THE NASHER

SPRING 2023

THE LAUREATE ISSUE

TREY **BURNS** CHRISTIAN **CRUZ** ERICA **FELICELLA** ALYSIA NICOLE **HARRIS** AVA **HASSINGER**
MAREN **HASSINGER** RYAN **MCGINLEY** SENGA **NENGUDI** SIMONE **WHITE**

"I HAVE THIS PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY THAT ART IS A VERY BIG BOAT, AND THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM FOR EVERYBODY IN EVERY WAY."

—Senga Nengudi

2023 NASHER PRIZE LAUREATE

SENGA NENGUDI (American, born 1943)
Ceremony for Freeway Fets, 1978
10 C-prints, including contact sheet,
dimensions variable
© Senga Nengudi, 2022
Courtesy of Sprüth Magers and
Thomas Erben Gallery, New York
Photos: Quaku / Roderick Young

Dear Friends,

At the Nasher Sculpture Center, as at most museums, we go to great lengths to show works of art to advantage. Every element of display is carefully considered and adjusted to make the art look its best. Though I wouldn't have it any other way, I'll confess that the pristine, idealized conditions we create for works in our care can at times contrast markedly with the environments for which they were originally conceived and the settings into which they were first introduced. By privileging the display of works as independent, self-sufficient objects, do we at times compromise our understanding of their true import?

These musings are occasioned by the work of our 2023 Nasher Prize Laureate, Senga Nengudi. Now in her 79th year, Nengudi has produced an extensive and remarkably varied oeuvre that includes sculpture in a wide range of materials, installations, film and video, photography, painting, and performance. While she has produced numerous works for art galleries and museums—the most traditional of art spaces—it may well be that her most influential works are those she made for decidedly unconventional public spaces like the freeway underpass in Los Angeles that served as the setting for her legendary installation/performance, *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, 1978. On that occasion, Nengudi worked with other artists, dancers, and musicians, creating a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that, though it now exists only in documentation, continues to inspire countless artists.

Indeed, as potent and compelling are the sculptural objects that Nengudi has produced (and continues to produce) over the course of her career, it is also her way of working, her openness to a wide range of art forms, her commitment to collaboration, that has rendered her so extraordinarily influential. Working with, and spurring the work of an extended, bicoastal community of Black artists—sculptors, dancers, filmmakers, poets, musicians, and more—Nengudi has championed artistic innovation and freedom, locating the most profound meanings in the humblest of materials, digging deep into her most intimate, personal experience to find universal resonance.

During Nasher Prize Month, and for a month after, the Nasher's Public Gallery at the entrance to our building will be filled with examples of Nengudi's work. Visitors will gain some sense of her way with found objects, mastery of unconventional materials, and ability to generate complex associations and powerful emotions. And yet the story that gallery offers—limited in size and holding but a few works—is necessarily incomplete. To fill out the picture, to broaden and deepen our understanding and appreciation of Nengudi's art and influence, we'll host a range of lectures, conversations, and events over the course of Nasher Prize Month, including a conversation with the artist herself. In addition, this issue of *The Nasher* offers a range of features, essays, and conversations, some directly concerned with Nengudi and others that take up themes in her work as they are explored by younger artists today, artists inspired by her example.

I've no doubt you'll enjoy encountering Senga Nengudi's work when you next visit the Nasher. And in perusing this magazine, and perhaps attending some of our events this March, your sense of the dense artistic world her work inhabits will be expanded, and some of those things that our beautiful gallery display cannot so easily convey will become evident. As always, we are grateful for the Nasher Prize jury's wisdom in selecting Senga Nengudi as our 2023 laureate.

With every best wish,
Jeremy Strick
Director

Director
Jeremy Strick

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ON THE COVER: Detail view of *R.S.V.P. Reverie "Scribe,"* 2014, Senga Nengudi. Nylon mesh, sand, and found metals, 91 x 54 x 67 in. (231 x 137 x 170 cm). © Senga Nengudi, 2022. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. Photo: Timo Ohler

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Nasher Sculpture Center

Images from Colorado Springs, home of Senga Nengudi. Photos: Ava Hassinger

Often it is the small things—quotidian, ubiquitous, and overlooked—that glue together our shared humanity. Skin on a worn pillowcase, bones crackling under stretched limbs, a receipt found in last season's coat pocket, playful rituals between children. Both nothing and everything, these interactions fill our lives, casually passing by within a modest yet universal experience.

In December 2022, a small crew from the Nasher went to Colorado Springs to visit with 2023 Nasher Prize Laureate Senga Nengudi. In the midst of towering rocks and epic skies, they were led to one of Senga's most cherished places to think: a liminal stretch of land beside a railroad track. There Senga would meditate over mounds of gravel, strained grasses, and the reliable presence of sordid stuff.

This issue of *The Nasher* is dedicated to Senga Nengudi and the connecting threads spun from her work. These pages consider the temporality of material and human relationships as a fertile and lasting artistic resource. A Dallas-based performance artist discusses how sculpture helps divorce her work from politicized identity. Interstates, mammoths of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, are presented as strange and glorious creatures. Between bites of candy, our laureate discusses the human qualities of water. Through these words we dare to recalibrate how one values something's creative potential, perhaps infusing a common day with a little poetic spirit and Nengudian warmth. Enjoy.

Adrienne Lichliter-Hines
Editor in Chief
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Trey Burns

Trey Burns is a writer and artist whose work explores entanglements of the built and natural world through photo, video, sound, and constructed environments. Burns has exhibited his work in galleries, institutions, and artist run projects both domestic and international. In 2018, he co-founded Sweet Pass Sculpture Park, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to supporting contemporary art which is invested in site, experimentation, and community engagement. In 2020 he received an NEA grant with Tamara Johnson in conjunction with Wassaic Project in New York, and an Arts Activate grant in 2020 and 2021 from the City of Dallas Office of Arts and Culture for Sweet Pass Sculpture School.

Christian Cruz

Christian Cruz is a conceptual artist whose work ranges from solo performances to multimedia installation, sculpture, and durational performance. Cruz has performed nationally and internationally in galleries, museums, universities, festivals, and public spaces since 2010. In 2020 she created Dallas Performance Art Index, an online archive, and Artist Mama Fund, an annual grant-giving initiative for artists who are single mothers. Recently Cruz's work has been shown at Mexic-Arte Museum in Austin, Texas, for *ELA 26: Histories of Transformation / Historias de Transformación*, and Centro de Artes Gallery in San Antonio, Texas. She is pursuing her master's degree in visual and performing arts from the University of Texas at Dallas.

Erica Felicella

Erica Felicella is a practicing artist and arts professional who moved to Dallas over 20 years ago and lives in Oak Cliff. She works as an artist, curator, producer, organizer, and program developer. Her artistic practice includes endurance and durational-based performance, site-specific installation, and new media, diving into the depths of society through exploration of thoughts, ideas, and a felt response to a collective whole. Since 2002, her installations, photography, and performances have been shown at the Dallas Museum of Art, the Amarillo Museum of Art, Texas Vignette, Cluley Projects, Ro2 Art, AURORA, and many other locations. Felicella is currently the executive producer of AURORA, a Dallas-based public arts organization working at the intersection of art, technology, and community.

Alysia Nicole Harris

Alysia Nicole Harris, Ph.D., is an Afro-Atlantic poet, performer, art journalist, and charismatic follower of Jesus. She serves as Arts and Soul editor-at-large for *Scalawag* magazine, working to galvanize radical Southern imagination through literature and the arts. Recent writing appears in *Scalawag*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *Shadowplay*, *Offerta*, and *Passage*. Alysia completed her MFA in poetry at NYU and her doctorate studies in linguistics at Yale University. She currently resides in Corsicana, Texas, where she coaches a local youth slam team and works to restore a 106-year-old CME church to its former glory.

Ava Hassinger

Ava Hassinger combines the practice and use of photography, sculpture, video, and performance, generating a mélange of material. She is a former resident of RAIR (Recycled Artist in Residency) in Philadelphia. Her work has been featured in exhibitions including *Slow Burn*, John H. Baker Gallery, West Chester, Pennsylvania; *Extra Parts*, Good Children Gallery, New Orleans, Louisiana; and *Descent*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Hassinger is a graduate of NYU with a degree in photography and imaging and received her MFA at the University of Pennsylvania. She is currently based in Philadelphia.

Simone White

Simone White is the author of *or, on being the other woman* (Duke University Press, 2022); *Dear Angel of Death* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018); *Of Being Dispersed* (Futurepoem, 2016); and *House Envy of All the World* (Factory School, 2010). Her poetry and prose have been featured in *Artforum*, *e-flux*, *Harper's Magazine*, *BOMB Magazine*, *Chicago Review*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *and Harriet: The Blog*. She teaches in the English department at the University of Pennsylvania and lives in Brooklyn.

Material in Senga Nengudi's studio in Colorado Springs. Photo: Ava Hassinger

Connective Threads

The Nasher's conservator contemplates nylon as an art material and the creation and re-creation of Senga Nengudi's R.S.V.P. series.

CLAIRE TAGGART

During a recent visit to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), I sought out examples of Senga Nengudi's R.S.V.P. series: wall-mounted works largely comprised of pantyhose, featured in the exhibition *Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces*. The direct relationship between Nengudi's manipulated nylon stockings and the body taps into the viewer's own experience and physicality. By using a material as ubiquitous as nylon, Nengudi also offers common ground in her media selection. Despite being intrinsic to our lives, little consideration goes into the changes everyday textiles (clothing, bedding, etc.) undergo with age. Bedding becomes threadbare, toes poke through socks, and elastic waistbands give out; need for repair—and more often, replacement—is commonplace.

Nylon remains a popular elastomer (a portmanteau of elastic and polymer) in the textile industry, often as a knit, along with spandex and the trademarked Lycra. The properties that make elastomers so desirable are their ability to repeatedly elongate and recover. However, over time their ability to perform these key functions fades. Fibers become brittle, resulting in the inability to stretch and/or the failure to return to original shape.

