

Senga Nengudi

*Senga Nengudi: Black Avant Garde Visual and Performance Artist*

Getty Trust Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by  
Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes  
in 2020

Interviews sponsored by the J. Paul Getty Trust

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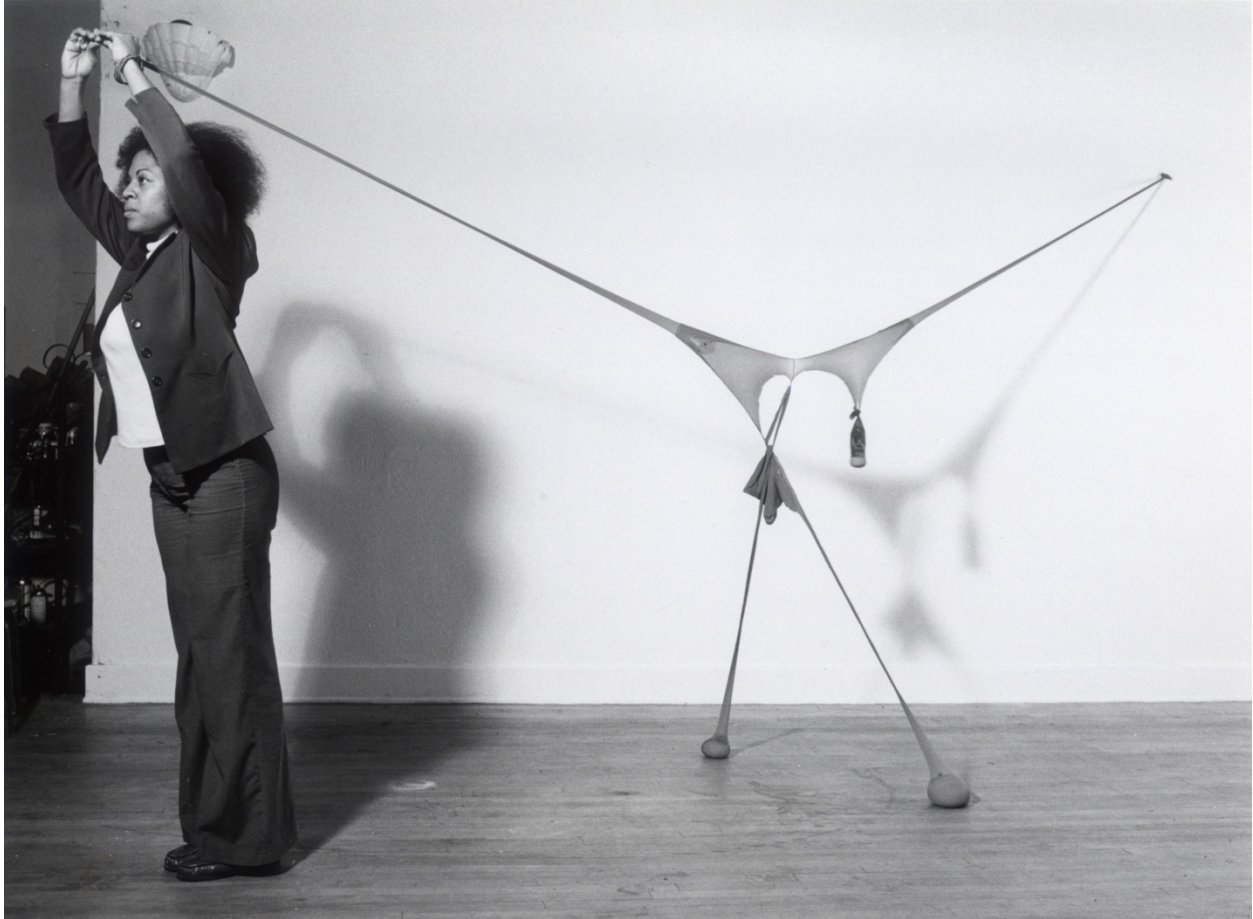
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Senga Nengudi, "Senga Nengudi: Black Avant Garde Visual and Performance Artist" conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes in 2020, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2022, under the auspices of the J. Paul Getty Trust, 2022.



Senga Nengudi setting up for a performance with *R.S.V.P. X*, 1976. Senga Nengudi Papers, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans. © Senga Nengudi.



Senga Nengudi setting up for a performance with *R.S.V.P. X*, 1976. Senga Nengudi Papers, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans. © Senga Nengudi.



Senga Nengudi, *Water Composition I*, 1969–70/2019. Heat sealed vinyl, coloured water 147.3 x 203.2 x 180.3 cm. 58 x 80 x 71 inches. © Senga Nengudi.



Senga Nengudi, *Bulemia*, 1988/2018 (detail). Newspaper and gold spray paint. 121 ¼ x 167 x 169 inches. © Senga Nengudi. Installation view, Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles, 2020. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

## Abstract

Senga Nengudi is an artist best known for her abstract sculpture and performance art. Nengudi was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1943 and moved to Los Angeles, California, at a young age. She attended California State University, Los Angeles for both her undergraduate and master's work, as well as completed a program at Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan. Nengudi was active in the avant-garde Black art scenes in Los Angeles and New York during the 1960s and 1970s, and was a member of the Studio Z Collective. She is best known for her *R.S.V.P. (Répondez s'il vous plaît) Series* featuring pantyhose, which she began in 1975. Nengudi is the recipient of several awards and honors, including an election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2020. In this interview, Nengudi discusses her family and childhood in both Chicago and Los Angeles; early exposure to art and interest in dance; arts education at California State University, Los Angeles, including professors and curriculum; attending Waseda University and interest in Japanese art and culture; artistic influences, including dancer Katherine Dunham; collaboration with other artists such as Houston Conwill, David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, and Ulysses Jenkins; work with Studio Z Collective and Othervisions Studios, as well as the CETA (Comprehensive Employment Training Act) Program through Brockman Gallery; Black art scene in Los Angeles and New York in the 1960s and 1970s, including artists and galleries; marriage and family; moving to Colorado Springs, Colorado, in 1990 and work promoting the arts, including establishing the community gallery ARTSpace; memorable pieces and performances, including *Freeway Fets*, *R.S.V.P.*, and *Bulemia*; honors and awards; and reflections on past projects and overall artistic career.

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## Interview 1: September 4, 2020

01-00:00:00

Tewes: This is the first interview with Senga Nengudi for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative [in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley]. The interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes on September 4, 2020. And Ms. Nengudi joins this remote interview from Colorado Springs, Colorado; Dr. Cooks is in Irvine, California; and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thank you all for joining in this conversation today. Bridget, would you start us off with some questions here?

01-00:00:36

Cooks: Yes. I want to start from the very beginning, and so the first question is: when and where were you born?

01-00:00:47

Nengudi: I feel like going into song, you know, [sings] [Cooks laughs] "Born in Alabama, raised in Illinois." Okay, so I was born in Chicago, September 18, 1943. I could be wrong, but I think it was Cook County Hospital. And yes, that's where I was born.

01-00:01:19

Cooks: And you were born Sue Irons. That was your birth name?

01-00:01:22

Nengudi: Yes, yes.

01-00:01:23

Cooks: Okay. And so we want to find out more about your family and your memories of being in Chicago.

01-00:01:34

Nengudi: What—

01-00:01:36

Cooks: I was going to say: what kind of neighborhood did you live in, what kind of community did you grow up in there?

01-00:01:43

Nengudi: Actually, I think I remember my grandmother's address was 6128 South Michigan, and it comes to me on occasion. [laughs] My dad died when I was three years old.

01-00:02:04

I attended a Catholic school, I guess, until maybe the first grade or so, because we moved to California, I think, around 1950-something; maybe '51, '52. I had that early education in a Catholic school, because even though it was then way, way far back, the schools were terrible and my mother wanted to get me into a safer situation. We had a cousin that lived in the outskirts of Chicago, and so we used her address to go to this Catholic school. And it really impressed me,

first of all, because there was a mother superior, who was—you don't really hear much about them anymore, but she was the ultimate mother superior. Ultimate. She would slap your hand with a ruler, and I guess you remember certain things. At that time, they didn't have uniforms like they do today. And so if you wore red or something, they'd say, "Oh, you're the devil today," or something like that. It was very color conscious, in a way. [laughs] One time I brought some cards to school, because my family lived for cards—what is it, not gin rummy, but bid whist. I mean, oh my God! They were so crazy about bid whist. And so I brought these cards to school one day, and unfortunately, they were kind of risqué. And boy, did I get beaten. It just seemed like a normal thing to me, because that's what my family always did. The other thing that I remember about Catholic school is this issue—you had to go to Mass every morning, and seeing the sisters in their habits and smelling the incense, and this issue of ritual and just this grace of ritual, you might say, really stuck with me—a *lot*. And so, even though it was limited, my impressions remained with this Catholic experience.

01-00:04:58

So then when we get to California, we moved to Pasadena first. My mother tried to enroll me in a Catholic school. It didn't work. It was still segregated, so I had to go to a regular public school, which was fine. Lincoln Avenue School in Pasadena. It's no longer there. But that was kind of my first experience directly, I guess you would say, in a sense, with racism. Because even though I was in a Catholic school outside of Chicago, it was still all Black. So—

01-00:05:45

Cooks: I wanted to ask more about your parents' background. Was your father's family Catholic or your mother's family Catholic, or just for the schools you went to the Catholic school?

