

Press Release

Senga Nengudi

Spirit Crossing

May 17–July 28, 2023

Sprüth Magers, NY

Sprüth Magers

Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are honored to present an exhibition by Senga Nengudi at the New York gallery that illuminates in-depth, for the first time, an important body of work created by the artist while working in New York in the early 1970s. Between the time of her celebrated *Water Compositions* (1969–71) and nylon *R. S.V.P.* sculptures (mid-1970s onward), Nengudi was immersed in her *Spirit Flags*. These evocative works comprise boldly colored fabrics cut into the form of human-sized silhouettes, which Nengudi then affixed with ropes to the walls and edges of rooms, and even staged outdoors in alleyways and across fire escapes. As the sculptures pick up currents and breezes, they move, animated both physically and in spirit.

Beautifully staged photographs of Nengudi's *Spirit Flags* strung in outdoor and indoor locations, shot in 1972, will be on view alongside a selection of sculptural *Spirit Flags* recreated by the artist for the first time in four decades. A new photographic triptych, depicting the artist's late husband, will round out the exhibition and its themes of spirit, family, transience and transcendence.

Nengudi's time in New York, from 1971 to 1974, though brief compared to her years in Los Angeles and later Colorado, was immensely formative for the artist. Living uptown in Spanish Harlem, she quickly joined a network of Black artists and thinkers eager to incorporate elements of Black life and identity into their work, whether it be through the body, history or culture. Using a vocabulary rooted in abstraction, Nengudi drew from her experience seeing everyday people on the streets of New York, including those living on the street, often hunched over, their bodies swaying but never collapsing. She translated these impressions into two-dimensional forms made of flag material, with grommets inserted around the edge of each figure. Using nylon cord, Nengudi suspended them so they might "begin to talk and move about" in the wind – as she described in a fellowship statement at the time – and then photographed them in situ. She added: "Spirits is the subject I am working with. The inner souls or spirits of people I have seen on the city streets; particularly in Harlem."

Spirituality – as translated through physical forms, such as the body and materials, both natural and manmade – has been a key notion in Nengudi's work since the start of her career. Moreover, the *Spirit Flags'* use of tension and suspension echoes many

of the elements the artist would develop in her *R.S.V.P.* works, for which she stretched nylon stockings often from one wall to another in ways that call to mind limbs and sinews. In the photographs of Nengudi's husband, taken in the late 1990s, we see his body at rest in a bath, his long locks floating and encircling his body like tentacles of spiritual energy. Moving and intimate, these images tap into Nengudi's practice of highlighting simple gestures, performed over the backdrop of daily life and captured photographically.

The exhibition at Sprüth Magers follows both the artist's inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art's recent *Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces*, celebrating the influential New York gallery where Nengudi exhibited her work in the mid-1970s, as well as a major solo exhibition of Nengudi's work at Dia:Beacon, New York, on view beginning February 17, 2023.

Winner of the Nasher Prize for Sculpture 2023, Senga Nengudi (*1943, Chicago) lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Recent solo exhibitions include Dia: Beacon, Beacon, NY (2023), Philadelphia Museum of Art (2021), Denver Art Museum (2020), Museo de Arte de São Paulo (2020), Lenbachhaus, Munich (2019), Henry Moore Institute, Leeds (2018), Baltimore Museum of Art (2018) and Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami (2017). Recent group exhibitions include Museum of Modern Art, New York (2022), Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2022), Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zürich (2021), Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2021), Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2020), Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2018), National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (2018), Brooklyn Museum, New York (2017) and the 2017 Venice Biennale.

For further information and press inquiries, please contact Silvia Baltschun (sb@spruethmagers.com).

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