The effects of time are evident in the wall texts for the artworks by Nengudi featured in *JAM*: there are two dates for each piece. The second date represents preservation efforts wherein newer pantyhose supplied by the artist were introduced as replacement. This has been the case for many of the artworks from the R.S.V.P. series due to the fragility of aging nylon. In addition to preserving the intent of these artworks, introducing new materials means that they now carry two creation dates. This intervention is decided upon only after documented discussions with the artist. Notably, the Hirshhorn Museum's previous chief conservator, Gwynne Ryan, worked with Nengudi when they acquired such a work in 2015. Ryan published the benchmark article "Considerations in the acquisition of contemporary art: Refabrication as a preservation strategy," citing discussions and interviews with Nengudi as a case study representing the process of material replacement or refabrication.[1]

When conservators are involved in philosophical conversations with artists, most take care not to steer them away from chosen materials; rather, the hope is to find pathways to extend the true intention behind the artwork. The initial resilience and ductility of the nylon pantyhose as reference to the human body may be invaluable to the R.S.V.P. series, necessitating the exploration between artist and conservator when unwanted change occurs.

Much like nylon knit pantyhose, textiles within the Nasher's collection pose challenges very specific to their media and manufacture. For instance, the woven plant fiber used by Magdalena Abakanowicz in the monumental *Untitled* has different preservation needs compared to the delicate sheer silk *Untitled (Muff)* by Ann Hamilton. The two aforementioned works are both considered natural fibers, unlike Beverly Semmes's *Yellow Pool*, which is composed of two types of inelastic synthetic fiber.

Since becoming a conservator, the way I view art has changed significantly. The enjoyment of discovery is now rooted in artist materials and their manufacture, as well as their inevitable entropy and the methods used to manage it. The strands of thread, yarn, or filament used to weave or knit a textile offer information on future material change. Armed with this and the knowledge gained from artist involvement, preservation tactics can continue to evolve.

1 Ryan, Gwynne. "Considerations in the acquisition of contemporary art: Refabrication as a preservation strategy." *Studies in Conservation,* volume 61. 198 – 202. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00393630.2016.1204517

ABOVE: Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Untitled,* 1980-83. Sisal weaving in five parts, 157 1/2 x 433 1/8 in. (400.1 x 1100.1 cm). Nasher Sculpture Center, Acquired through the Kaleta A. Doolin Acquisitions Fund for Women Artists, 2019. Photo: Kevin Todora

RIGHT: Beverly Semmes, *Yellow Pool,* 1993. Organza and velvet, 37 13/16 x 132 5/16 x 137 in. (96 x 336 x 348 cm). Nasher Sculpture Center, Acquired through the Kaleta A. Doolin Acquisitions Fund for Women Artists, 2020. Photo: Kevin Todora

ABOVE: Ann Hamilton, *Untitled (Muff),* 1999. Silk muff and glass shelf, 5 x 12 x 7 1/2 in. (12.7 x 30.5 x 19.1 cm). Nasher Sculpture Center, Gift of the Barrett Collection, Dallas, TX, 2021. © Ann Hamilton

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An artist captures the odd majesty of Dallas's interstates, bridging together art, literature, and urban spaghetti.

TREY BURNS
Essay and photography

TREY BURNS
Maximilian Sunflowers Under Interchange, 2022
Digital photograph
© Trey Burns

When approached to create a photographic response to Senga Nengudi's 1978 work *Freeway Fets* I think I said yes before the ask was finished. A beautiful activation of a freeway underpass, Nengudi's sculpture drew on the poetics of the interstitial to create an ephemeral and poignant public offering. It is made all the more powerful and mysterious by the few pieces of documentation that exist today.

In the photographic record that is available, shot by Studio Z member Roderick "Quaku" Young, the underpass appears as a ruin or modest temple. Nengudi's intervention includes her signature material of pantyhose filled with sand—the latter being a constituent ingredient of concrete. Nengudi counters the cold utility of concrete infrastructure with the bodily and organic—festooning the tops of pillars with forms which drape downward and lightly billow above the parking lot below. *Freeway Fets* appears, as the title implies, like a festive and celebratory ornamentation for a party or ritual—calling our attention toward this infrastructural space and its meaning and use in the landscape.

Visiting the site today via Google Maps (drop a pin on "Joe's Auto Parks Parking" on Pico Boulevard near the Los Angeles Convention Center) you get a sense of the remarkable un-remarkability of this parking lot below a highway. Seeing this place, this nowhere, through the smeary stitched lenses of Google cameras heightens its Ballardian aspect—the columns wrapped now with the eerie green glow of a nearby digital sign for Heineken.

I couldn't help but connect it to J.G. Ballard's novel *Concrete Island* (1974)—a coolly postmodern update of *Robinson Crusoe* and the second entry to Ballard's *urban disaster trilogy*. The plot follows an unlikable architect named Maitland (mainland?) who, after crashing his car off the interstate, finds himself trapped inside the steep-walled median of a traffic island. Unable to escape after suffering a broken leg, he turns to survival—drinking water from his car's windshield washer reservoir and eating food discarded by passing motorists. Trapped and ignored by the torrent of speeding traffic, the architect wonders to himself if he might not have crashed on purpose to escape the world he helped create.

It was a book I first precociously read as a child because I was attracted to its cover. The image of the towering highway interchange reminded me of my suburban family's jaunts into "the city." Leaving Gwinnett County and driving south on I-85, before entering the city limits of Atlanta, one first has to pass through the tangled arms and legs of the Tom Moreland Interchange. Here,

I-85, I-285, US 23, SR 13, and Buford Highway converge through a 90-foot-tall five-stack interchange consisting of 14 bridges and countless exits. The Malfunction Junction, aka the DeKalb Super Looper is *really* only known by one name to the locals, and that's Spaghetti Junction.

Be careful where you roam
'cause you might not make it home
(In the junction, in the junction)
–OutKast, "Spaghetti Junction" (2000)

Spaghetti Junction was a perfect image for a child—something out of Candy Land. I'd press forehead to glass to catch the pleasing parallax of passing under curving stacks of road—big rigs, buses, sedans—set in tracks like

CLOCKWISE: All works by Trey Burns. *Untitled,* 2022. Digital photograph. / *Echo and Narcissus,* 2022. Digital photograph. / *Days Inn,* 2022. Digital photograph. / *The Passenger,* 2022. Digital photograph. © Trey Burns


Days Inn


STRANGE WORLD

ducks in a carnival game. It was here I also remember first seeing unhoused people, relegated to tents high in the shadowy corners of the twisting complex.

Both *Concrete Island* and *Freeway Fets* were surely made in response to the realities of the ever-expanding, ever-dizzying offerings of the post-war built environment where places like Spaghetti Junction have become the standard fare. The massive expansion of highways during this era generated what we now know as the fundamental experience of America as a techno-ecosystem built for cars. It is *this* self-perpetuating gray goo of the automobile-dependent landscape which created the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex—the massively continuous plate of pasta where I took my photos. Here ubiquitous forms rise from ever more ubiquitous contexts—rubble, signage, and the fecundity of fast flora eking out what it can in the in-between. Within these viewpoints the scenes refract as mundane, humorous, and poignant.

In 1978 Nengudi also conducted a performative work, aptly named *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, to serve as an opening for her temporary public work under the highway. The performance invited the participation of artists from the LA collective Studio Z as musicians and, included in her cast, artists Maren Hassinger and David Hammons who performed alongside her as dancers. The event was filmed by Barbara McCullough but suffered an apparent technical difficulty in the processing of the footage. So, the reality of this ceremony now lives in various interviews and a few photographs, leaving room for our own imaginings—expanding in our minds like Nengudi's R.S.V.P. sculptures, stretching to fill in the gaps.

Ceremony for Freeway Fets becomes a radical act in the face of historical trends of infrastructural encroachment and its well-documented legacy of disenfranchisement. In his book *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, Marc Augé describes a non-place as the opposite of Utopia, because it "does not contain any organic society."[1] Nengudi repurposes this freeway underpass, a true "non-place," for the grounds of joyful ceremony. Her work cultivates the soil of this otherwise alienating environment by scattering the wild seeds of community—planting in this territory ideas of a reclaimed commons.

1. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 2008), 90.

LEFT: Trey Burns, *Strange World*, 2022. Digital photograph. © Trey Burns

SENGA NENGUDI
Water Composition I, 1969-1970/2019
Heat-sealed vinyl and colored water,
58 x 85 x 71 in. (147.3 x 215.9 x 180.3 cm)
Dallas Museum of Art, TWO x TWO for AIDS and Art Fund
Installation image from *Slip Zone: A New Look at Postwar Abstraction in the Americas and East Asia* at the Dallas Museum of Art, 2021–2022
Photo: courtesy of Dallas Museum of Art

Sensuous Ritual, Temporal Play

How Senga Nengudi transmits corporeal existence to her sculptures, eschewing the classic notions of art as artifact.

ALYSIA NICOLE HARRIS

Ritual establishes, it reaffirms the relationship between people and places and things.[1] —KEVIN SEVERIN

I enthusiastically embrace the moment impossible to hold. I let go and remember in it song and dance.[2] —SENGA NENGUDI

The most common way many of us engage art is as artifact. We enter pristine white temples, press our foreheads to the glass, and covet the charge of the artist's holy and creative act.

It's almost as if sculptures have become relics. Precious materials insulated from the indignity of touch and function, the sacred object is preserved on altar-like pedestals to be fussed over forever by elite art-priests.

Artist and 2023 Nasher Prize Laureate Senga Nengudi invites us into an alternative configuration. Her sensuous forms and ritual activations tempt us toward truths we already know: To have a body is to wield a capaciousness for touch. The creative potential of any form—be it inanimate or otherwise—lies in its ability to engage with other bodies.