01-00:05:59

Nengudi: It was just for the school, very much just for the school. My mother and my whole family have always been AME, which is African Methodist Episcopal Church, members, and so that was the family religion. On my father's side, they were Episcopalians. So this whole thing about Catholic school totally had to do with education and safety, yeah.

01-00:06:29

Cooks: And where were your parents from? Do you remember where their families were from and how they met?

01-00:06:38

Nengudi: Well, my mother, when she was one year old, my grandparents moved to Chicago, and that was part of the Great Migration. She was born in Missouri, Festus, Missouri, but immediately they moved to Chicago. It was an interesting move, because my grandmother played the piano and wrote poetry—this is all that was told to me—and she was one of the few people that could read, so she taught school, also. But when she came to Chicago, of

course, that was not happening, so she became—she didn't like the word "domestic"—she was a cook, and she was an exceptional cook. So that was her craft, that was her skill, and she didn't want it included in cleaning or whatever. My grandfather was a chauffeur, and you know, that was it. My grandmother—is anything too long a story? I don't know. My grand—

01-00:07:54

Cooks:

No, not so far! Yeah, we want to hear about your mother's side and your father's side.

01-00:07:59

Nengudi:

So my grandmother worked for Jewish families, and a couple of them were doctors. And so when she got sick, everything was really good, you know, she was able to have that with no issue. She was able to get really good food. This was, I guess, during the—what would that be, in the twenties, what would that be? The Depression. You know, they always had food and everything. She didn't let anybody play with her. She said, boom, "This is it!" [laughs] She was a *tough cookie*. Yeah, so they had everything that they needed during some of those difficult times. And let's see, what else?

01-00:09:03

Cooks:

I was thinking about your father's side of the family, too.

01-00:09:04

Nengudi:

Yes.

01-00:09:05

Cooks:

Were they from Missouri or Chicago?

01-00:09:06

Nengudi:

Well you know, I think somehow originally they were from Florida. My father's side of the family was very, very fair. Well, my [maternal] grandparents had three children: my mother, another daughter, and another son. On my father's side there were thirteen children! Yes, yes. My mother told me that every time [my grandmother] found out she was pregnant, she'd go in a closet and cry, because, you know. But she had thirteen kids, and most of them were very, very fair. My father was one of the darkest kids, and she really cried about that one! [laughs]

01-00:10:03

So, like I said, he passed early. He was in the service, which was fine. But when he got back, he had, oh gosh, a cancer—oh, I can't remember the cancer now. It was really serious. But the thing is, because it was the war—I mean, it was right after the war—and he was Black, they put him in a TB ward, and so it was like a double whammy. They had him in the hallway and all that kind of stuff. And so, he did pass. I really, sadly, don't remember *anything* about him. Except just a couple years ago, I was looking through my stuff, and there was a little booklet that apparently was from him. He said something like, "I love my Susie." It meant so much to me, because I had no real connection with him,

except through memories of the family. And everybody adored him. He was funny and kind and all that kind of stuff. And so he really had a reputation, even though he wasn't here that long. I have a picture of him—let me see, I wonder if I could—

01-00:11:34

Cooks: Yeah, we can wait.

01-00:11:35

Tewes: Do you want to pause? Let's pause.

01-00:11:38

Nengudi: No, no, because I'd have to take this—[moves with computer] can you see?

01-00:11:43

Cooks: Oh. this is great!

01-00:11:45

Tewes: We are looking across the couch at Senga's father, a picture of him.

01-00:11:50

Nengudi: Can you see?

01-00:11:51

Tewes: Yeah.

01-00:11:53

Nengudi: Okay, that's him, walking down Chicago St. [laughs]

01-00:11:58

Cooks: What an amazing picture to have!

01-00:11:59

Nengudi: Yeah, yeah. That's him, and he has all the Irons characteristics.

01-00:12:07

Cooks: [laughs] Yeah.

01-00:12:09

Nengudi: He's a little bit darker than the other families who could—at some point, a couple of them could easily pass, really.

01-00:12:17

Cooks: Yeah.

01-00:12:18

Nengudi: But they did not. And you see the "L" in the back. Can you see the "L" over there? You know what the "L" is?

01-00:12:28

Cooks: The train?

01-00:12:28  
Nengudi:

Yeah.

01-00:12:29  
Cooks:

Yeah, this is great.

01-00:12:32  
Nengudi:

Yeah, so I guess I'll sit here. [moves with computer] So anyway, as I said, my grandmother was pretty intense, pretty intense. I loved her dearly, loved her. But my mother was very calm and quiet and, you know, demure and all that. She had a trip to Berkeley—I did not go, it was a long time ago—and she had such a good time, and she was a person for visualization, so she just decided that she wanted to move to California.

01-00:13:20

I don't know why she didn't decide on—excuse me—on the Bay Area. So we had—boy, stop me if it doesn't seem relevant—but we had cousins that she visited when she was there, and one cousin was my grandmother's first cousin. She was very dark, she was Black, basically, I mean, seriously Black and very beautiful. She married this fellow who was Black, but he looked Jewish, that's how light he was. He was the first Black realtor in Berkeley, so he had a lot of money. They had a farm in Walnut Creek. [laughs] These are the closest-to-rich relatives we had. They had cows and this and that and peacocks. Well, even in their Berkeley home they had peacocks in the yard. They were like out there. They would kill a cow and split it up and give it to people to put in their freezers, and all that kind of stuff.

01-00:14:49

So anyway, that was [my mother's] dream, so she packed up everything. Because my grandmother was very powerful, and it wasn't about going up against her. So to have her own life, she had to move, she had to move as far away as possible.

01-00:15:12  
Cooks:

And, Senga, you're the only child.

01-00:15:13  
Nengudi:

Yeah.

01-00:15:16  
Cooks:

And—

01-00:15:15  
Nengudi:

And she never got [re]married, you know.

01-00:15:19  
Cooks:

Okay. I wanted to know what kind of ambition your mother had to move so far, and what kind of ambitions did the family have for you? Your grandmother, who was so powerful and strong, what did they envision for you, what did they encourage you to do?



01-00:15:40  
Nengudi:

Well, that's a good question. My grandmother, I can't really say she envisioned anything for me. I really don't know. My mother was more—I always felt supported, whatever I wanted to do. I don't even know where my thoughts came from, to be honest. If I try to, you know, try to go back and find the root of it, I really cannot do that. I just, I can't. So my mother, as I was telling Amanda the other day, my mother was very visual. She really believed in visualization, and that was something, I guess, that I inherited or was always—

01-00:16:44  
Cooks:

What does that mean, in terms of your house or like the interior space? But also, what did she do for work after she moved?

01-00:16:52  
Nengudi:

Well, her motivation, like I said, for moving was my grandmother. If she could've moved to outer Alaska, she would have. That was the motivation: get out of town. And because she was a very kind of elegant, graceful person—you know, the California way of life, especially then, was quite different than Chicago life.

01-00:17:29

She'd send me on a train every summer to visit my grandmother, and my grandmother—now I know, it was probably because she was trying to find things for me to do—she would send me to the store all day long: "Well, go get a carton of milk." "Well, go get a candy bar." "Well, go get a—this." It would always be a trip that was like maybe one or two items. In the olden days, everybody trusted everybody, so she'd send me to the corner store, and she'd say, "Tell Mr. Mullen to put that on my tab," that sort of thing. But I had to walk over drunks in the street, you know? [laughs] I'll never forget. I had to literally walk over these drunks to get to the store. So it wasn't the best atmosphere. You know, she had a beautiful house, she had a beautiful apartment and all that sort of thing. But Chicago is Chicago, even today. They can polish it up and all that.

01-00:18:48  
Cooks:

You were talking about your mother being someone who had a great sense of vision or—is that like beauty or design? And how did that become part of your life at that age?

01-00:19:04  
Nengudi:

Yeah, she was. People often ask me about, you know, was there anyone in my family that was an artist or anything like that? And there was not. I mean, really, there was not. [laughs] I was talking—you are Amanda, right? Thank you. Okay, I was talking to Amanda, and I was telling her that I had an uncle, I guess a great uncle. He was my grandmother's sister's husband. I remember him giving me a little art/paint box. But in his home, that was the only art I had ever seen. In his home, he had these paintings, which you're too young, I think, to remember. But anyway, it used to be the thing where they would have these velvet paintings with these dogs playing—

01-00:20:13

Cooks: Poker! Yeah. I think we know that, that image is a famous image. Yeah.

01-00:20:17

Nengudi: Yeah, yeah. So he would have stuff like that. That's the closest I got to that, to a painting.

01-00:20:26

Cooks: So that didn't have much influence on you, the dogs playing poker?

01-00:20:32

Nengudi: [laughs] No.

01-00:20:33

Cooks: That's hilarious.

01-00:20:34

Nengudi: I know. But my mother, she was very, very, very conscious of the home and making something home, and so she would decorate the house. And then, say like three years later, she would repaint the walls, she would change the upholstery, she would do all those kinds of things. She was very aesthetically aware, as well as needing a particular beauty in her home to feel good. She liked to give parties, she liked to entertain, she loved—which was, I guess, the thing then—she had little dishes for everything, for crab salad, whatever, you know what I mean? I guess the thing that impressed me most was it was never about money. She would gather these beautiful things—china and silver, silverware, all those kinds of things—and she—[laughs] I told Amanda—she would have these parties. She'd [say], "Well, we have to have a party." The money was low, but she would have beans and rice, but she'd serve them in china and she'd serve them in silver containers. And corn bread, of course. [Cooks laughs] But always, no matter what, she'd serve champagne with it. So it was really important, yes.

