as sculpture, and often integrates everyday and discarded materials, and elements of nature, in her artworks.
- Nengudi’s work has been in group exhibitions including *Afro-American Abstractions*, *WACK! Art & The Feminist Revolution*, *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, and *Now Dig This!: Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980*, and is in the permanent collection at MoMA, among others.

Senga Nengudi, *Untitled (R.S.V.P.)*, 2013.  
Nylon, sand, and mixed media,  
78 x 34 x 16 inches. © Senga Nengudi.  
Photograph © MCA Denver (Ron Pollard).

## SYMPOSIUM SCHEDULE

### At the California African American Museum (CAAM)

9 TO 9:15 A.M.

Check-in, coffee, and pastries

9:15 A.M.

Introduction and opening remarks by Selma Holo and Chelo Montoya

9:30 TO 11 A.M.

Conversation: "Improvise, Fetishize, Ritualize" with Elissa Auther and Uri McMillan, moderated by Grant Johnson

11 A.M. TO 12 P.M.

Conversation: "Ritual in Rearview" with Senga Nengudi, Barbara McCullough, Isabel Wade, and Maren Hassinger

### At the USC Fisher Museum of Art

12 TO 1:30 P.M.

Lunch

2 TO 2:30 P.M.

Performance: *R.S.V.P.*, choreographed by Senga Nengudi, with Cheryl Banks-Smith and Breeze Smith

3 TO 4 P.M.

Roundtable: "On Activism and Performance" with Senga Nengudi, Rafa Esparza, Patrisse Cullors, and Nao Bustamante, moderated by Andy Campbell



Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.* sculpture activated by Maren Hassinger in *Performance Piece—Nylon Mesh and Maren Hassinger*, 1977. Photograph © Harmon Outlaw, Pearl C. Wood Gallery, Los Angeles.

## ABOUT THE SYMPOSIUM PARTICIPANTS

- ◉ **Elissa Auther** is a curator and scholar of modern and contemporary art as well as the founder and co-director of the public program Feminism & Co.: Art, Sex, Politics.
- ◉ **Cheryl Banks-Smith** is a dance artist who has performed with luminaries including Cecil Taylor and Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Myth Science Solar Arkestra. She is an associate professor of performing arts at Pasadena City College.
- ◉ **Nao Bustamante** is an internationally known artist whose work encompasses performance art, video installation, visual art, filmmaking, and writing. She is the Vice Dean of Art at the USC Roski School of Art and Design.
- ◉ **Andy Campbell** is an art historian, curator, art critic, and assistant professor at the USC Roski School of Art and Design. His scholarly and curatorial work explores the identity-based politics of sexuality, queerness, race, and feminism.
- ◉ **Patrisse Cullors** is a co-founder of Black Lives Matter, founder of Dignity and Power Now, performance artist, and author of *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*.
- ◉ **Rafa Esparza** is an L.A.-based artist whose signature works are physically exhausting performances and installations made of adobe bricks. He centers collaboration in his work, especially with members of his family.
- ◉ **Maren Hassinger** is a sculptor, performance artist, and video artist whose work is informed by her background in dance and the use of natural and industrial materials. She was part of the Studio Z collective and is a longtime collaborator of Nengudi's.
- ◉ **Selma Holo** is the director of the USC Fisher Museum of Art.
- ◉ **Grant K. Johnson** is a Ph.D. candidate in art history at USC and a contributor to publications including *Artforum*.
- ◉ **Barbara McCullough** is a film and video artist who is associated with the L.A. Rebellion school of independent Black cinema.
- ◉ **Uri McMillan** is a cultural historian, literary critic, performance studies scholar, and assistant professor of English at UCLA, with joint appointments in African American studies and gender studies.
- ◉ **Chelo Montoya** is the director of education at CAAM and an artist working in design, education, and social practice.
- ◉ **Breeze Smith** is a drummer, percussionist, instrument designer/builder, sound sculptor, and educator who has worked with artists including Dwight Tribble and David Ornette Cherry.
- ◉ **Isabel Wade** is a Provost Doctoral Fellow in art history at USC, studying how the urban landscapes of Southern California affect and inform artists from the 1970s to the present.

## SENGA NENGUDI: SELECTED PROJECTS

***Walk a Mile in My Shoes*** (1999–present) For this conceptual mail-art piece, Nengudi sends shoes to others with a request for recipients to walk/dance a full mile in the shoes, and then return them with documentation.

