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“Enmeshed: Senga Nengudi’s Performative Nylon Sculptures and Afro-Asian Ritual”

Abstract:

Senga Nengudi (b.1943) is best known for her surreal, ambiguously gendered sculptures made of everyday materials like rubber and used nylon pantyhose, which she often activates through collaborative performance. Begun in the 1970s, her nylon works reflect the body’s material fatigue from a black feminist perspective, but they are also conversant with the tenets of postminimalism as well as what the artist has termed an “Afro-Asian” aesthetic – a culturally syncretic notion of formal and informal ritual that spans African and Japanese performance-based cultural practices. This stylistic term reflects her upbringing and education in multicultural Los Angeles, and dovetails with the broader history of imaginative kinship between African Americans and Asian peoples in the 20th century. Exploring a single work from 1978, this presentation examines the longstanding impact of the year Nengudi spent in Japan in 1966. Her immersion in Japanese culture was a transformational sojourn that remains underrecognized in the artist’s oeuvre. The impact of this journey not only catalyzed her understanding of global ritual but also compounded a critical perspective toward American imperialism abroad during a time of intense political unrest in Japan and in the U.S. Incorporating this experience meaningfully into a contextual analysis of Nengudi’s practice unfolds the broad scope of her intersectional, and international, perspective.