01-00:22:35

Cooks: Wow!

01-00:22:34

Nengudi: Yeah.

01-00:22:36

Cooks: It seems like, well, she was really enjoying life. No matter the economic condition you were in—

01-00:22:46

Nengudi: Yeah, yeah.

01-00:22:47

Cooks: Did you feel like you didn't have much money or did you feel like you all were doing really great?

01-00:22:55  
Nengudi:

Well, the only time I felt the money pinch was during Christmas. I would always be a little bit ashamed, because everybody at school would talk about all the gifts that they got for Christmas. You know, they'd go down the list—all these gifts. And she would always make a good Christmas for me, but it was nothing in comparison to all these other kids. There was always a little something, but she always did her best. She would do stuff like I'd be at home alone and someone would tap at the door, like a bill collector, and so I'd say, "Oh, you know, they said they're going to turn off the gas, they're going to turn off the lights." And so she says, [imitates mother's voice] "Well, dear, let me speak to them." And so she'd speak to them, and magically they'd go away. I always thought she was so magical, that she could make people disappear. She was always calm, always, "Well, darling, let's do it this way." I mean, that's kind of how she talked. Nothing ever riled her, I never saw her cry. You know, I think it's part of the generation, that you'd do what you had to do.

01-00:24:25

She would take me on these shopping trips, literally window shopping, and we would window shop for hours. We would go in the store, and she would never buy anything. We would be in there until the store would close. I said, "Oh"—you know how the bells ring when they're getting ready to close the store—I said, "Oh, we have to get out of here." "That's all right, dear, no worries. They're not going to—" you know, it was like, oh. [gestures like sweeping troubles away] It was like a computer. She was constantly putting in this information and forming a dream of what she wanted. You know, she was basically science of mind, and she just like, [gestures like inputting information] that's it. I'm visualizing this, I see this, this is what I want, and I will get it in due time. And so that was kind of the mentality that I grew up with.

01-00:25:36

Cooks: So, Senga, would you do things like look at clothes?

01-00:25:40

Nengudi: Yes.

01-00:25:40

Cooks: Did she sew? Did she then go home and make things that she saw in the stores?

01-00:25:45

Nengudi: Yes, yes.

01-00:25:46

Cooks: Wow.

01-00:25:46

Nengudi: But also, you know, I felt very privileged, because I was one of the few kids at Halloween that got an actual—I had actual handmade costumes. I mean, real—like, say, a princess costume. It wouldn't be like Walmart or something like that; it would just be something that was actually sewn. But yes, she was

really gifted with all of that, the cooking and all that sort of thing, sewing and—

01-00:26:34

Cooks: And did she cook and sew for other people for a living, or what did she do for money?

01-00:26:36

Nengudi: No. Actually, one of her earlier jobs was to work at—I think it was called Dorothy Thorpe, and it was—you know Bullocks? Are you familiar?

01-00:26:49

Cooks: Yeah.

01-00:26:49

Nengudi: Okay, well, back in the day, Bullocks was everything.

01-00:26:52

Cooks: Bullocks Wilshire, yes. [laughs]

01-00:26:55

Nengudi: Yes, Bullocks Wilshire. And she worked in the glass section, the crystal section.

01-00:27:03

Cooks: Oh wow!

01-00:27:02

Nengudi: You know, that was one of her things. I didn't visit her often, because I'm like a bull in a china shop. [laughs] Again, she's absorbing all of this information. But she ultimately became an escrow officer, and she did that most of her adult life.

01-00:27:26

Cooks: Okay, and we wanted to also know about you going to school. Do you remember what grade you started when you first moved out to California?

01-00:27:38

Nengudi: You know, I really think it was second grade.

01-00:27:39

Cooks: Okay, so very young.

01-00:27:43

Nengudi: Yes, and we would bounce back and forth from Pasadena to Los Angeles—excuse me—but in both instances I was really accustomed to diversity. There were not that many white kids, but there were Chinese kids, Korean kids, Latino kids, you know, you name it. I really grew up in a very rich, diverse community. I went to Lincoln Avenue School in Pasadena. That was really influential for me. I love Pasadena to this day, I love Pasadena. [Cooks laughs] Some of my best experiences happened in Pasadena.

01-00:28:41

Cooks: Did they happen when you were a kid growing up, that you have these great memories of Pasadena?

01-00:28:47

Nengudi: Yeah!

01-00:28:47

Cooks: Yeah.

01-00:28:48

Nengudi: Yeah, my mother worked all the time, and so she found this couple that were kind of like play grandparents to me, and so I would—Mr. and Mrs. Redd, Claudia and Walter Redd. And Mr. Redd, I would sit with him for hours and look at cowboy movies and all that kind of thing. And then Mrs. Redd, even when I was a teenager, their back door was always open. They always had ice cream in the freezer. [laughs] So even as a teenager, way since I moved from Pasadena, I knew I could go there at night and I'd have a bed, I'd have—so they were really influential, to the point where my husband really looks like Mr. Redd, he's physically the same.

01-00:29:53

Cooks: Really!

01-00:29:52

Nengudi: The same temperament. To this day, I'm so glad that I had that experience, because again, I visualized who I wanted as a mate, because it was really important. And my mother, even though she never got married, she had plenty of boyfriends. Somehow she always had me in an environment where the men were positive and there were positive married couples as roles. Some of her friends were very amazing, and they were couples, my godparents, and so on and so forth. So that was really incredibly important in my upbringing, that I had these amazing mentors, as well as role models.

01-00:30:54

Cooks: Wow, did you ever have any other family move to California, or your mom just came out on her own and then created this community for you?

01-00:31:03

Nengudi: Later on, after she was very well established much later on, my uncle on my father's side, my—he adored my father, they were close in age and they were brothers—he moved out. And then, oh gosh, years later [laughs] my grandparents moved out, and she goes, Oy, oy, oy. [hits head and laughs]

01-00:31:30

Cooks: Oh my goodness! Okay. [laughs]

01-00:31:33

Nengudi: So they moved out. Yeah, so they moved out slowly, but it was just us for the longest time. I would say up until the seventies, it was just us—related to family, that is.

01-00:31:55

And let's see, what else? Oh yeah, so I went to the worst—what I feel is the worst junior high school in all of America. [laughs]

01-00:32:07

Cooks: Okay, what school was that?

01-00:32:08

Nengudi: Foshay Junior High.

01-00:32:11

Cooks: Okay. Foshay's still around, yeah.

01-00:32:13

Nengudi: Yeah, I know it is. It's off of Jefferson and Western, I think. That school was so bad. Oh my God, I don't even know how I survived. But again, it was very multicultural. I'm trying to think—there were a couple of very famous jazz musicians that did, what do you call them, assemblies and so on and so forth. I don't know, maybe the principal or somebody knew these people and made sure—or maybe he was a jazz fan or something. But it was very intense, very, very intense.

01-00:33:01

Cooks: So the schools were segregated, so there were—were there any white kids at Foshay or was it—oh okay, it was.

01-00:33:10

Nengudi: There were a couple.

01-00:33:11

Cooks: But it was Catholic schools that—you couldn't go into the Catholic schools.

01-00:33:13

Nengudi: Right.

01-00:33:14

Cooks: Okay.

01-00:33:16

Nengudi: Right, right. In the Catholic school, yeah, yeah. They weren't integrating at all. But these were public schools. Foshay is a public school, and so there were a few white kids in there, but, boy, did they get it. [laughs] You know, it was just such a bad school. And curiously enough, that was my experience. I had a friend who I met later who also went to Foshay, I found out, at the same time. But her experience was totally different, because she had what was the equivalent then of AP school, you know, AP classes.

01-00:33:59

Cooks: Okay.

01-00:34:01

Nengudi: And so she wasn't exposed to the rough and tough kind of experience I was having, because I was in regular classes. There would be stuff like kids would steal your gym clothes and everybody had to stay after school until the gym clothes were found. [laughs] And then the teachers were just as bad! Some of the teachers would be making out as we're—like we're in gym, out on the field, and they're making out in the inside gym. And then you know, a couple of teachers wound up pregnant. That place was so intense.

01-00:34:54

Cooks: Oh my gosh, it sounds like a soap opera.

01-00:34:57

Nengudi: It was. It was sort of like—well, you probably aren't familiar with this story, this movie, but *Blackboard Jungle* was a movie with Sidney Poitier, and that's what it was like. They would throw tomatoes at the teachers and oh.

01-00:35:17

Cooks: Okay, well, it sounds like you're lucky to have survived. Was there any exposure to art, any influential teachers that you had at that time?

01-00:35:28

Nengudi: In junior high school? I know I took some art classes. I found some of the teachers very interesting. They had several Black teachers, and one was the first—I think she taught home ec[onomics], and she was like the first Black home ec teacher in LA or something.

01-00:35:56

Cooks: Okay.