This year the 79-year-old artist and visionary of the 1970s Black avant-garde became the seventh recipient of the Nasher Prize. Born in Chicago in 1943, Senga Nengudi has been creating work at the intersection of sculpture and performance for more than 50 years.

Her sculptures are wondrously abstract yet remain intimately suggestive of the body. Her explorations of the sensuous and kinetic interactions between material

and the body transform the gallery space into a place of collaborative possibility.

Nengudi's practice continues to challenge not only what sculpture can be made of—tape, water, women's undergarments—but also who it engages and how it can evolve once released from the constraint of permanence. Her incorporation of dance introduces change as a natural phase in a sculpture's lifecycle.

I first encountered her work a year and a half ago at the Dallas Museum of Art's colossal exhibition of post-war abstraction, *Slip Zone*. Plastic limbs, some plump, others limp, were filled to varying degrees with glistening marigold and ruby-colored water. *Water Composition I* (1969-1970/2019) looked like a galactic starfish. The clear heat-sealed bags sagged seductively, resting on a curious braided rope.

The sculpture called to be squeezed. Wasn't I supposed to touch?

The answer was yes.

Nengudi, who studied art and dance within the Black creative milieu of the Watts Towers Project and the 1965 Watts Uprising, wanted to articulate a way of artmaking that disrupted traditional Western models. She opposed the assumed supremacy of the solitary (white/male) artist by illuminating the creative possibilities that emerge from collaborative query.

This led Nengudi to invest in playful experimentations and creative partnerships with artists like Maren Hassinger, David Hammons, and others of the famous West Coast Black artist collective Studio Z. Nengudi's relationship with Hassinger has lasted over 40 years.

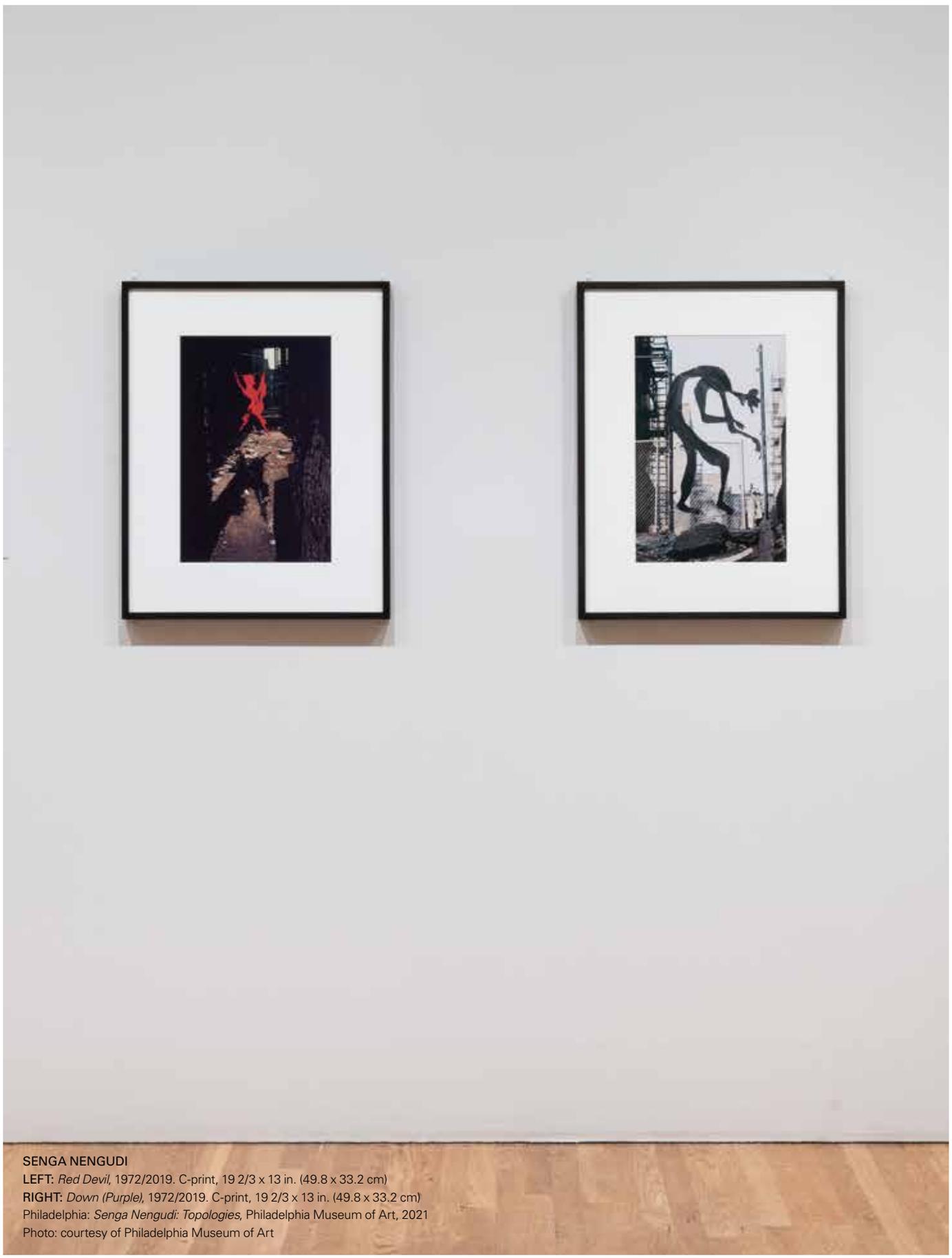
In *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* (1978), Nengudi and fellow collaborators borrowed from African dance ceremonies, combining sculpted masks and totems with ritual movement. This initiating act was understood to unleash the sculptures' power within a shared social context.

Global influences, such as the Japanese Gutai Art Association's rejection of traditional painting methods, can also be seen in Nengudi's relationship to making.

Not seeing Nengudi's decidedly non-Western approach to sculpture as an equally personal and political choice is a mistake. It's only recent superficial and performative treatments of race, gender, and class that assume art cannot be both.

A central concern repeats across Nengudi's sculptures: how everyday materials might empathize with the overlooked, exhausted, and excluded. The nylon of *Red Devil (soul 2)*, 1972, suspended above an alley, mimics the

SENGA NENGUDI, *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, 1978. 3 of 10 C-prints, including contact sheet, dimensions variable. © Senga Nengudi, 2022. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. Photos: Quaku / Roderick Young



SENGA NENGUDI
LEFT: *Red Devil*, 1972/2019. C-print, 19 2/3 x 13 in. (49.8 x 33.2 cm)
RIGHT: *Down (Purple)*, 1972/2019. C-print, 19 2/3 x 13 in. (49.8 x 33.2 cm)
Philadelphia: *Senga Nengudi: Topologies*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2021
Photo: courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art

liquid phantoms of drug-addled citizens shape-shifting in the wind. But the evolution in the corporeality of her forms reaches its height in her most celebrated series, R.S.V.P. (*répondez s'il vous plaît*).

First begun in the mid-1970s and revisited from 2003 onward, R.S.V.P. invites dancers to respond to evanescent sculptures made of used nylon pantyhose. The nylon mesh is affixed to the wall, stretched, and weighted, in some cases with sand.

Nengudi chose this unusual material for its sympathetic relationship to the Black female body: "From tender, tight beginnings to sagging end … After giving birth to my own son, I thought of Black wet-nurses suckling child after child—their own as well as those of others, until their breasts rested on their knees, their energies drained. My works are abstracted reflections of used bodies."[3]

The works' success rests in their abstraction and the visceral power of the material.

Looking at a reproduction of *R.S.V.P. XV* (March 1977), I can smell my own sweat. Dangling legs, open wombs, elongated breasts with knotted nipples—the marvel of works like *Inside/Outside*, 1979/2003 is how she scaffolds ovaries and internal organs out of the apparatus upon which female bodies depend and by which they are also constrained.

I notice how a dancer negotiates the simultaneous fragility and expansiveness of the nylon mesh in a 2021 activation of *R.S.V.P. Performance Piece*. Ralaya "Rai" Goshea splays her fingers to mimic the affixed end points of the 10-limbed nylon hydra. Minutes later, the dancer cradles her neck in an umber-colored gusset, stretching the material. Throughout the performance, Goshea rhymes her body again and again with shapes suggested by the sculpture.

Artist Maren Hassinger first activated a version of this sculpture in 1977. Her collaboration with Nengudi anticipated the emergence of movement in the gallery space by more than 30 years.[4]

Past actions and past bodies enter the space through the memory of the fabric and intertwine with Goshea's movement. All the Black women who have ever worn those pantyhose are active collaborators.

Catherine Wood of Tate Modern confirms Nengudi's indispensable contributions to the field, treating sculpture "as an expanded practice that might include the body in mutual dependency."[5] With an African

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"From tender, tight beginnings to sagging end … After giving birth to my own son, I thought of Black wet-nurses suckling child after child—their own as well as those of others, until their breasts rested on their knees, their energies drained. My works are abstracted reflections of used bodies."

Senga Nengudi

Statement on nylon mesh works, 1977
Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Senga Nengudi Papers, 1966-2017

SENGA NENGUDI
Inside/Outside, 1979/2003
Nylon, mesh, rubber, and foam,
60 x 24 in. (152.4 x 60 cm)
Photo: courtesy of the artist,
Sprüth Magers, and Thomas
Erben Gallery, New York

sensibility, Nengudi treats the objects she creates as agents with memory and will, capable of transforming space through activation.

"Individual acts of art do not have to depend upon the permanence of materials, only the permanence of the soul,"[6] writes Nengudi in a 1993 artist statement. Nengudi makes space for souls beyond her own, reveling in their dynamic agency, motion, and memory as she invites them to engage her work.

