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Senga Nengudi: ‘Performances 1976-81’

By HOLLAND COTTER FEB. 14, 2013

Thomas Erben Gallery

526 West 26th Street, Chelsea

Through Feb. 23

Senga Nengudi was recently featured in “Now Dig This! Art & Black Los Angeles 1960-1980” at MoMA PS1. And this follow-up solo at Thomas Erben significantly extends our view of her work. She studied art and dance in Los Angeles in the 1960s and participated in community projects at the Watts Towers Arts Center. In the early 1970s she began traveling back and forth to New York, soaking up experimental vibes on both coasts.

Her sculptures made of sand-filled and stretched pantyhose from that time are often exhibited. (One is on view in “Blues for Smoke” at the Whitney Museum of American Art.) Her performance work, which now exists only as documentation, is less familiar. The pantyhose sculptures figured in some of it. In a 1976 photograph at Erben, we see Ms. Nengudi manipulating one of those pieces as if it were a puppet.

In pictures from two years later, another performer — the artist Maren Hassinger — interacts with a second piece as if she were entrapped by it. Here and elsewhere, Ms. Nengudi’s links to early feminism are clear.

Over all, politics is rarely overt in her art, though a mingling of cultures is. In a 1977 photograph titled “Study for ‘Mesh Mirage,’ ” she’s dressed in a costume —paper

cloak, mask — that evokes West African dance and Japanese Noh theater. Other pictures catch the spirit, part carnival, part ritual, of a performance she staged with fellow artists under a Los Angeles freeway ramp, using found materials and a space where the city's homeless took shelter.

Later in the 1970s we see her dancing alone in a dark room, her body covered with bits of white tape. In a characteristically egoless image, she looks like an apparition of flickering light.

Finally, in a retrospective video compilation called "Side by Side for 35 Years," she revisits her many collaborations with Ms. Hassinger, another artist awaiting serious study. Enough to say that in this sampling of their joint performances, from the mid-1970s to 2005, the old work looks as freshly minted as the new.