01-00:35:57

Nengudi: And then there was a beautiful Black teacher. I think she taught math, and everybody adored her because she was so attractive and she dressed so well, and it was really important, you know, to see that role model. I had this math teacher. She said, "I'm going to tell you like it is." And she was pretty fair, you know, light skinned, but she wore a lot of heavy light makeup. She said, "I want to tell you guys what is what." I think she was a math teacher, too. She says, "If you have two cups of milk, and you put one drop of coffee in it, what is it?" You know, of course we said—and so she said, "Well, this is the real deal here, that is: you have one drop of coffee, you are considered Black if it's just one drop." You know, this is a class lesson! It was really interesting. We had a lot of Black teachers, and each one, you know, had their own spin on things. So—

01-00:37:17

Cooks: And then, Senga, from there you went to Dorsey High School, where there's—

- 01-00:37:21  
Nengudi: I did, I did.
- 01-00:37:22  
Cooks: —so many accomplished people—
- 01-00:37:23  
Nengudi: Oh yeah, oh yeah.
- 01-00:37:25  
Cooks: —went to Dorsey. It's still a very central educational institution in the public schools in LA.
- 01-00:37:31  
Nengudi: Yeah.
- 01-00:37:32  
Cooks: Did you have any more art experiences there? Because we're wanting to talk about how you became *you*, sort of step by step.
- 01-00:37:45  
Nengudi: Yeah.
- 01-00:37:46  
Cooks: And things that you were exposed to.
- 01-00:37:47  
Nengudi: Okay, so going back to elementary school—and I still have it somewhere—I made a little clay dog. They had an assembly, and you know how they have somebody from science, somebody from art, somebody from this and that? Well, I was on this little panel where I had to talk about my art, which is—you know, I do that now! So I had to talk in front—and very nervous—talk about my little dog that I had made out of clay. So yes, I've always—it's just like breathing. It's always been art and dance. Mostly sculpture, clay—not clay, but three dimensional. Is it bad for me to constantly say, "I was telling Amanda," because I went over some of this. Okay.
- 01-00:38:48  
Cooks: No, because I didn't hear it, so no one else has heard it. So please tell us!
- 01-00:38:52  
Nengudi: Okay, all right. So back in the day, when you went downtown, you had to wear gloves and you had to wear a dress, that sort of thing. And so that's on Broadway, and now those stores aren't there, but it was like—Broadway, yeah.
- 01-00:39:17  
Cooks: Yeah, Broadway the store?
- 01-00:39:18  
Nengudi: Yes.



01-00:39:19

Cooks: Yeah.

01-00:39:19

Nengudi: And Bullocks, and so on.

01-00:39:20

Cooks: Yeah.

01-00:39:21

Nengudi: So anyway, we went down. We would do that periodically. That would be our big thing. We went to a place called Clifton's Cafe[teria], and Clifton's was amazing. I loved it, because it was a cafeteria, and they had all kinds of food that you could choose from. There's a new Clifton's Cafe—they tried to bring it back, but I don't think they could ever duplicate the original. And so there's always on that corner—I'm sure even now—there would always be someone talking about the world was going to end, and they had, you know, that sandwich board that would have like a biblical saying or number on it. And so they were going to town.

01-00:40:12

But inside, the fellow that owned it was very involved with Christianity, and I guess he was a super-duper Christian. So in the, I guess in the Hollywood style, because everything, even though you're not in Hollywood, has this Hollywood bigness about it. He had all over the place—there was like three levels, and he had these false kind of entrances to catacombs, like it would be in Israel or Palestine or something. They never led to anything, but it alluded to the Christians, early Christians, and so on and so forth. I had to go to the bathroom, so I go to the bathroom in the basement, and there is this life-size—it looked bigger than life, but I guess maybe it feels like I was about twelve years old—and there's this life-size Jesus right there, and I go, "Wow!" And it was so inviting. You could sit on his lap, just like Santa Claus or somebody.

01-00:41:36

Cooks: Okay.

01-00:41:36

Nengudi: You could sit on his lap, and it was the best experience for me, and I really—I was telling Amanda—I really felt some kind of connection with this issue of three dimensions, that you can feel something, you can be even embraced by something that's three dimensional. I really felt like that was the deal for me. That really, somehow, I wanted to do three-dimensional things, as opposed to paper.

01-00:42:14

Cooks: Senga, that's an incredible story—

01-00:42:18

Nengudi: Yeah.

01-00:42:18

Cooks: —that you had this encounter with a Jesus sculpture! [laughs] And then you become who you are.

01-00:42:26

Nengudi: Yeah, yeah. And who knows, maybe I would have done it anyway. But I mean, it was such a—I guess you could call it a visceral experience, but it was like, oh so solid an experience. Yeah.

01-00:42:47

Cooks: And you were young, but you weren't so impressionable at five or six years old; you were really almost a teenager, so you're aware.

01-00:42:57

Nengudi: Yeah, right. Exactly.

01-00:42:59

Cooks: That's fascinating.

01-00:43:00

Nengudi: Yeah.

01-00:43:00

Cooks: You know, when you did your presentation on that little sculpture in elementary school, did you get positive feedback, did people like it?

01-00:43:09

Nengudi: I don't know.

01-00:43:11

Cooks: No?

01-00:43:11

Nengudi: I'm sure they did, I'm sure—you know, I didn't have tomatoes thrown at me, so that says something.

01-00:43:19

Cooks: [laughs] That's it, yeah.

01-00:43:22

Nengudi: Yeah.

01-00:43:23

Cooks: And so when you went to Dorsey, was there an opportunity to take art classes or to focus on sculpture or dance? How did dance also become part of your life?

01-00:43:34

Nengudi: Well, I have to kind of give the climate of Dorsey. When I moved there, it was sort of like Catholic school. After that experience at—

01-00:43:51

Cooks: Foshay?

01-00:43:51  
Nengudi:

At Foshay, yeah. I felt like I barely escaped. My mother figured out Dorsey, and I had a friend that was going to Dorsey, and so we figured that out, and so I was able to use someone else's address. They were very strict at that point. They would check your address and all that kind of stuff. There were not that many Black kids going at that time. And there were—excuse me—have you ever seen Dorsey?

01-00:44:35  
Cooks:

I have, yeah.

01-00:44:35  
Nengudi:

Okay, so there are these quads. It's kind of divided into triangles. And so at that point, there was a Black triangle, there was a mixed triangle where all kids went, then there was a senior triangle where only the seniors could go, and there was one other kind of triangle. But anyway, it was so funny, because then everybody was cool, you know? And so there were sororities and fraternities already in place there. Yes. And you know, the guys would have suits on, and they'd have an attaché case, and they would line up, stand sort of like along the wall there. And then they'd have what they'd call woofing sessions. And in the East, they call them—let's see, what do they call it. Oh God. Oh, playing the dozens.

01-00:45:49  
Cooks:

Oh, yes.

01-00:45:50  
Nengudi:

So they'd have these woofing sessions. The girls could not participate, it would just be the guys. "Your mamma is so big—" so they would keep that going until it would get down, boil down to just two people. I mean, there'd be a large group of guys, and they'd keep going, going, going [back and forth] until there's just two, and they'd have to outwoof each other. So it was really very cultural, very interesting.

01-00:46:25

But as more Black people, more Black students were there, the white teachers—they had a superior class of teachers—staff, I should say—of teachers, and they transferred out. It was really strongly Jewish, because after—if it was a Jewish holiday, there'd be nobody in class. [laughs] You know, there'd just be a few of us sitting there in class. Like, the Jewish families, the parents would call down to the Board of Education and say, "This, this, and that," and then it would happen. Pow! And so, we had one teacher, Señor Brown. He was Black, and he taught French and Spanish. But you know, it was really interesting how quickly white flight—it happened. It just kind of flipped; from the time I arrived there as a freshman to the time I graduated, the demographics changed dramatically.

01-00:47:44

I basically lived in the Art Department and the Dance Department. We didn't have any real dance teachers, per se, but Mrs. Pleasant was a Black PE teacher who taught dance, so yes. We did concerts and things like that. And then, gosh, I cannot remember, oh dear, the name of our art teacher. But ultimately, Dale Davis now has had her position. So it's fascinating. Dale was younger, so it was—Alonzo Davis was kind of in my group. And yeah, I lived in the Art Department, I lived in the Art Department. You know, we thought we were all that. On the weekends we would go down to Hermosa Beach to hear jazz and go on Sunset Strip to hear jazz. Some places we were too young to go in, so there was—what's the name of that place—the Lighthouse [Café] in Hermosa Beach.

01-00:49:02

Cooks: Yes, yes.

01-00:49:02

Nengudi: You know, they had a door, kind of a Dutch door that would open, and so we would stand outside and listen to the musicians and so on. So yeah, that was my crew. I guess we were kind of beatnikish, beatnik kind of generation. Some of my friends were really wanting to be in sororities and stuff, and that just really wasn't quite my style. I really, I really loved art. Between junior high and high school, I really—of course, I've always loved libraries, and so I would really study things like Greek mythology and other kinds of things like that. Later on, which I was never exposed to, because they'd never tell you anything in school, I realized the relationship or the structure of, say like Yoruba, that there are different gods and so on and so forth. I don't think I even realized that there was a Harlem Renaissance until I went to New York. I was never, ever exposed to Black art history or basically Black history, period. So I mean, it's like a gap that they just don't—so it's unfortunate.

01-00:50:46

Cooks: So when you were at Dorsey, do you remember any artists that you became aware of that were really influential dancers that you were watching or—

01-00:50:59

Nengudi: Yeah.

01-00:50:59

Cooks: I'm trying to think about how you were learning all of those things, because some things you have to teach yourself. But then when you were at Dorsey, what kinds of things were you exposed to in those fields?

01-00:51:12

Nengudi: You know, I loved modern dance, so people like Martha Graham, and, oh gosh, even some of the pioneers of modern dance. I was really taken with the freedom of movement. Katherine Dunham was really important, and Pearl Primus. That was really important, the two of them were quite role models for Black dancers. And I took dance at Lester Horton Studios, which was on

Melrose—no, was it? I can't remember where it was, but it was in that area. So those people that I took with ultimately moved to New York to create the Alvin Ailey Company, dance company.