***R.S.V.P.*** (1977–present) The *R.S.V.P.* series consists of sculptural installations made of pantyhose. They stand alone as sculptures, and are also often used as sets for dance and performance pieces. The series is called *R.S.V.P.* as an encouragement for viewers to respond to and interact with the artworks. "This idea that people can brush up against sculpture, have a sensual experience with it, is really attractive to me," Nengudi has said.

***Ceremony for Freeway Fets*** (1978) This ceremony was the initiation of the grounds under an L.A. freeway overpass where Nengudi created a public installation. The ceremony is featured in Barbara McCullough's 1979 film *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual and Space*.

## WHY PANTYHOSE?

“To shape shift paradigms I find different ways to use materials others consider useless or insignificant providing proof that the disregarded and disenfranchised may also have the resilience and reformative ability to find their poetic selves.”

—Senga Nengudi

Nengudi is conscious of and deliberate about her choice of materials for artworks. This concern dates to at least the 1960s, when she was teaching at the Watts Tower Arts Center, then directed by the sculptor Noah Purifoy, who also used found and “everyday” materials in his work. So why pantyhose in Nengudi’s decades-long *R.S.V.P.* series? The artist has provided a number of answers:

“Because there was always an issue about money, my concept was I could take a whole show and put it in my purse. I could take it out [. . .] and hang it up and there you are [. . .] I liked this idea that a woman’s life is in her purse.”

—from a 2011 interview with Senga Nengudi by Kellie Jones

“In a sense, we all have our dance with materials on a day-to-day basis. Traditionally, pantyhose is worn in stressful situations: at a party, a job interview, a meeting. I’ve incorporated used pantyhose from friends and thrift stores for this very reason—because they contain a residue of energy of stress left over from the person that had worn them before. It’s an ideal material for this type of reflection because it can mostly come back into shape after it has been tested to its extreme limits.”

—Senga Nengudi in *Artforum*, 2014

“I am working with nylon mesh because it relates to the elasticity of the human body,” [Nengudi] explained. “From tender, tight beginnings to sagging . . . the body can only stand so much push and pull until it gives way, never to resume its original shape.” Nengudi sees the female psyche, on the other hand, as more resilient, and aims to reflect this quality in the work as well. Like the pantyhose, the ‘psyche can stretch, stretch, stretch and come back into shape.’”

—The Museum of Modern Art on *R.S.V.P. 1*, quoting Nengudi

## STUDIO Z

Nengudi was a member of the Studio Z collective, a group of African American artists in 1970s L.A. whose work focused on improvisation, collaboration, and experiment. They often worked with discarded materials and in marginalized spaces, interests that have endured throughout Nengudi’s career. The loosely affiliated group met at David Hammons’s studio on Slauson Avenue; along with Hammons and Nengudi, participants at different times included Barbara McCullough, Maren Hassinger, Franklin Parker, Houston Conwill, Ulysses Jenkins, and RoHo.

## SENGA NENGUDI: IMPROVISATIONAL GESTURES

*Senga Nengudi: Improvisational Gestures* is a traveling exhibition that surveys Nengudi’s sculpture, performance, video, and related work from the 1970s to the present. The show was organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver and the University of Colorado Colorado Springs Gallery of Contemporary Art, and was at the USC Fisher Museum of Art from January 20 to April 14, 2018.

## CALIFORNIA AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM: CAAM

The California African American Museum (CAAM) was founded in 1977. It was the first African American Museum of art, history, and culture fully supported by a U.S. state, and its founding was the result of a multi-year campaign by community members. After a few years in a temporary location, in 1984 CAAM moved to its permanent home in Exposition Park; the facility was designed by African American architects Jack Haywood and Vince Proby. CAAM’s permanent collection has 4,000 objects, from historical objects to contemporary art. The museum’s mission is “to research, collect, preserve, and interpret for public enrichment the history, art, and culture of African Americans with an emphasis on California and the western United States.”

## THE USC FISHER MUSEUM OF ART

Founded in 1939 by Elizabeth Holmes Fisher and accredited by the American Association of Museums, the USC Fisher Museum of Art was the first museum established in the city of Los Angeles that was opened as an art museum and remains solely dedicated to the exhibition and collection of fine art. The museum houses a permanent collection of some 1,800 objects, including nineteenth-century American landscapes; sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Northern European paintings; eighteenth-century British portraiture; and nineteenth-century French Barbizon paintings; as well as twentieth-century works on paper, paintings, and sculpture. The exhibition schedule includes both contemporary and old-master exhibitions designed to introduce the arts to a wide range of audiences. The Fisher Museum is located on the USC campus.

## FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Nengudi aims “to share common experiences in abstractions that hit the senses.” What was your sensory experience of encountering her artwork? How does abstraction connect to common experience, or common experience to the abstract, in your life?
- The title of the *R.S.V.P.* series (respond, please) is a call for interaction. Why do you think interactivity is so important to Nengudi’s art practice?
- Nengudi has long worked in multiple genres, including sculpture, dance, performance, and conceptual art. What does this cross-genre approach offer that might not be possible in a single medium? Do you know of other artists that move as fluidly across mediums? Who?

## IF YOU LIKED THIS EVENT, YOU MIGHT WANT TO CHECK OUT:

- Senga Nengudi online  
[sengasenga.com](http://sengasenga.com)
- A 2014 performance from the *R.S.V.P.* series  
[youtube.com/watch?v=RyXqYY6evjE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyXqYY6evjE)
- Senga Nengudi in *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes* (Barbara McCullough, 1979)  
[aapaa.org/2009/11/23/shopping-bag-spirits-and-freeway-fetishes-reflections-on-ritual-space-1979](http://aapaa.org/2009/11/23/shopping-bag-spirits-and-freeway-fetishes-reflections-on-ritual-space-1979)
- Upcoming events at CAAM  
[caamuseum.org/programs/lectures-and-workshops](http://caamuseum.org/programs/lectures-and-workshops)

- The digital archive of the exhibition *Now Dig This!: Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980* [hammer.ucla.edu/now-dig-this](http://hammer.ucla.edu/now-dig-this)
- The Watts Towers Arts Center [wattstowers.org](http://wattstowers.org)
- The Underground Museum [theunderground-museum.org](http://theunderground-museum.org)

## DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

**STACY WILLIAMS** of the USC Libraries selected the following resources to help you learn more about Nengudi and her work. Those with a call number (e.g., books) are physical items which you can find in our campus libraries. Those without a call number (e.g., articles and databases) are electronic resources, which you can access through the search bar on the USC Libraries homepage at [libraries.usc.edu](http://libraries.usc.edu).

### BOOKS

- Jones, Kellie. *Now Dig This!: Art & Black Los Angeles, 1960–1980*. Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2011.  
**ARCHITECTURE AND FINE ARTS LIBRARY: N6538.N5J666 2011**
- Jones, Kellie. *South of Pico : African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.  
**ARCHITECTURE AND FINE ARTS LIBRARY: N6538.N5 J668 2017**
- Catherine Morris, et al. *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85: A Sourcebook*. Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 2017.  
**DOHENY MEMORIAL LIBRARY: HQ1421 .W4 2017**
- Nengudi, Senga, Begum Yasar, Rizvana Bradley, Jessica Bell Brown, Ellen Tani, and Dominique Lévy. *Senga Nengudi*. New York: Dominique Lévy, 2015.  
**ARCHITECTURE AND FINE ARTS LIBRARY: N6537.N46 A4 2015**

- Rothrum, Emily, Elizabeth A. T. Smith, Jenni Sorkin, Anne Middleton Wagner, and Paul Schimmel. *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016*. New York: Hauser & Wirth, 2016.  
**ARCHITECTURE AND FINE ARTS LIBRARY: NB198.5.A2 R48 2016**

### JOURNAL ARTICLES

- Bowles, John P. “Side by Side: Friendship as Critical Practice in the Performance Art of Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger.” *Callaloo: A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters* 39, no. 2 (2016): 400–418.
- Bradley, Rizvana. “Transferred Flesh: Reflections on Senga Nengudi’s R.S.V.P.” *TDR/The Drama Review* 59, no. 1 (2015): 161–66.
- White, John. “The Test of Time: Senga Nengudi’s R.S.V.P. Series and the Materiality and Temporality of the Body.” *International Review of African American Art* 26, no. 2 (2016): 45–51.

### DATABASES

#### Art & Architecture Archive

Art and Architecture Archive is a major research resource comprising the digitized backfiles of many of the foremost art and architecture magazines of the twentieth century.

#### Arts & Humanities

This database features hundreds of titles covering Art, Architecture, Design, History, Philosophy, Music, Literature, Theatre and Cultural Studies.

#### Art Full Text (H.W. Wilson)

Art Full Text is a comprehensive resource for art information featuring full-text articles from more than 300 periodicals dating back to 1995, high-quality indexing and abstracting of over 600 periodicals dating as far back as 1984, including 280 peer-reviewed journals, as well as indexing and abstracting of over 13,000 art dissertations.