By not fetishizing the original material and composition of her sculptures, which were never meant to last, Nengudi achieves a powerful multivalent relationship with time. Nengudi's works exist synchronously—available in the past through documentation, at present as performance, and in the future as sculpture.

The artist described extemporaneously engaging with a form as "being in the state of being."[7] Photographs and films document the memory of performances, while written instructions preserve the possibility of future activations even if the materials are lost. Archival materials become the relics, while the sculptures remain free radicals, objects of futurity. It is through Nengudi's rituals that sculpture is saved from the reliquary.

Nengudi writes, "Those doing ritual have the assurance of time."[8] And now, after decades of being overlooked, so does her legacy.

What makes her revolutionary is her embrace of what most of Western sculpture holds at bay: time. Nengudi's works are living bodies, subject to decay, yet able to act at any moment in unpredictable ways. We perceive them as we perceive our own bodies, each as vessels holding time with open hands.

1. From Barbara McCullough's documentary film *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*, 1979. Sourced from Catherine Wood, "Nengudian Woman," in *Topologies* ed. Stephanie Weber and Matthias Mühling, (Hirmer) pg. 102.

2. Statements by the artist, 1994 and 1996. Thomas Erben Gallery archives, New York.

3. Statement on nylon mesh works, 1977. Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Senga Nengudi Papers, 1966-2017.

4. Catherine Wood, "Nengudian Woman," in *Topologies* ed. Stephanie Weber and Matthias Mühling, (Hirmer) pg. 98.

5. Ibid. pg. 100.

6. Statement by the artist, 1993. Thomas Erben Gallery archives, New York.

7. Artist Senga Nengudi at the Denver Art Museum, video, 7:08 mins., released December 11, 2020 [accessed Dec 12, 2022].

8. Statement by the artist, 1993.

Activation of Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P. Performance Piece,* 1977/2012/2019, nylon mesh and sand. Performed by Ralaya "Rai" Goshea (dancer) and Monique Brooks Roberts (violinist) during *Senga Nengudi: Topologies,* Denver Museum of Art, 2021, courtesy of the Denver Art Museum. Photo: Emily Barrett Rodriguez

UNRULED

Considering the shifting qualities of steel rope in Field *by Maren Hassinger*

DR. CATHERINE CRAFT

Collaboration has been a defining feature of Senga Nengudi's practice, and perhaps no relationship in that regard has been more important or long-lived than her friendship with artist Maren Hassinger. Like Nengudi, Hassinger studied both dance and sculpture, and their work together has often called on both these facets of their backgrounds.

As Nengudi developed her R.S.V.P. sculptures made from pantyhose, some of the larger compositions became the focus of activation by both artists. In a series of iconic photographs and performances, Hassinger intertwined her body among tautly stretched strips of nylon hosiery, entangling herself, stretching the pieces to their limits, and leaning in to be cradled by them. As a fellow participant in the Los Angeles artist collective Studio Z, Hassinger played a principal role in Nengudi's 1978 performance *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, and the two artists continued to work together on behalf of both shared and individual projects in the years that followed.

Born in Los Angeles in 1947, Hassinger studied sculpture at Bennington College, Vermont, where she worked with the artist Isaac Witkin. In the early 1970s while working on her MFA in fiber arts at UCLA, Hassinger encountered pieces of wire rope at a scrapyard. She quickly saw its artistic potential: "Wire rope is steel, and can be treated as steel, but it is also a rope, so it can be treated as fiber."[1] Inspired by its literal and metaphorical flexibility, Hassinger has deployed wire rope in temporary works of Land Art as well as installations and individual sculptures. Often, she unwinds its fibers, so that it appears frayed or tangled, evoking a range of associations: "The rope could look like many elements of nature—hair, vines, or water ripples. There was potential for the expression of motion, and you can see in the way that it's made that there is a bound up, wound up energy twisted into the material."[2] This tension between order and unruliness plays into Hassinger's broader interest in the role that nature could play in bettering our relations with one another; she has described the importance of nature to her art in political terms, as "using it to talk about equality. If we can share the sky, we can share other things."[3] Over the years, she has explored these concerns through video and a range of materials including tree limbs, plastic bags, and newspapers in addition to wire rope.

SENGA NENGUDI, *Performance Piece*, 1978 (detail). Silver gelatin prints, triptych, 118 3/8 x 41 in. (300.8 x 104.1 cm). Performer: Maren Hassinger. © Senga Nengudi, 2022. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. Photo: Harmon Outlaw

MAREN HASSINGER, *Field,* 1989. Concrete and wire rope, 36 x 60 x 84 in. (91.4 x 152.4 x 213.4 cm).
Nasher Sculpture Center, Acquired through the Kaleta A. Doolin Acquisitions Fund for Women Artists, 2020. Photo: Kevin Todora

The Nasher collection's *Field* is one of several sculptures with wire rope that Hassinger composed according to a geometric grid—a structure familiar in abstract art (particularly Minimalism), weaving, and agricultural plantings. From the sculpture's concrete foundation, untwisted lengths of wire rope spring like waving grasses. The abrupt shifts in height from one section of wires to another suggest, on the one hand, rows cut abruptly short as in a harvest, but also the possibility of different stages of growth. When *Field* was first exhibited in 1989, *The New York Times* critic Michael Brenson, calling it "one of Hassinger's best works," wrote, "It is a very personal work: the [wire cable] trees almost seem like a four-member nuclear family. Yet the issues they raise are also general. The use of industrial materials to suggest a fragile nature and the implication that industry is part of nature, is pointed and poignant."[4] *Field* is currently on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center. Additional works will be on view at the Nasher in Fall 2023 for *Groundswell: Women of Land Art*.

1. Maren Hassinger, "Passing Through," in *Maren Hassinger … Dreaming* (Atlanta, Georgia: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, 2016), 18.
2. Ibid.
3. Maren Hassinger, quoted in Mary Jones's "Nature as an Architecture for Equality," in *Maren Hassinger … Dreaming*, 87.
4. Michael Brenson, "Quiet Art Need Not Be Boring or Wimpish," *The New York Times*, November 26, 1989, section 2, p. 35.

LIKE

SUNS

Ava Hassinger, artist and daughter of Maren Hassinger, reunites with Senga Nengudi in Colorado Springs.

AVA HASSINGER
Essay and photography

I have known Senga my entire life. I like to think of her as my Art Auntie, in part because of her longtime collaborative sisterhood with my mother, Maren Hassinger, but also because of our overlapping interest in materials. I feel the pull of their art practices echoing in my own.

Looking back now, I remember a midterm critique in graduate school. A professor referenced Senga while looking at my work. At the time, I was interested in creating "soft sculptures" and I was particularly obsessed with spandex, and other stretchy synthetics, that referenced the body in a palette of skin tones. It's funny because it hadn't occurred to me that I was thinking about Senga while making the work, but after my professor said her name, it was clear: her influence had rubbed off on me.

An earlier memory: my sophomore year in college, Senga had a show at Thomas Erben Gallery. I remember thinking, *What is this?! Is this art?* I had never experienced this kind of work before. A large tube wrapped around the columns of the room. A massive square of sand covered

Installation view from *Senga Nengudi: Asp-Rx* at Thomas Erben Gallery, 2005. Sand, pigment, and found objects, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist, Sprüth Magers, and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

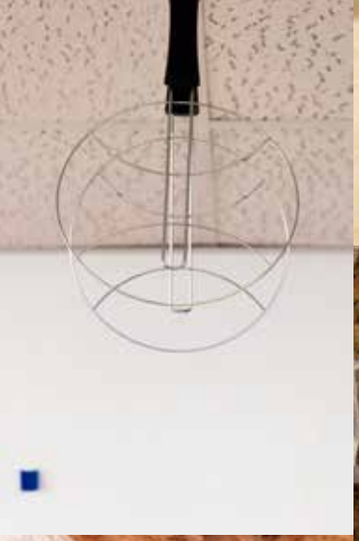
AVA HASSINGER, *Sisyphus,* 2018. Electrical wires, 72 x 24 x 24 in. (182.8 x 70 x 70 cm). Courtesy of the artist

the gallery floors with ridges drawn like rivers, splashes of color sprinkled around tiny mounds of car parts and scattered found materials. Human silhouettes were drawn on brown kraft paper. White fabrics draped on the wall. I left the show feeling bewildered but awakened.

Senga's work does not exist in a single category. It flows, infused with energy. Senga energy. Open. Curious. Light and heavy. Hard and soft. Electric. Tender. Kind.

This December, I had the pleasure of going to see Senga in Colorado Springs. "The Springs" are magical. The rolling mountains and hills ripple behind the city. The color of the boulders exhales warmth. I was in Senga's world, a world where there are two landscapes—the one in her studio, and the one outside—in reciprocal dialogue. In her studios, with their Senga energy, she prepares for her anticipated exhibition at Dia Beacon in February. Her improvisations with found and natural materials are a strong combination of harmony and dissonance. The feeling is meditative. The work is fluid and alive. Over the course of two days I photographed this world.