01-00:52:16

Cooks: Okay.

01-00:52:18

Nengudi: Carmen de Lavallade didn't teach there, but her sister, Yvonne [de Lavallade], I think her name was, or Yolanda—it was either Yvonne or Yolanda—was there, and James Truitte, who was one of the main Alvin Ailey dancers. So we took Lester Horton technique—Lester Horton had died at that point, but that's where I took dance. I was really pretty serious about it, but it was just really very special. I took ballet as a younger child, but I was always chubby. So my aunt went to see me once and she said, "How are you doing that?" Because I would lean on the barre, you know? I had a very strict Russian ballet instructor. She had a stick and all that. And so there was always this love of dance, always.

01-00:53:32

Cooks: You were studying dance in high school, but then you were taking classes on the weekends?

01-00:53:38

Nengudi: Yes. Yeah, I'm sure it was, or in the evenings or something.

01-00:53:41

Cooks: Okay.

01-00:53:43

Nengudi: They had a pretty good dance program at—what do you call it—a public, oh gosh.

01-00:53:57

Cooks: At another high school or a—

01-00:54:01

Nengudi: No, it wasn't a high school. It was a [recreation center].

01-00:54:05

Cooks: We'll put it in later, yeah.

01-00:54:06

Nengudi: Okay. It was around Jefferson. But anyway, the desire was always there, and I don't know where that came from, because absolutely no one in my family—absolutely no one—dealt with dance at all, and particularly that type of dance.

01-00:54:31

Cooks: Okay.

- 01-00:54:31  
Nengudi: So genuinely, I do not know where it comes from.
- 01-00:54:37  
Cooks: Okay, and what about—I was thinking about LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] or thinking about museums and the art you were learning about in high school that you were making, or any exhibitions you saw that were influential at that time.
- 01-00:54:53  
Nengudi: Yeah, in high school?
- 01-00:54:56  
Cooks: Yeah, in high school.
- 01-00:54:58  
Nengudi: I'm trying to think.
- 01-00:55:03  
Cooks: Do you remember any artworks that you made in high school that you really were proud of?
- 01-00:55:07  
Nengudi: Yeah, I do. I did some—
- 01-00:55:10  
Cooks: What were those?
- 01-00:55:11  
Nengudi: I did silkscreen. I really liked doing silkscreen pieces.
- 01-00:55:24  
Cooks: Were they still lifes?
- 01-00:55:24  
Nengudi: Printmaking.
- 01-00:55:26  
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-00:55:28  
Nengudi: Yeah.
- 01-00:55:28  
Cooks: Still lifes or people, figurative art?
- 01-00:55:31  
Nengudi: People, people. My mother, my grandmother, you know? Yeah, people that were significant to me. Yeah. Of course, they had models that would come in and so on. I'm trying to think of an art exhibit that, in high school, that had significance. It's always been a deal between art and dance with me, and I really remember more of my dance experiences and influences, and so on.

God, I don't know where I—honest to God, I'm trying to think. I watched a lot of TV.

01-00:56:23

Cooks: [laughs] Okay.

01-00:56:24

Nengudi: Because you know, that was my babysitter. Now, you know, they plop kids in front of a computer. Well then, they plopped kids in front of a TV, and so more now than then—I mean, more then than now, they had old movies going all the time. Like Cary Grant and this person and all those super—Elizabeth Taylor and so on. So you were exposed to a different kind of movie then, and so I learned a lot—actually I learned a lot more from that than I did in class sometimes. [laughs] You know, about social structure and a number of things.

01-00:57:21

Cooks: And there are some great dancers in movies at that time, too. Yeah.

01-00:57:25

Nengudi: Absolutely. Yeah, like Katherine Dunham, you know, she was fantastic! She was very involved with Haiti, so the exposure to that type of dance and so on, that was really big. I mean, really, TV played a strong kind of almost mentoring role or—because really, I learned language, in a sense. My English classes were terrible. You know what I'm saying? I learned culture from movies, and then, you know, you learn negative things, too. I mean, how can you have Tarzan, and you have the natives with watches on? [laughs] And you know, having to do these roles, you don't know anybody like that. Yeah, it taught me a lot.

01-00:58:38

Cooks: Okay. It's interesting, too, because you're watching movies and a lot of those things are really made right down the street, you know?

01-00:58:47

Nengudi: Exactly, just right down the street.

01-00:58:48

Cooks: So yeah, it's really interesting. Clifton's, like you said, is kind of these theatrical sets, the way that it's constructed inside. I think growing up in LA, maybe there's a blend between what you see on TV and what you're actually seeing in your public life.

01-00:59:09

Nengudi: Right, right!

01-00:59:11

Cooks: Yeah.

- 01-00:59:12  
Nengudi: I loved libraries. I mean, I still do. And I worked—this was in college—I worked at the Downtown branch of the library.
- 01-00:59:24  
Cooks: Oh wow!
- 01-00:59:25  
Nengudi: And in the basement, you know, it was like an old Egyptian set. Just huge Egyptian-like sculptures and so on. They filmed the first *Ghostbusters* down there. [laughs]
- 01-00:59:47  
Cooks: Wow.
- 01-00:59:49  
Nengudi: Yeah, it was great. I loved the library. There's no one more unique than people that come to the library. [laughs] So I really loved it. I've always loved libraries.
- 01-01:00:01  
Cooks: So, Senga, when did you decide to go to college? Did you know, I just want to, I love libraries, I love learning, I want to go? And did you go right after high school?
- 01-01:00:14  
Nengudi: I did. I went right after high school. I mean, there was no question, I just went. But I wanted to go to—even though I had the grades to go to Cal State, I wanted to go to PCC, because at that point, they had the best—well, PCC and LACC, but I wanted to go to—you know, I love Pasadena, because they had an exceptional Art Department there.
- 01-01:00:45  
Cooks: Okay, and I'm just going to tell everybody it's Pasadena City College.
- 01-01:00:47  
Nengudi: Yes, Pasadena City College. So I go to Pasadena—
- 01-01:00:51  
Cooks: Okay, which is still a great school.
- 01-01:00:54  
Nengudi: Yes, it is.
- 01-01:00:54  
Cooks: It's still a very strong school, so you're part of that lineage.
- 01-01:00:57  
Nengudi: Yes, I have a friend that teaches dance there.
- 01-01:01:03  
Cooks: Oh. [laughs]



- 01-01:01:05  
Nengudi: Isn't that interesting?
- 01-01:01:06  
Cooks: Yeah.
- 01-01:01:08  
Nengudi: Cheryl Banks[-Smith].
- 01-01:01:08  
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-01:01:10  
Nengudi: I met her in New York. She used to dance with Sun Ra. But she was born in LA, so she came back to LA. So anyway, yeah, so I was very excited about going to PCC. Well again, they had the address situation in place. I lived in Los Angeles. I used someone's address, and they weren't having it. And they just flushed as many people as possible out of there; most of them were Black. Therefore I said, "Well, whatever." So I spent a half a semester there, and then I transferred to Cal State LA.
- 01-01:01:59  
Tewes: This was in 1962?
- 01-01:02:01  
Nengudi: Yes.
- 01-01:02:02  
Tewes: Okay.
- 01-01:02:05  
Cooks: And you knew immediately what you were going to study? You were going to be a dance major? Or was it an art major or fine arts, or was it specifically dance?
- 01-01:02:15  
Nengudi: I wasn't really sure. I did not know immediately. It was between dance and art, and I made my final decision, because I said, "Well you know, if I go with being a dance major, I'm only—it's a physical thing. I'm only going to have my—if I'm really good, I'll only have my moment in the sun for a little while, and then that's the end of that. But if I'm an artist, I can do that until the day I die." And so that's why I decided to go with art. I had an art major and a dance minor.
- 01-01:03:00  
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-01:03:01  
Nengudi: And while I was there—this is not well known—I danced in a couple of musicals. [laughs]

01-01:03:11

Cooks: Oh wow. Which ones?

01-01:03:14

Nengudi: I think *Bells Are Ringing*, something like that. It was somebody—Judy Holliday was her name? No, no. I can't remember the Broadway star that did it. But yeah, so I did that. And also, of course, studied modern dance. I remember Ruth St. Denis—she had to be 103 years old, because she was one of the founders of modern dance. She was very old, but she had this amazing red cape, and I remember us following her like little ducklings. She was so grand and just wonderful. I had a lot of wonderful dance memories there. Jan Day was a very influential person in my life. She was the head of the Dance Department there and responsible for bringing a lot of really fine dancers—Murray Louis, who was part of Alvin Ailey dance company. And there was a general feeling—like Alvin Ailey and Murray Louis—you know, kind of not fully in the John Cage camp, but sort of the equivalent in dance. And so I really had some super-duper, wonderful memories of dance, yeah.

01-01:04:58

Cooks: And, Senga, did those people come to campus, or those people came to Los Angeles and you saw them off campus?

01-01:05:06

Nengudi: Murray Louis did a dance workshop every summer.

01-01:05:12

Cooks: Wow.

01-01:05:12

Nengudi: So he was there. Alvin Ailey never came out, but he was a part—are you familiar with them?

01-01:05:20

Cooks: I'm familiar with Alvin Ailey, and I'm familiar with some of the other names, but I would have to find some video to see what they actually have—yes.

