

Senga Nengudi

Teaching Resource

2023 Nasher Prize Laureate

About Senga Nengudi

(Pronounced: SEN-gah nen-GOO-dee)

Senga Nengudi was born in 1943 in Chicago as Sue Irons. She was raised in California and attended California State University, Los Angeles, where she received a B.A. in Art with a minor in Dance. She continued her studies there to earn a master's degree in Sculpture.



Senga Nengudi. Image courtesy of the artist.

Names

In 1974, a friend gave her a new name: Senga Nengudi. *Senga* means "woman of the village that people come to [for advice]" in the Douala language of Cameroon, while *Nengudi* means a woman who "comes to power as a traditional healer." She continues to use this name today.

- **Do you know why you received your name? Were you named after someone? Does your name have a special meaning?**
- **If you had to choose a different name, what would you name yourself? Why?**
- **Have you ever helped name a person, pet, place or object? What name did you give it and why?**

Identity

Nengudi has expanded our idea of what can be considered political about a work of art. As she explained in 2018, "Simply by being, that's a political statement. So, whatever comes out of me has all those elements of me in it: I'm black, I'm a woman, at this point I'm a woman of a certain age, which also has issues related to it. So simply by being, I am those things."

Nengudi identified three areas of her identity that she considers important: She is Black, she is a woman and she is an older adult.

- **What are 3 parts of your personal identity that influence your life? These might include your race, ethnicity, culture, gender, religion, family, geographical location or interests.**
- **Imagine yourself without one of these identities. How would your life change?**



Senga Nengudi, *Performance with "Inside/Outside"*, 1977, gelatin silver print. Image courtesy of the artist.



Nasher Prize is a special award for a living artist who helps us see sculpture in a new way. The 2023 Nasher Prize is presented by The Eugene McDermott Foundation. Nasher Prize Education and Community Programs are sponsored by The Donna Wilhelm Family Fund, Joanne Leonhardt Cassullo / The Dorothea L. Leonhardt Foundation, and Patricia J. Villareal and Thomas S. Leatherbury.

Materials

Nengudi asks us to consider sculpture in a new way. She creates art experiences that combine the disciplines of sculpture and dance. These may exist for a limited moment in time. Using materials like newspaper, sand and pantyhose, she creates sculptures that were never intended to exist forever. They were, in the words of the artist, “experiments” presented for a viewer to experience. “Making objects that will last lifetimes...has never been a priority for me,” Nengudi noted in 1993. “My purpose is to create an experience that will vibrate with the connecting thread.”

- **Sculptures can be created from many things. Which materials do you consider the most common for creating sculpture?**
- **What are the advantages of creating sculpture from permanent materials? What are the advantages of creating sculpture from impermanent materials?**

Senga Nengudi’s works remind us that life is short and precious. While changes in our body and our lives may be hard to accept at first, humans have the ability to adjust and adapt to change.



Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.*, 1976/2014. Nylon mesh and sand 72 x 24 x 2 inches. Private Collection, Connecticut. Courtesy Sprüth Magers.

R.S.V.P

One body of work that uses pantyhose as a primary material is titled “R.S.V.P.” The title offers an invitation to respond or relate to the sculptures, not physically, but intellectually. Nengudi became interested in working with pantyhose because their elasticity reminded her of the strength and resilience of the human body. Pantyhose also reflected certain social norms of the 1970s, when Nengudi was making this work. These types of stockings were often required for women in the workplace but were seldom available in darker skin tones for women of color.



Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.*, 1977, sculpture activated by Maren Hassinger, dimensions variable.

- **Think of an article of clothing you own that has qualities that remind you of your own personality. How could you transform it into art?**

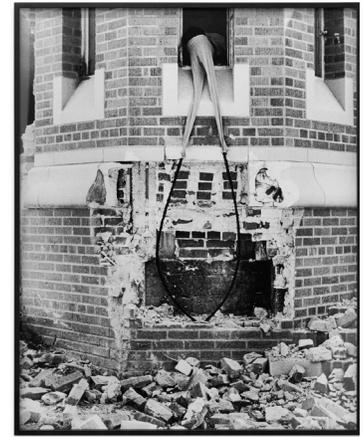
R.S.V.P sculptures are sometimes activated by dancers who pull, stretch, and intertwine their bodies with the material. Nengudi has said the dancer’s role is to “partner with the sculpture.”

- **How does it feel to pull against a material that resists you? Can you think of any situations in your life where you have met resistance but kept working against it?**

Rapunzel

Nengudi posed for this photo at a school in her community that was about to be demolished. She said the school building reminded her of a castle, and she and her friend rushed into the last part of the building that remained to stage this performance using pantyhose and braided hair.

- **Do you know the story of Rapunzel? How does it connect to this image? How is it different? Rewrite the story of Rapunzel with a twist to make it fit this scene.**



Flying

Nengudi's work often involves groups of people uniting to create performances. She reminds us of the importance of collaboration and friendship. A 1982 performance called *Flying* is documented in the photographs seen here. Nengudi, along with artists Ulysses Jenkins, Maren Hassinger, and Franklin Parker, choreographed a dance about nature and the passage of time in a Los Angeles park. Each artist contributed a different idea to the finished product.

- **Is there someone at school or in your family whom you work well with? What strengths do you each bring to the relationship?**



Water Composition I

Senga Nengudi's Water Compositions are made from plastic bags filled with colored water. She created them as a way to explore the weight and movement of a body using abstract materials. Although you can't do so with the one at the Nasher, viewers would have originally been allowed to gently touch and move parts of the sculpture. This artwork is remade using fresh materials each time it is displayed.

- **Imagine you could pick up this artwork. How would it feel? How would the shape change?**
- **If you received a box of plastic bags, dye, and rope, how would you set it up? What additional equipment would you need?**



TOP: Senga Nengudi, *Rapunzel*, 1981. Silver gelatin print Photographer: Barbara McCullough 41 x 31 inches (framed).

Courtesy Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. CENTER: Maren Hassinger, Ulysses Jenkins, Senga Nengudi and Franklin Parker, *Flying*, 1982/2014. 9 C-prints, Dimensions variable. Courtesy Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.

BOTTOM: Senga Nengudi, *Water Composition I*, 1969–70/2019. Heat sealed vinyl, colored water 147.3 x 203.2 x 180.3 cm 58 x 80 x 71 inches. Dallas Museum of Art. TWO x Two for AIDS and Art Fund.

Additional Resources

Senga Nengudi Essay on Nasher Website

<https://www.nashersculpturecenter.org/programs-events/nasher-prize/laureates/laureate/id/301>

Video: Nasher Prize Laureate Senga Nengudi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DO-hs3A7KI8>

Senga Nengudi Artist Website

<https://www.sengasenga.com/>

Video: R.S.V.P. Installation Activated by Maren Hassinger

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihcSz5kXyzg>

Installing Senga Nengudi's *Water Composition I* at the Dallas Museum of Art

<https://blog.dma.org/2022/03/22/behind-the-scenes-installing-senga-nengudis-water-composition-i/>

Individual Collective: A Conversation with Senga Nengudi

<https://walkerart.org/collections/publications/side-by-side/individual-collective-a-conversation-with-senga-nengudi>

Suggested Curriculum Connections (TEKS)

Fine Arts: Knowledge and Skills | §117.302. Art, Level I (b) (4)

Fine Arts: Critical Evaluation and Response | §117.4 (b), (d) and (e)

Fine Arts: Critical Evaluation | §117.52 Art, Level I (c) (3) and (4)



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