Senga Nengudi, left, with Ava Hassinger in Colorado Springs, 2022. Photo: Nan Coulter







"I was in Senga's world, a world where there are two landscapes—the one in her studio, and the one outside—in reciprocal dialogue. … Her improvisations with found and natural materials are a strong combination of harmony and dissonance. The feeling is meditative. The work is fluid and alive." —AVA HASSINGER







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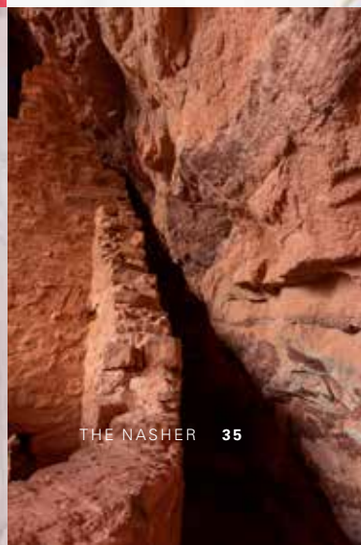
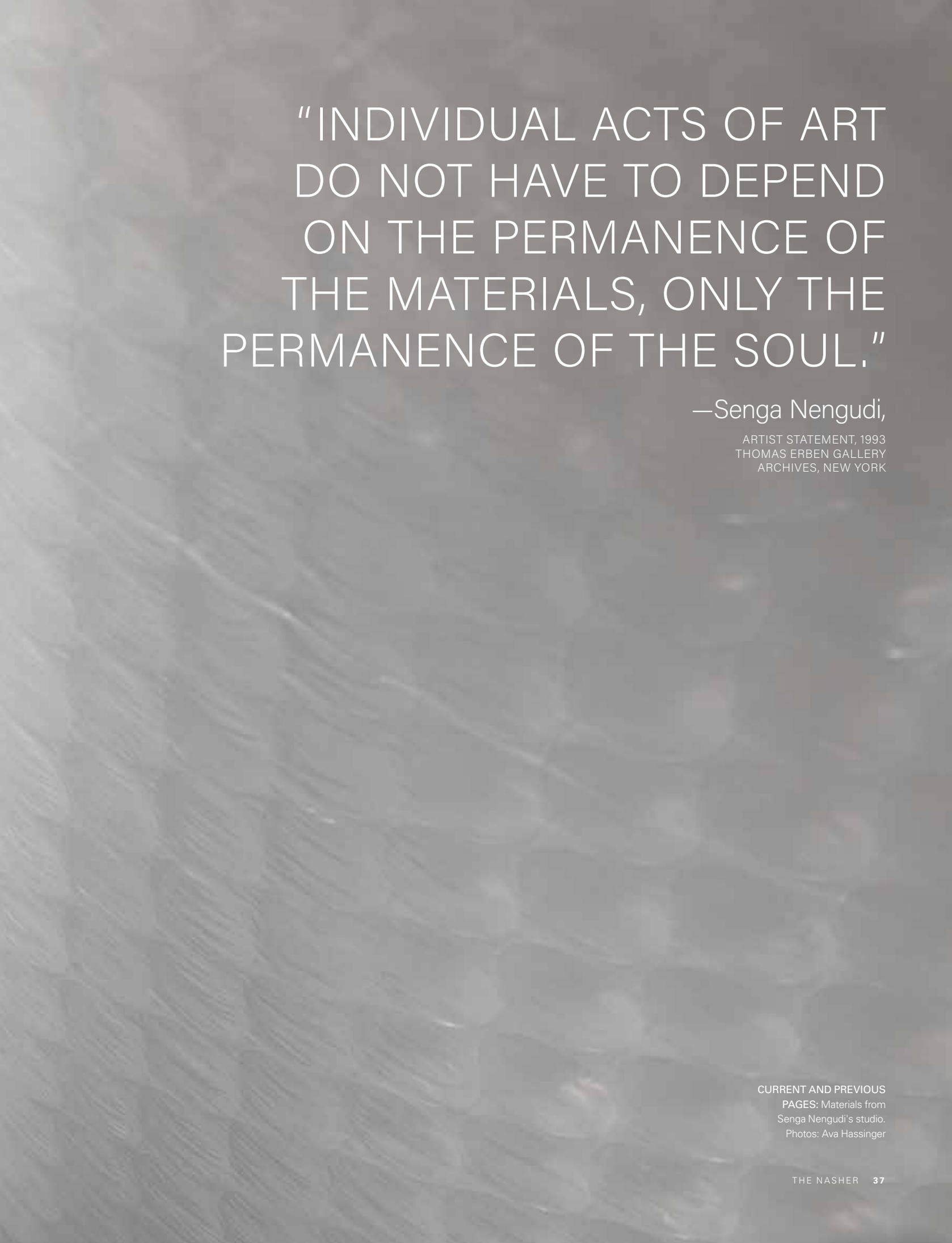


“INDIVIDUAL ACTS OF ART DO NOT HAVE TO DEPEND ON THE PERMANENCE OF THE MATERIALS, ONLY THE PERMANENCE OF THE SOUL.”

—Senga Nengudi,

ARTIST STATEMENT, 1993
THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY
ARCHIVES, NEW YORK

CURRENT AND PREVIOUS PAGES: Materials from Senga Nengudi’s studio. Photos: Ava Hassinger

ABOVE: Christian Cruz, *Laundry High Heels (Relic) 1 & 2*, 2019. Old family clothes (baby, daughter, husband, mine), clothes line, 6-in. stiletto heel clear acrylic ankle strap platform sandal, 80 lb. cardstock, dimensions variable. Photo: Kevin Todora RIGHT: Artist performance of *Nasher Public: Christian Cruz, Pink Collar // Children's Linen*, 2021-22. Photo: Christopher Sonny Martinez

A Body's Interaction with Sculpture

Unpredictable Engine

CHRISTIAN CRUZ




As a child, the live TV broadcasting of a local club that I can best describe as Dallas's Hispanic *Soul Train* punctuated the weekend. I'd stand at attention every Saturday night, memorizing the strokes of legs in light blue wash jeans cascading to the rhythm of green lasers, roaming fog, and nods from the DJ. All to say, I am a seasoned social dancer grown from a culture of movers. My love of moving my body comes from my relatives, who are all incredible dancers. Along with memorizing gestures of choreography, fundamentally, I invested my time in the physical comedy of the character "Lucy" on the TV series *I Love Lucy*. No one ever acknowledged Lucy's multidisciplinary magic, a secret the audience knew but the main characters failed to realize. *I Love Lucy* inspired me to create expressions without speaking, or silent tableaus.

In 2022 for my *Nasher Public* installation titled *Pink Collar // Children's Linen*, I displayed several sculptures including *Laundry High Heels (Relic) 1 & 2*, alongside a video documentation taken in my studio. The sculptures are codependent on movement to define their limitations, and ultimately their value. To describe the intersection of movement and sculpture, the first thing to agree upon is the materiality of the human presence inside the movement space. While my human body may differ from yours, our bodies have more similarities than compared to a rubber eraser, a marble column, a drop of blood, or a carbon monoxide leak. The mass composed together to reveal my human body acts as an adhesive for my ephemeral sculptures. My assemblage sculptures are held together by my limbs and time. My limbs are placed with specificity to guide the eye of the viewer, similar to the composition of a painting.

In the video performance, *Laundry High Heels*, I assemble clothes, shoes, and cardboard all tied with a laundry line to create a sculpture made of found materials. The *Laundry High Heels* video begins with me attaching the clear platform dancing heels to my foot, which stand at the top of several folded garments. My body wiggles from sitting to standing. I move my body by dipping my knees and lowering my torso in a downward swing. I intentionally create multiple compositions by sustaining the alignment of all the materials; each containing formal, physical qualities—















stacked and folded textiles caving under the pressure of the platform shoe, driven by my uncertain limbs. The unintentional shapes created by my loss of control, or resistance to fall, are part of my body's process in creating performance/sculptures.

As I continue to stomp, hobble, and sweep my legs around my studio, the sculpture begins to dematerialize. My hands push back on a wall to help me kick forward the stack of laundry, now dangling from my ankles like a Mexican balero or cup-and-ball game. My aim is to snap the laundry line and become untethered; instead, my dancer heels become undone. The clear, acrylic platforms crack apart from the insert and my foot falls to the floor. The second heel follows, disintegrating from underneath me, marking the end of this performance-as-research in my studio.

When asked how to demystify my work, I find this performance-for-video similar to a kinetic sculpture. My movement intends to shift the audience's perspective of the assembled, found materials activated by my body. My body acts like an unpredictable engine controlling its speed, ignition, or combustion through the performative device of improvisation.

This process came from a desire to ignore identity as a point of discussion or investigation, thereby furthering my exploration of form and site. Once visual art uses the body as material, disconnecting from the categorization of identity, then form and other physical qualities are highlighted. Instead of highlighting a marginalized demographic and elevating it for inclusion, the art can now be about what is happening in the installation or documentation itself. Unlike sculpture, performance art is uncollectible; however, a connection to sculpture can facilitate the acquisition of my artwork for an institution's art collection, which is ultimately my career goal. Therefore, when merging the two, then photographing it, it can live on not as a narrative with a moral, like the theater, but as an abstract conceptual artwork, its purpose to heal the imagination, like visual art.