01-01:05:30

Nengudi: Yeah, Murray Louis was actually the head dancer and choreographer for the Alvin Ailey Dance Company. Yeah. And even what attracted me then was the visual aspect of Alvin Ailey. He did a lot of incredible installations, sets for the dances, and that was—click, click, click—that was really important to me, this sense of installation and multimedia presentations.

01-01:06:10

Cooks: So when did you start seeing that kind of dance? Were there places in Los Angeles where you were, also, off campus, going to see these more theatrical performances, or was it later in New York where you see Alvin Ailey performing and all of his corps?

01-01:06:28  
Nengudi:

Well, UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] had a lot of stuff. I went to see like John Cage there, and just amazing. Halfway through the performance, most of the audience left, because the musicians were not playing. They had their instruments, but they were sitting—I'll never forget this—sitting down in kind of a bed—not bedroom, but living room setting, and they were doing nothing. The audience couldn't take that, so off they go. There were a lot of very influential art shows at UCLA, which I recall a Matisse show that was brilliant, a Picasso show.

01-01:10:29

There was also—and this was very significant for me—there was also an African show. And I really became aware of the role of the curator and how important that is for the flow, for the audience to get a full experience. You know, usually they have everything in glass and so on and on pedestals. Well this exhibit, as I recall, there were some pieces that were not in glass, and they were so close together that you almost had to brush against them. And you could smell what it was made out of: the fabric and the wood, and so on and so forth. And that was as impressionable as me sitting on Jesus's lap. [laughs] And you know, you could smell—I mean, it was fascinating. You could smell it, and they never let you do that. Again, it was close enough where you were kind of rubbing up—not fully rubbing up against it, but you really had as full an experience as you could have in those circumstances, of the power and the energy coming off of these sculptures.

01-01:09:03

Cooks: And that was a show you saw at UCLA?

01-01:09:04

Nengudi: Yes.

01-01:09:05

Cooks: Interesting.

01-01:09:06

Nengudi: Yeah. I don't know when it was.

01-01:09:10

Cooks: You know, I wanted to ask you about your experience with John Cage. You were saying that in this particular concert half the audience left halfway through. Can you even articulate why you stayed? What was it about that kind of art form that appealed to you? What made you different from half of the audience, that you were loving it?

01-01:09:34

Nengudi: I was fascinated with his approach, that he was taking a totally different approach than the regular, and I really didn't like the regular. I really was looking for, I guess, the irregular. I was really looking for a newness, a breaking through of what is the norm. I really wanted to sit there and see really what he was saying, really what he was trying to—this approach he was

trying to make. He really fascinates me. This whole issue of almost—well actually, in dance, too, this thing of pedestrian sound and pedestrian movement.

01-01:10:39

When my kids were young, we lived on Twenty-Fourth St., Twenty-Fourth St. between Western and Arlington. That's a really important area, because Eric Dolphy and the Mills Brothers, and all these old musicians were there, because they couldn't—at that point, early on, when they got their houses—that was before we were in the area—they couldn't move to Beverly Hills. They had the money, they had the prestige, but they couldn't move. So this was Sugar Hill. And this is an aside: Marvin Gaye's parents lived down the street, and I remember when his dad killed him. You know, it had a lot of history, a lot of history.

01-01:11:43

And so just down the way, with my usual morning walk, there's a library—I think it's called the Clark Library, and it's off of Adams and close to Western, and it's actually owned—well, whoever had it originally willed it to UCLA. One side it's the library, and on the other side there's a Buddhist center across the street. And so the story goes, this library is sort of like a mini villa—it's beautiful and they have books there, rare books, and you have to be a scholar to even get in there. But the story goes that this villa was the party house of this millionaire, and he had his concubines or whatever across the street, which is now the Zen Center. [laughs] So it has a fun history.

01-01:12:50

But anyway, again [laughs] it added to my visual sense, because at that point—well, I certainly had gone to Japan, but I hadn't—yeah, I guess I went to some of the others, in Europe. But anyway, it was like being in Italy. So again, this visual of fantasizing what it's like to be in Italy or something like that. I would go around the grounds, and there'd be a little cove there where they would have—at certain points they'd have quartets, string quartets and so on. When it wasn't being used, it was just kind of like a cove. So I would listen to the birds and I would dance to the sound of the birds. And that's kind of a John Cagean kind of thing to do. And so really, that's kind of been my sensibility all along, to just hear these sounds and take them in as composition, musical composition. I don't play an instrument or anything like that, but I really resonated with John Cage's approach.

01-01:14:24

Cooks: I'm so glad that we heard you answer that question, that's really insightful. I guess I would ask, then, about the kind of work that you were making, because you were an art major when you were at Cal State LA, a minor in dance. What kind of art were you making during those years?

01-01:14:45  
Nengudi: I was very interested in, again, printmaking, silkscreening, and sculpture. Yeah, that was my main thing. I had a really great sculpture teacher who I cannot remember—I mean, his name. I did a variety of things. I resonated, again, pretty much with sculpture and printmaking. I was horrible with fiber arts. [laughs] And I liked drawing, and I—you know, I wasn't particular about painting, and of course I did painting, but I don't know what it was. Even silkscreening, there's a certain physicality related to printmaking, woodblock printing, and all that. There's a certain physicality to that.

01-01:15:42  
Cooks: And the sculpture, were you making work out of clay? Were you working in ceramics or wood?

01-01:15:50  
Nengudi: Stone.

01-01:15:51  
Cooks: You were working in stone!

01-01:15:55  
Nengudi: Yeah, limestone, and so in sculpture work, yeah.

01-01:15:57  
Cooks: Well, tell us about that! I mean, you were strong.

01-01:16:00  
Nengudi: Yeah.

01-01:16:00  
Cooks: I think you have to be physically strong to dance, and then you're working in stone.

01-01:16:06  
Nengudi: Yeah, I guess. I've never considered myself super physically strong, but I guess there's something about needing a certain kind of physicality. I don't think I did much with wood, but I really preferred stone as opposed to clay, because I found clay gives in too much, in a sense. You know with stone, you're carving away, and it's there; but with clay, it kind of gets wobbly and all that kind of stuff. And ceramics was a very popular course. I never had ceramics, because it was always full. But with clay, you know, I guess it just was too yielding for me. So yeah.

01-01:17:06  
Cooks: Were you making abstract works or figurative works from stone?

01-01:17:12  
Nengudi: Figurative. Yeah, figurative pretty much.

01-01:17:15  
Cooks: Do you have any of those things?

- 01-01:17:17  
Nengudi: Oh, I do. I'm not particular about showing it. [laughs] But yes, I do.
- 01-01:17:25  
Cooks: But you kept some of them, though, which is great.
- 01-01:17:27  
Nengudi: Yes, I kept one.
- 01-01:17:32  
Cooks: Wow, I had no idea.
- 01-01:17:32  
Nengudi: Yeah. But then there was a thing—you know, I had a class and I did—it was on African art, and I did drawings to illustrate what I was talking about. Did I say it was art history? Did I say art history class?
- 01-01:17:54  
Cooks: Okay, African art history class, okay.
- 01-01:17:57  
Nengudi: Yes well, it wasn't African, it was an art history class, and I chose to do African art history.
- 01-01:18:02  
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-01:18:04  
Nengudi: I did these drawings, and I was so insulted, because someone said, the instructor said, "You didn't do these drawings." I said, "Yes, I did." I was really upset that she felt as though I could not do these drawings, that I had somehow cheated, and it was really very upsetting to me.
- 01-01:18:28  
Cooks: Because they were so impressive, she thought someone else must have done them?
- 01-01:18:32  
Nengudi: Yeah, yeah. It was just myself and I think there was one other fellow. Yeah, what was his name? His last name was King, because we were thinking about Martin Luther King, but his last name was King, too. I can't remember his full name, but anyway, we were the only two. I was the only woman, Black woman artist in the whole shebang, and so there were very few of us, needless to say.
- 01-01:19:05  
And you know, I was really very disappointed that there was no African—oh okay, all right. I'm remembering something. In high school, I was very interested in African art, and I remember wanting to take French, because all of the books I saw in the library were written in French that had to do with African art; there were very few that were in English, and so I really wanted to know what these books

were saying. And to this day, I don't speak French, but I can read enough. It would just bring me to tears the way they would speak about Africans and African art, I mean, to tears. Because you know, I was a Francophile—oh, so charming, so—oh, you know, France and, oh [gestures with hands]—it really caught my attention, of course.

01-01:20:24

The two things that were alarming—when I went to France, I guess I was coming back from my time in Japan. I went across Europe on the, what is that called, the Orient Express. So when I got to France and go to the [National] Museum of Natural History, they have—first of all, again, which brought me to tears—they have—what is the lady's name. She had a really big butt.

01-01:21:03

Cooks: Oh, the Hottentot Venus, Sarah Baartman?

01-01:21:05

Nengudi: Yes, Sarah Baartman. They had her in a glass enclosure.

01-01:21:13

Cooks: And you saw that with your own eyes?

01-01:21:14

Nengudi: I saw it with my own eyes, and I just could not believe it. And then they had little display cases of African textured hair, from the kinky to the whatever. It was so devastating. And then, this was later on, they asked Picasso, because of his being strongly influenced by African art, they asked him—and he was a hero of mine, mainly because he was ever changing his style, and I just hated somebody that just stayed with the same style—they asked him about African art, and he said, "What art?" He didn't even put it in the same realm. Yeah, that was really quite alarming.

01-01:22:14

And so, like in high school, as I said, that was one of the reasons I really wanted to take French, was to decode some of these books on African art, because they weren't available in any other form. And as long as I was at [CSU Los Angeles] and taking art history classes—because I *love*, I love history, period, and I love art history. And it was the same old, same old. The big book was *Janson's [History of Art]*, yeah. I would look through that book, I would look through that book, I didn't see ne'er a person of color. And that's how I was educated.

01-01:23:16

Cooks: Senga, I think we're out of time for this session, which went by really quickly.

01-01:23:21

Nengudi: It did!

01-01:23:21

Cooks: But we want to continue, because I feel like we're getting so much to the point of thinking about your education formally, but then how that influenced you to

educate yourself and to do things your own way and go on a whole path of discovery.

01-01:23:39

Nengudi: Yeah, we haven't gotten to Watts Towers or the Pasadena Art Museum.

01-01:23:43

Cooks: Right.

01-01:23:44

Nengudi: And I was doing that during college.

01-01:23:47

Cooks: Okay, we're going to—let's start there then, when we start the next session.

01-01:23:54

Nengudi: Sounds good!

01-01:23:56

Tewes: Thank you, everybody.

01-01:23:57

Nengudi: Yes, nice meeting you!



## Interview 2: September 24, 2020

02-00:00:01

Tewes: This is a second interview with Senga Nengudi for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, [in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley]. This remote interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes on September 24, 2020. Ms. Nengudi joins us from Colorado Springs, Colorado; Dr. Cooks joins from Irvine, California; and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thank you all for joining this morning. Bridget, why don't you take us away?

02-00:00:30

Cooks: Okay. We are still in the 1960s. We're going to start around 1965, and during this time, Senga, you're at Cal State LA and you are getting your BA in dance. And I have noted here that in the summer of 1965 you received an Orchesis Dance Scholarship.

02-00:01:01

Nengudi: Okay, so first of all, my BA is in sculpture.

02-00:01:06

Cooks: Okay.

02-00:01:09

Nengudi: Or fine arts, and my minor is in dance.

02-00:01:15

Cooks: Okay, thank you for correcting that, because I kept thinking—you know, I think of you as an artist. But I know that you are so interested in dance, and I got those two mixed up.

02-00:01:22

Nengudi: Mm-hm.

02-00:01:24

Cooks: Okay, so the minor is in dance.

02-00:01:26

Nengudi: Right.

02-00:01:27

Cooks: Okay.

02-00:01:30

Nengudi: And the scholarship, Orchesis was a scholarship. It was a dance club, and I received a scholarship from them for summer workshop studies in dance.

02-00:01:44

Cooks: And that was still at the university, or did you have to travel for that?

02-00:01:48

Nengudi: Oh, it was at the university.

02-00:01:51

Cooks:

Okay, and was that a significant workshop for you? Were there people that you were interested in at that time who were mentors or fellow performers?

02-00:02:05

Nengudi:

Yeah, the workshops pretty much—I don't know how long they were, but at least for a couple of years these summer workshops were put on by Murray Louis. He was the guest instructor, and he was a part of Alvin Ailey's dance company in New York. That was very significant, because even at that point they were very involved with, you might call it, total theater. You know, more like installations, art installations as props. That's not a good word. Art installations as part of—what would you call that—setting, the setting.

02-00:03:00

Cooks:

Okay, the sets, yeah.

02-00:03:02

Nengudi:

Yeah, the sets for the dances. And they were very involved with music, because Alvin Ailey was—wait, did I say Alvin Ailey? I didn't mean Alvin Ailey, oh lord, I meant Alwin Nikolais! That's wouldn't be Alvin Ailey.  
[laughs]

02-00:03:23

Cooks:

Alwin Nikolais.

02-00:03:24

Nengudi:

Yeah, and it's A-l-w-i-n.

02-00:03:28

Cooks:

Okay.

02-00:03:31

Nengudi:

Nikolais I think is N-i-k-o-l-a—something.

02-00:03:37

Cooks:

Okay, we'll figure it out.

02-00:03:39

Nengudi:

You can look him up. And you know, he was a part of that kind of John Cage-ish kind of approach. You know, I love John Cage, and it all kind of worked together for me in terms of my aesthetic and my vision for myself. So that was really exciting, and he was quite a taskmaster.

02-00:04:06

Cooks:

[laughs] Yeah.

02-00:04:08

Nengudi:

Murray Louis, that is. And he used to tell us—God, what's the other guy's name—Merce Cunningham. He and Merce Cunningham would see each other on the street, and they crossed the street so they wouldn't be on the same side of the street.

02-00:04:23

Cooks: Wow.

02-00:04:24

Nengudi: It was that New York dance kind of, you know, stuff.

02-00:04:31

Cooks: Wow.

02-00:04:32

Nengudi: So anyway, I had a very influential teacher by the name of Jan Day, and she pretty much ran the Dance Department there [at CSU Los Angeles]. She was really committed to us having as many real—[makes air quotes] real—dance experiences as possible.

02-00:05:00

Cooks: Okay.

02-00:05:01

Nengudi: She brought in a lot of people like Ruth St. Denis, who was the pioneer in modern dance—I mean, *the* pioneer. I think I may have mentioned this to you. But anyway, Ruth St. Denis came—she was at least 180 years old at that point. [laughs] She had this cape. She was a little, tiny lady, had this big, red cape. She had it around her neck and it flowed, of course. And so we had to go from one point to another. I don't know, she probably gave a lecture, and then we went someplace else. And we were like little ducklings behind her. And this cape, this cape was just flowing in the wind. She was so dramatic. So you know, those were positive experiences for me.

02-00:05:59

I think I told you this, that I also took part in musicals when I was there, and I think the woman's name I was trying to think of was Judy Holliday. I think that her name was Judy Holliday. I think *Bells Are Ringing* or something like that, that was the name of it. So yeah, that was my time.

02-00:06:27

Cooks: And at this time, while you were an undergraduate, did you also have an internship at the Pasadena Art Museum? Was that involved with dance, also?

02-00:06:37

Nengudi: Yes. I actually got it through some referral from—it could have been Jan Day—for someone that was working at the Pasadena Art Museum. There was a woman by the name of Hilda Mullin, and she was the dance instructor for the Pasadena Art Museum Art Education Department. She was a therapist, like a psychotherapist, as well as a dancer, and so she brought that into the mix, as well. And through her, I then was referred to this Watts Towers Art Center, and that woman's name was Deborah Brewer. So I worked with her on the art classes, and then worked with Hilda on the dance classes. But Deborah also—Debbie—was also a teacher at the Pasadena Art Museum. So you know, it was like that. I think it's really important, because there is an interesting link amongst all of this: the organization that handles Noah

Purifoy's legacy, I guess you might say. They have a lot of information on Deborah—Debbie Brewer—and how these things kind of interacted, if that's of interest to you.

02-00:08:26 Before Pasadena—forgive me, I'm getting all these names [confused]—before the Watts Towers Art Museum had a building, we were in one of the houses on the block. It was called the White House, because it was painted white, but it was a little frame house, very small [Nengudi's husband walks by in the background]—that's my husband—very small, and that's where we conducted the classes. And then on certain occasions, particularly in the summertime, we would then have it at the Tower itself, which was kind of like a shell at that point, because he lived there, Simon Rodia lived there. And Simon Rodia was—I never met him, but his story was really significant in terms of what happened, too, with the arts. Do you know his story?

02-00:09:33  
Cooks: Yeah, but I think it would be good for future people who are listening if you would say what you know.

02-00:09:39  
Nengudi: Okay. And you correct me, because it's been a while. But anyway, he was an emigrant from Italy. He was a mason or he did stones, and all that kind of stuff. He was so grateful to America, he wanted to build this kind of monument to America, so he would walk along the railroad tracks and gather this and that, and he created these towers. He also, of course, included all of his instruments. He would just press it into the cement. So his real presence was there. And he even had a tub and a fireplace and all this—it was his home. They wanted to tear it down at a certain point, because they said it was unstable. So after really a lifetime of work, he said, "Screw it," and turned around and left, and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. And all of that, you know, really is significant when you think about how we went about also dealing with materials that we found and that sort of thing. Yeah, so that's kind of the history of Watts Towers Art Center.

02-00:11:13  
Cooks: And so, Senga, were you working as an intern in Pasadena and you were working at Watts Towers at the same time?

02-00:11:24  
Nengudi: Well, you know, yes. And such as it is, in the scheme of things, I was an assistant at the Pasadena Art Museum, and I was a teacher, full-fledged teacher at Watts Towers Art Center.

02-00:11:42  
Cooks: Were the classes really different? Because it seems like maybe you were doing more—was there dancing going on in the galleries in Pasadena, and what was going on for you as a teacher?

02-00:11:57  
Nengudi:

In Pasadena?

02-00:11:58  
Cooks:

In Pasadena versus Watts Towers. Were you doing the same kinds of things?

02-00:12:05  
Nengudi:

No, we weren't doing the same kinds of things. In Pasadena, it was basically—it's a kind of an upper-class kind of community there. So they had the freedom to dance in the Museum, and we talked about various people and their work, because all of this stuff—Jim Dine and, you know, those kinds of people were becoming famous. What's his name—Claes Oldenburg and, you know, that crew. It was really exciting and we were able to go into trash cans and—which I still do today—[laughs] go into trash bins and grab stuff and bring it back to the Museum and work on it, and so on.