CHRISTIAN CRUZ, Photo stills from performance for *Laundry High Heels*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist

RYAN MCGINLEY
Atlas, 2022
Digital chromogenic color print,
40 x 27 in. (101.6 x 68.58 cm)
Courtesy of the artist
Image selected by Senga Nengudi

A Ceremony of Self-Determination

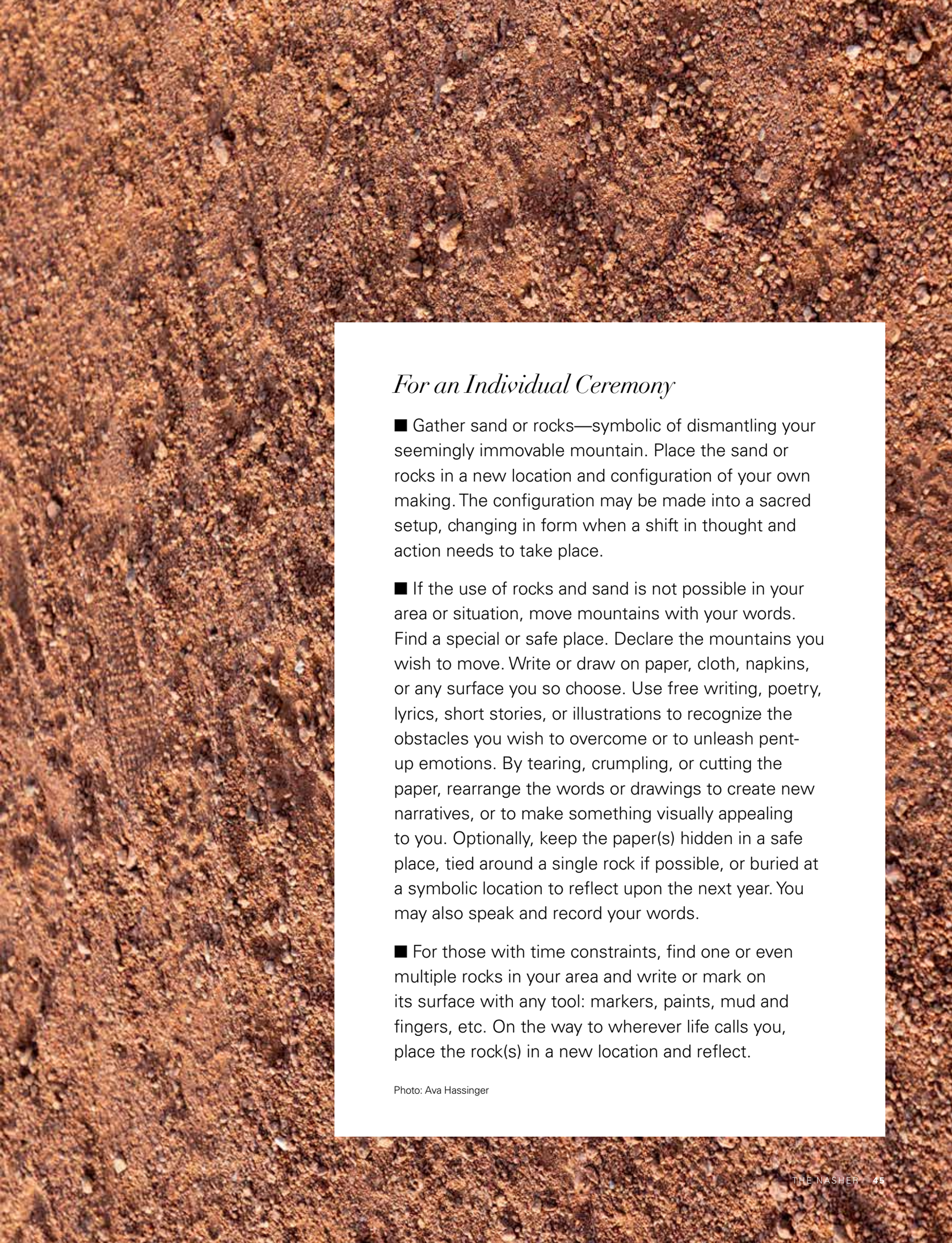
MOUNTAIN MOVING DAY

Senga Nengudi in Colorado Springs, 2022. Photo: Nan Coulter

In 2002, Senga Nengudi created Mountain Moving Day, a ritual celebration to empower, unify, and heal women. Nengudi offers this ritual to communities within and outside her reach through a set of instructions published on her website. Intended to be held on the third Sunday in March (during Women's History Month), though possible to be held at any time and place, the project asks women to celebrate individually, among friends, or among strangers, to spiritually and symbolically move barriers placed in front of them. The ceremony can be expressed in many forms—alone in a bathroom with a pencil and paper, in a communal gathering with dancing and music, on the way to work with a rock and an intention. Through Mountain Moving Day, however it is performed, Nengudi provides us a creative process to awaken and expand our human potential, letting "our bodies and beings come into alignment with our souls and our purpose."

On March 19, Senga Nengudi and the Nasher Sculpture Center call all genders in need of collective, uplifting action to participate in Mountain Moving Day. Join us at the Nasher for a family-friendly event featuring artist-led projects and work on view from artist Senga Nengudi or, using Nengudi's guidelines, imagine a Mountain Moving Day that speaks to you.

Mountain Moving Day may be done whenever needed, even daily.



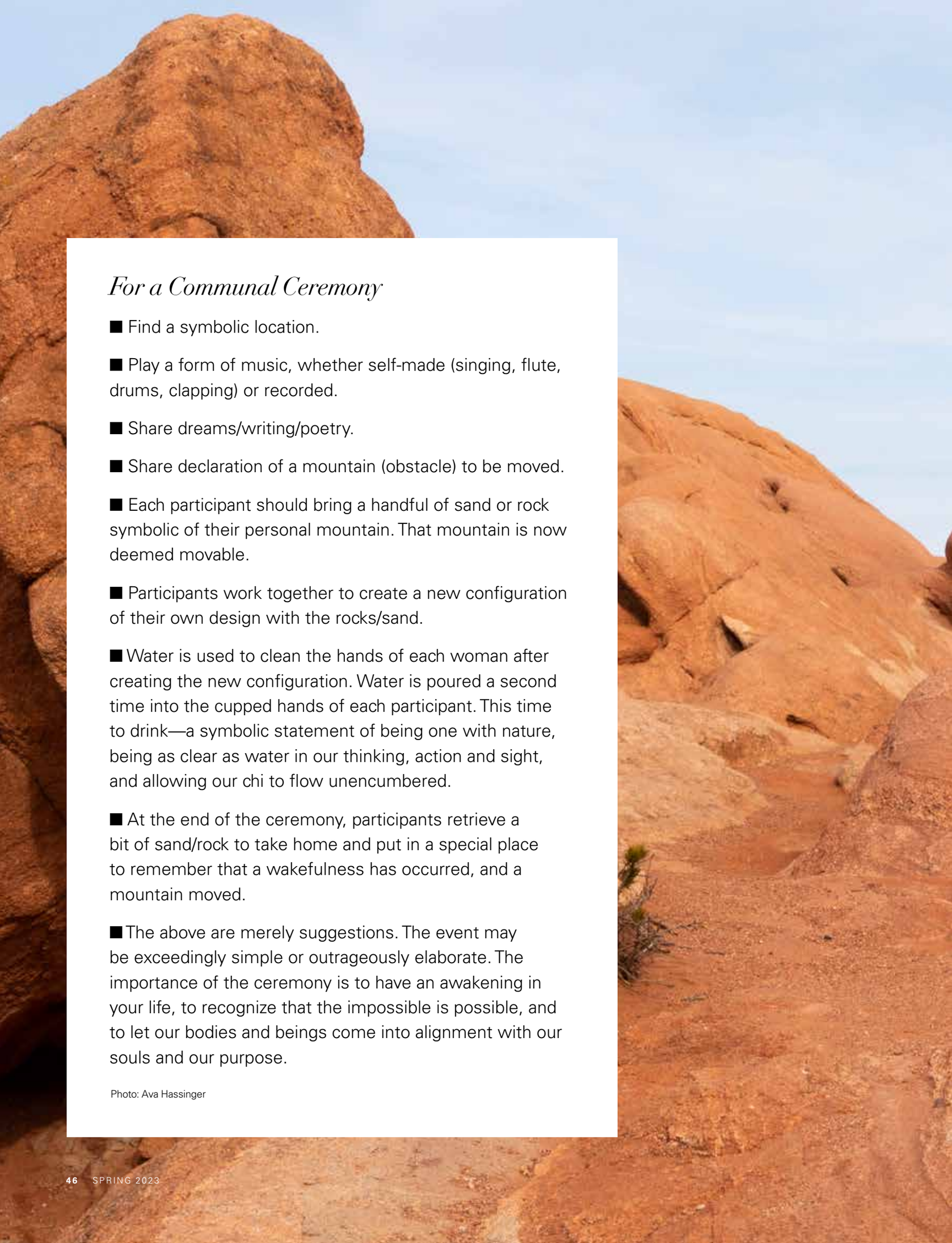
For an Individual Ceremony

■ Gather sand or rocks—symbolic of dismantling your seemingly immovable mountain. Place the sand or rocks in a new location and configuration of your own making. The configuration may be made into a sacred setup, changing in form when a shift in thought and action needs to take place.

■ If the use of rocks and sand is not possible in your area or situation, move mountains with your words. Find a special or safe place. Declare the mountains you wish to move. Write or draw on paper, cloth, napkins, or any surface you so choose. Use free writing, poetry, lyrics, short stories, or illustrations to recognize the obstacles you wish to overcome or to unleash pent-up emotions. By tearing, crumpling, or cutting the paper, rearrange the words or drawings to create new narratives, or to make something visually appealing to you. Optionally, keep the paper(s) hidden in a safe place, tied around a single rock if possible, or buried at a symbolic location to reflect upon the next year. You may also speak and record your words.

■ For those with time constraints, find one or even multiple rocks in your area and write or mark on its surface with any tool: markers, paints, mud and fingers, etc. On the way to wherever life calls you, place the rock(s) in a new location and reflect.

Photo: Ava Hassinger



For a Communal Ceremony

■ Find a symbolic location.

■ Play a form of music, whether self-made (singing, flute, drums, clapping) or recorded.

■ Share dreams/writing/poetry.

■ Share declaration of a mountain (obstacle) to be moved.

■ Each participant should bring a handful of sand or rock symbolic of their personal mountain. That mountain is now deemed movable.

■ Participants work together to create a new configuration of their own design with the rocks/sand.

■ Water is used to clean the hands of each woman after creating the new configuration. Water is poured a second time into the cupped hands of each participant. This time to drink—a symbolic statement of being one with nature, being as clear as water in our thinking, action and sight, and allowing our chi to flow unencumbered.

■ At the end of the ceremony, participants retrieve a bit of sand/rock to take home and put in a special place to remember that a wakefulness has occurred, and a mountain moved.

■ The above are merely suggestions. The event may be exceedingly simple or outrageously elaborate. The importance of the ceremony is to have an awakening in your life, to recognize that the impossible is possible, and to let our bodies and beings come into alignment with our souls and our purpose.

Photo: Ava Hassinger

ERICA FELICELLA, *Re-sist, Re-live, Proceed,* 2020. Video stills: Christian Vazquez, courtesy of Erica Felicella

Life's Weight in a Rock

Re-sist, Re-live, Proceed, *a performance by Erica Felicella*

ADRIENNE LICHLITER-HINES

In late December of 2020, Erica Felicella bore the symbolic burdens of others. From dawn to dusk the veteran performance artist lay on a bed of rocks, motionless and silent, in a vacant lot south of downtown Dallas. Nearby was a desk, paper, and two jars. Visitors were asked to take paper from one jar, write reflections or memories from the past year, and leave it behind in the next. They were then directed to a pile of rocks, asked to take one and place it on Felicella's still body, breathing behind an all-too-familiar face mask. Finally, visitors were given the opportunity to write anonymously in a book to document their thoughts more permanently.

With the sun setting, in front of a small audience, Erica rose from the pile. Chimes rang, candles were lit, and flower petals were showered over the body that had just compassionately absorbed the transfer of confusion, reflection, and hope.

"Choices will be given to all to pass the weight, pain, and suffering of their emotions upon the soul of a year. The weight shall slowly bury the presentation of self as those around deliver it back into the ground where it began."

—ERICA FELICELLA

Photo: Adrienne Lichliter-Hines

A Very Big Boat

On December 2, 2022, Nasher Curator Catherine Craft spoke to Senga Nengudi about her first experiences with sculpture, her fascination with elemental materials, how things were then, and how things are now.

Catherine Craft: The examples of our past Nasher Prize laureates have established a fairly expansive idea of what sculpture can be. I was struck by the fact that when you were in school, you majored in sculpture and minored in dance. I wonder, to begin with, what drew you to sculpture specifically?

Senga Nengudi: I've always been attracted to the three-dimensional, and I kind of love telling stories, so I'm going to tell you this story: As a child in Los Angeles, there was a place called Clifton's Café. The owner was really, really religious. He had these catacombs or niches with Christ and the early Christians, and that kind of stuff. I was fascinated with—even though I didn't have these terms at the time—this thing of installations, setting a scene. And because it was in Los Angeles, and because Los Angeles is Hollywood, a lot of places have that sense of grandeur and history. So, I had to go to the bathroom, went downstairs, and there was this huge Jesus, *huge*. I sat on his lap, just like Santa Claus, and there was some kind of feeling, I can't explain it, that this was sculpture. There were no terms at the time, but I really liked this idea of the three-dimension. I think that that was my epiphany at that time. Even though I was maybe 11 years old, it just attracted me more than painting or drawing and so on, because I had to have that tactile feeling. I couldn't get it from a photo; I've always wanted to pull something out of a photo, or pull something out of a painting. That feeling that you get from a three-dimensional object is what continually stimulates me.

Craft: It's striking to me that you went to school at a time when definitions or thoughts about sculpture were changing and expanding.

Nengudi: Oh, totally.

Craft: Were you exposed to more contemporary developments in school, or more outside of that?

Nengudi: More outside. I had a job as an assistant teacher at Pasadena Art Museum, and I also had a job as a teacher at Watts Towers Arts Center. Both of those were very experimental places, trying to find new dialogue and new ways of doing.

Craft: It seems like teaching has been a part of your practice from the beginning. I know some artists who have taught, and for them it's a job. The minute they can retire or do something else, they're fine with leaving it behind. My impression is you feel differently about teaching—that it's been a part of your practice?

Nengudi: It's been a part of my practice. In the beginning, I was teaching children's art, and I was always stimulated by the fact that they were so free—that they could find anything and slap it on there. And you couldn't tell them to do it any differently. "This is what it needs to look like. This is what I'm doing," whether it's a purple tree or whatever. That was very stimulating to me and continues to be. I'm ever amazed at children and this freedom they have and willingness to try anything. Later on, when I was teaching at University of Colorado in Colorado Springs, I felt it was important that they have a teacher of color—for them to have a full picture of what art looks like.

Craft: Was the student body at the university more diverse than the faculty?

Nengudi: Absolutely. And that's depressing that you have this student body that's very diverse yet there's no one there for them to relate to. There's only one point of view.

Craft: When you started making the Water Compositions in the late 1960s, how did you come to the idea of sealing liquid in plastic? What was the technology for doing that at

Senga Nengudi in her studio, 2022. Photo: Nan Coulter

the time? I saw a machine in your studio for doing that. Is it from that era?

Nengudi: Mm-hmm.

Craft: Where would you have come across that?

Nengudi: Well, the first explorations I made were with those sealers for plastic bags for things like vegetables. It was a little thing that I just made work. I was always into stuffing things, including myself [*laughs*], so it comes from there. Anyway, I started trying to experiment with things I could stuff, and I thought, "Well, let me put some water in here." I was always fascinated with the elements, and with water, just the nature of water—its flexibility, its changeability, its shape-shifting … So I added colored dye to it, and I sealed it. I like the idea of it having this humanness, that I can touch it, and it's like human skin and it's responsive, like touching a human. So that's what lured me into that. I like the way it waved. I could move it and the movement that was in it fascinated me.

Craft: I guess this is true of the R.S.V.P. works too, but with the Water Compositions, how do you feel about viewers not really being able to handle them anymore? And actually, did they handle them much to begin with?

Nengudi: Yeah, that was my fantasy, that they could come in and touch it and so on and so forth, but obviously in a museum or even a gallery setting that wasn't possible; they wouldn't last that long. With R.S.V.P., *répondez s'il vous plaît*, I'm inviting you to come in and have this experience. I really wanted the viewer to be a part of it. I was always taken with aboriginal art because of this dreamtime kind of concept that they have in some of their paintings. That would fascinate me because I would stand in front of them and I could go on this adventure just looking at the canvas. That's what I want for my viewer, that somehow, if there's some movement, they can take this to another level. This is just a beginning point that allows them to expand themselves.

Craft: So the response needn't be literal or physical. It's something that is happening imaginatively. It seems to me that the way these works are presented suggests that idea of movement without requiring the viewer to physically do it themselves.

Nengudi: It's true.

Craft: Thinking about the Water Compositions, sometimes stories get told about an artist's work that come to be repeated over and over. The Water Compositions could be called abstract. But often when I've read about them, it's in relation to a single quote from David Hammons, about contemporary responses to them. How was the response to these works?

Nengudi: What was the quote, because he's done a couple?

Craft: The one I'm thinking of is that your work was so apolitical that people would barely speak to you. ["No one would even speak to her because we were all doing political art. She couldn't relate. She wouldn't even show around other Black artists her work was so 'outrageously' abstract." Interview between David Hammons and Kellie Jones for *ART PAPERS*, July/August 1988]

Nengudi: I hate that quote. Because it's so not true.

Craft: Yeah?

Nengudi: It's so not true.

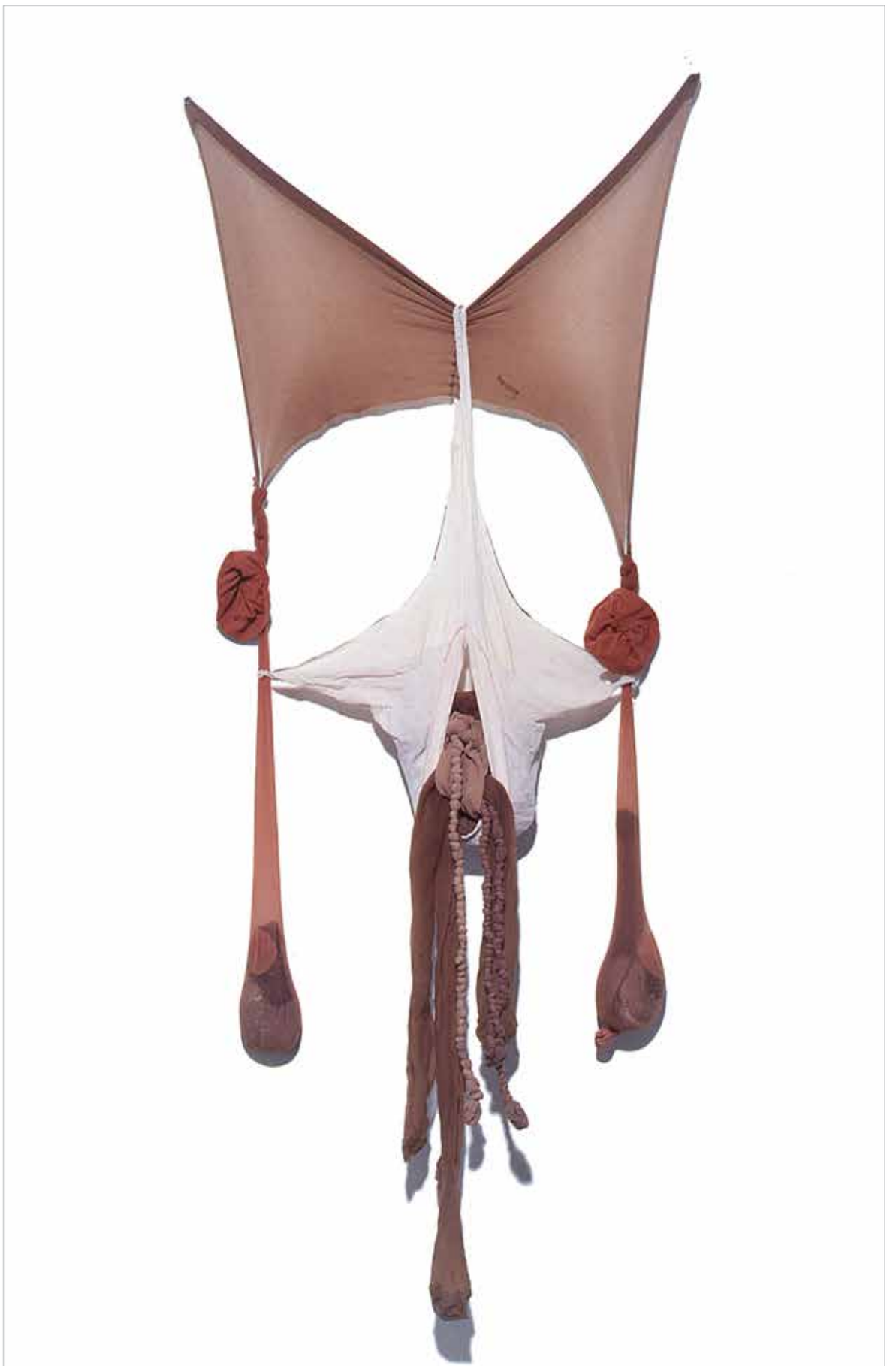
Craft: Can you talk a little bit about what you remember of the responses and the tension between Black artists working abstractly, and not. Is there another way to remember or tell that story?

Nengudi: Yeah. I mean, David was grappling with it himself. He was looking at what I was doing as, "Wow, she's doing this and she's going against the tide." But in my mind, I wasn't going against the tide; I was doing what I had to do. I had to do things in a certain way. And yeah, that's how it was. I have this personal philosophy that art is a very big boat, and there's plenty of room for everybody in every way. And if somebody's doing something that's more formal, then that means I don't have to do it. I'm free to do something else. They've got that covered. So that allows me to explore in another way.

Craft: Did you stop making Water Compositions at some point?

Nengudi: I stopped when the waterbeds came into fashion. I said, "Well, that's the end of that." Yeah, it was over, and I stopped making them. Then I moved to New York and was there for close to four years, came back to California and I was pregnant; I had my first child. That was an extraordinary experience for me, and I wanted to express that in some kind of way. I wanted to express how the body and the psyche change during that process. How the shape of the body changes, how your mindset changes—all of these things. I wanted to reflect that in what I was doing. I tried all kinds of materials—all kinds—and then I happened upon pantyhose and I said, "Wow, it's the same color as the body. It's flexible like the

SENGA NENGUDI, Detail of *Water Composition (Orange)*, 1969–70/2018. Heat sealed vinyl, colored water, 7/8 x 38 1/8 x 15 3/4 in. (2 x 97 x 40 cm). © Senga Nengudi, 2022. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. Photo: Stephen White



SENGA NENGUDI
R.S.V.P. XV, 1977
Nylon mesh, sand,
18 x 54 x 4 in (45.7
x 137.2 x 10.2 cm)
In the collection of
Greg Pitts, courtesy
of Sprüth Magers and
Thomas Erben Gallery,
New York

SENGA NENGUDI, Detail view of *R.S.V.P. Reverie "Scribe,"* 2014. Nylon mesh, sand, and found metals, 91 x 54 x 67 in. (231 x 137 x 170 cm). © Senga Nengudi, 2022. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. Photo: Timo Ohler

LYGIA CLARK, *Stone and Air,* 1966. Stone and plastic bag, variable dimensions. Ref. N 20189. Photo: courtesy of The World of Lygia Clark Cultural Association

body. I just have to figure out how I want to fill it." And so I went back to the sand. And when I started putting sand in them, I noticed that it had the same sensuality, it had the same body weight, it had the same flexibility in form. And that's when I started doing that.

Craft: When you were looking for a way to express these feelings and such, did you feel that there were any precursors in art, existing art, that you could look to?

Nengudi: There was a Brazilian artist—Lygia Clark. I saw a photograph of her, this famous photograph with this form in her hand, and I went, "Ah, I'm simpatico! I'm not crazy. Oh, there's somebody else that is thinking in ways outside of the box." That was a true inspiration for me as well as Hélio Oiticica, who was also Brazilian. I guess the main thing was the concept of permission that I can do this. It may or may not be accepted, but this is the road I want to travel.

Craft: Permission is such an interesting concept because I've heard other artists talk about that—trying something new in those terms. Who did you feel you needed permission from?

Nengudi: That's a very good question. I guess I think the situation was who did I not want permission from? And that was the white established group. I did not feel as though I needed to be validated by them. I wanted to take what I was doing and expand on this. Watts Towers Arts Center was very influential. I was fortunate enough to have Noah Purifoy as the director at the time; he's brilliant and honest. I mean, he walked the walk. Some people say, "Oh yes, I'm doing it," but he *did* it. He's totally committed. We also had Simon Rodia [who built and designed the Watts Towers] as a model, even though he wasn't around at the time we were there. He would just walk along the railroad tracks and grab stuff that was cemented into these amazing towers. Being committed to the process was really important, and being around people that were committed to the process of expansion was really important.

Craft: You were talking about the white art establishment and accepted canons of art. Do you think that we've managed to expand that at all? Or do you feel like you're creating a separate sort of art world? Or a separate history?

Nengudi: That's a good question. Ask me in another way.

Craft: Okay. I can turn it around to my experience as a curator. The Nasher Sculpture Center, like other collections, has predominantly white male artists in our founding collection. We've been trying to change that and expand it. But it seems like at our museum, and at other museums, we

have to decide if it is more helpful or interesting to show all of this together or to show a sort of solidarity of Black artists. You know, like here's Maren Hassinger and Mel Edwards and Martin Puryear and Senga Nengudi, or here's Mel Edwards and David Smith. It doesn't have to be only one or the other, but how do you feel about that?

Nengudi: Yeah. I think it needs to be both. I mean, we've worked a long time to be part of the canon, but then the other way has its value historically, you know? How did all of this evolve? And why did it all evolve? But I think it needs to be given equal value as opposed to, "Well, we'll do that over here and we'll have them over there." And the whole blockbuster situation is interesting. It is sort of like a blockbuster movie. You want people to come and see it, so there's certain things in it that people enjoy and so on and so forth. But David [Hammons] would say, "Well, in the '80s we had a lot of play." And he says, "Oh, okay, well that's going to be over pretty soon, but then they'll come back around to us in a couple of decades and rediscover us." However, sometimes you feel like instead of there being a true value to the work you've selected it's more like, "Okay, we needed this in our collection, and we needed that in our collection." And it's not even aesthetically based. It's ...

The Watts Towers in Los Angeles, California, built by Simon Rodia with steel, concrete, and found materials between 1921 and 1954. Courtesy of Watts Towers Arts Center

Craft: Checking boxes.

Nengudi: Yes.

Craft: I think it's maybe starker in sculpture, or at least traditional sculpture, because it requires material resources that leave the contrast even more exaggerated. But one of the things that really strikes me about your work is that, with a few exceptions, you've been really good about documenting. Documentation has been important.

Nengudi: It's important, yes. Only because it's ephemeral in nature. If I don't document it, that's the end of that. It's like the tree in the forest. To prove that this experience happened, that it did exist, I need the documentation.

Craft: What was the process of deciding how you wanted the ephemeral things to be documented? Because there's different ways to photograph, to film. Did you direct the photographers of your work to what you wanted to be shown?

Nengudi: Well, again, it was this issue of immediacy. There's a photograph called *Rapunzel* that came about because there was a Catholic school in the neighborhood that had been there forever—it looked like a little castle. One day I was passing by, and they were tearing it down. I said, "Oh my God, they can't do this without documentation!" So I called my friend Barbara McCullough, who's a filmmaker, and basically asked her to come out and play. Barbara was able to come out and they were literally demolishing the school as we were doing our thing. And so that's kind of how it was. There was a merry band of us that we could call on in terms of what we needed. We were just working in the moment and we didn't have any money. So it really had to do with our resources and lack of resources. We used what we had, and that's how it went.

Craft: But part of the resources was this incredible web of friendships.

Nengudi: Exactly. We were our own resource.

Senga Nengudi will have an artist talk at the Nasher Sculpture Center at noon on March 31, 2023, as a part of Nasher Prize Dialogues. Her work will be on view in the Nasher's Public Gallery through April 30, 2023.

SENGA NENGUDI, *Rapunzel,* 1981. Silver gelatin print, 40 x 30 in. (101.6 x 76.2 cm). Courtesy of Sprüth Magers

Senga Nengudi
in her studio, 2022.
Photo: Nan Coulter

"THIS IS JUST A BEGINNING POINT THAT ALLOWS [YOU] TO EXPAND."

—Senga Nengudi

2023 NASHER PRIZE LAUREATE

Untitled (Hour in which I consider hydrangea)

SIMONE WHITE
Poem

Hour in which I consider hydrangea, a salt or sand plant, varietal, the question of varietals, the diet of every mother I know, 5 pounds feels like 20, I have lost… I have lost, yes, a sense of my own possible beauty, grown external, I externalize beauty. Beauty occurs on the surface of plants; the sun darkens the skin of my child, he is so small, he is beautiful (I can see; it is obvious) and everything about him is beautiful. Because he is small, the bite of some insect —its venom—makes his hand swell. He appears to feel nothing. He smashes his skull against the floor. He screams. I hold him in my lap on the kitchen floor in front of an open freezer, pressing a pack of frozen clay against his forehead. He likes the cold. I see; it is so obvious. Hydrangea. When I move, when I walk pushing my child's stroller (it is both walking and pushing or hauling, sometimes, also, lifting; it is having another body, an adjunct body composed of errand and weight and tenderness and no small amount of power), I imagine I can feel this small amount of weight, this 5 pounds like 20, interfering with the twitch of every muscle in my body. As an object, a mother is confusing, a middle-aged mother with little spare flesh, I feel every inch of major muscle pulling against gravity and against the weight of my child, now sleeping. This is the hour for thinking hydrangea. Let no man look at me. I stop to brush the drowsy child's little eye. His face. He barely considers his mother. I am all around him. Why should he consider what is all around him? Perhaps what is missing is a subtle power of differentiation. I am in, therefore, a time of mass apprehensions.

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