02-00:13:03

But at Watts Towers Art Center, it was pretty much centralized to that area. We tried to take them on trips, and so on, but pretty much it was doing art classes right there. There was an incident that really stuck with me for a long time, because at that point there was a real presence of—Pasadena Art Museum presence, in terms of the instructors and all that kind of stuff. We were taking the kids on a trip, and one of the kids didn't have any shoes. And they used to say, they'd say, "Oh, you go over in there and tell them that we have a pair of shoes." I said, "Okay." So I went over there and the mother says to me, "Don't do this. The child can't go. I don't want the shoes, I don't want—" you know what I mean? It was like, "Don't do this to me, don't embarrass me even more." And so that really—because they were all up in—"Oh, we've got to [claps hands], we've got to do this. We've got to take these kids, and they have to have this experience and all that kind of stuff." So there's quite a balance. You really have to be sensitive to really what's going on. And sometimes, that's not the best. They can forgo that particular experience. So you know, you have to feel the temperature on these things.

02-00:14:48  
Cooks:

So you're working with two totally different populations.

02-00:14:50  
Nengudi:

Exactly.

02-00:14:50  
Cooks:

Yeah.

02-00:14:52  
Nengudi:

Exactly.

02-00:14:54  
Cooks:

Basic needs—yeah, it was very different for—

02-00:14:57  
Nengudi:

Very, very different. And then—

02-00:14:58

Cooks: So—

02-00:14:59

Nengudi: Yeah, and the community. We spent a lot of time with those kids, and some of them it helped. And then others, they just kind of went the way of the neighborhood, but at least they had that experience under their belt. Yeah.

02-00:15:22

Cooks: And what kind of art classes, what kind of art skills were you teaching them at Watts Towers?

02-00:15:29

Nengudi: Oh you know, it was basic: painting, collage.

02-00:15:31

Cooks: Yeah, okay.

02-00:15:33

Nengudi: If we had clay, assemblage. That was always good, because there was plenty of stuff around to gather up, so they were very basic. Printmaking sometimes, simple printmaking. Yeah.

02-00:15:51

Cooks: But I'm also thinking about—so you've got Pasadena, which is affluent, then you have Watts, which is not. You're working in both spaces. You're also a student. I know Watts Towers has been so influential for so many artists in Los Angeles, and I—would you say that it was also influential for you, in terms of Rodia's process? But also, was your time in Pasadena and having Jim Dine come through, and Oldenburg, was that also influential? Because it seems like you're between these two very different LAs.

02-00:16:34

Nengudi: Did we talk about this before, or no?

02-00:16:37

Cooks: Not yet.

02-00:16:38

Nengudi: Okay, all right. [Cooks laughs] Yeah, it was absolutely wonderful. I was euphoric that I should have these two experiences, which on a certain level, you know, were equal, in terms of experimentation. And that's what I was about: experimentation. At the Towers, you have this kind of energy coming out of the—I want to say resurrection, but it was a resurrection—you know, after all of that, the [Watts] riots and everything, there was this energy, this newfound energy to really wipe the slates clean and do it our own way, and so on. And similarly, there was this other type of experimentation that was going on at Pasadena Art Museum, with Jim Dine and this person and that person. I'm trying to think of the—oh, I was so excited, because I got him on the

phone once. He was based in California. He's an installation artist. Can you name a few, about that time?

02-00:18:03

Cooks: Oh my gosh, based in California? [Edward] Kienholz?

02-00:18:08

Nengudi: Yeah, Kienholz. But this guy, he did a lot of stuff outside, like with tires and this and that. Oh my gosh, I always forget his name. I'll look it up.

02-00:18:22

Anyway yeah, there was this rigorous experimentation going on in both parts of the city. One, of course, was recognized; the other was not. I just thought I was positioned in the best place possible to experience all of this and to be a part of it, and it all kind of fit into my energies and my aesthetic leanings, and so on. So at the Pasadena Art Museum, I was exposed to happenings, and so on, and I could see, Yes, I don't have to be prima ballerina; I can take my movement vocabulary and incorporate it in my art, in a performance. I guess it was a validation—well, I don't want to say validation—it just kind of opened doors to—doors I had actually started knocking on anyway.

02-00:19:42

Cooks: Was it Allan Kaprow? Was that who you were trying to think of?

02-00:19:47

Nengudi: Yes.

02-00:19:48

Cooks: Okay. [laughs] So you—

02-00:19:49

Nengudi: That's exactly who I was thinking of.

02-00:19:51

Cooks: We think of him as being, you know, the major figure in happenings, and so now I have questions about that. You said you were able to get him on the phone.

02-00:20:02

Nengudi: Yes. I was—

02-00:20:02

Cooks: Do you want to talk about that?

02-00:20:04

Nengudi: I was a student, right? [laughs] And I was so nervous I don't even remember what I said or what questions I asked him. I was just so excited that he actually answered the phone and was interested in talking to me. So yeah, it was quite, quite wonderful.

- 02-00:20:21  
Cooks: Well, were you reaching out to him just for your own development as an artist, or was it because of something happening at the Museum or at Watts Towers?
- 02-00:20:32  
Nengudi: It was all of that.
- 02-00:20:34  
Cooks: Oh great, okay.
- 02-00:20:35  
Nengudi: Yeah, it was all of that. I was familiar with his work and very excited about his work. A real fan, so that's why.
- 02-00:20:44  
Cooks: So where were these happenings happening? Are they happening in Venice, are they happening in—
- 02-00:20:49  
Nengudi: Oh no, they were at the Museum.
- 02-00:20:52  
Cooks: They *were* happening at the Museum.
- 02-00:20:53  
Nengudi: Yeah, they were happening at the Museum. And yeah, right in the Museum.
- 02-00:21:00  
Cooks: And so, Senga, were you the only Black person involved in these happenings?
- 02-00:21:07  
Nengudi: Probably, I don't remember. Yeah, probably, yeah.
- 02-00:21:12  
Cooks: Okay. But you still felt like there was something there for you?
- 02-00:21:17  
Nengudi: Mm-hm.
- 02-00:21:19  
Cooks: Yeah, it was open enough that there was something you could learn from.
- 02-00:21:22  
Nengudi: Mm-hm.
- 02-00:21:22  
Cooks: Okay.
- 02-00:21:23  
Nengudi: And I must say that with the Watts Towers Art Center—I think I may have said early on it took me up until going to New York to find out about the Harlem Renaissance and stuff like that—but you know, it was so wonderful just to be grounded in my culture at Watts Towers. And there was a—I think



his name was James [Richmond] Barthé, and he was a—of course he was old at that point, but he was actually a sculptor of renown in the Harlem Renaissance. I met him; he came through one day. And you know, some of these people, they were so unassuming and almost shy, that you didn't even—until you looked them up, you didn't even know their significance. Ruth Waddy, you know, some of the older artists, they were very quiet about what they did, very committed, and basically got no play at all. [phone rings]

02-00:22:43

Cooks: Yeah, I know. You're talking about Richmond Barthé, and he was based in Pasadena.

02-00:22:47

Nengudi: Yes, Richmond. Okay, yes.

02-00:22:48

Cooks: Yeah, how wonderful. But he's someone—and Ruth Waddy—that you saw in Pasadena while you were at the Museum.

02-00:22:55

Nengudi: Yeah.

02-00:22:55

Cooks: That's really wonderful.

02-00:22:56

Nengudi: Yeah, yeah. Pasadena or LA, but particularly he was at Watts Towers. Ruth Waddy, you know, she was just kind of around. They were very quiet, gentle souls, that, like I said, really were committed to their art, and there's this constant drive to get further. At that point, Golden State [Mutual Life] Insurance Company sponsored, supported a really good collection of Black artists. Yeah, we chipped away, chipped away.

02-00:23:44

Cooks: [laughs] And you graduate from Cal State LA in 1966.

02-00:23:50

Nengudi: Uh-huh.

02-00:23:49

Cooks: And then you make this big trip to Waseda University?

02-00:23:56

Nengudi: Waseda University.

02-00:23:57

Cooks: Waseda, thank you.

02-00:23:58

Nengudi: Exactly.

02-00:24:00

Cooks: And you were there for a year. There's this lovely photograph of you with a whole group of other people in 1966.

02-00:24:10

Nengudi: Yeah, let me see if I can—yeah.

02-00:24:13

Tewes: We should also say that this university is in Tokyo, [Japan].

02-00:24:16

Nengudi: Yes, it is in Tokyo. Here it is.

02-00:24:20

Cooks: Yeah, this photograph is wonderful. It's in the Archives of American Art. It's digitized.

02-00:24:29

Nengudi: Yeah, so yeah, this is the crew. We were all there. I'm trying to see if there's another—there was another Black woman who—hm.

02-00:24:42

Cooks: Who went with you?

02-00:24:47

Nengudi: She came a little bit later, and she had a child, so she wasn't—she had different kind of a housing than we had, because she had a child. And her experiences were not good there. Mine were wonderful, so I can only go by what happened with me. And this is so interesting. Oh, I'm seeing all these—boy, all of this is coming back to me. [looks at image] Let me see if—where he is. I don't see him. Maybe he wasn't there for this photo.

02-00:25:33

Cooks: Who are you thinking of, Senga?

02-00:25:35

Nengudi: His name was Wada-san, Wada, and he was from LA, too. And his parents told him, "Look, you'd better find a Japanese bride when you get over there." So he had kind of like this additional pressure on him. Say, like if I went to Africa, I might have a—you know, because they were intent on him getting a pure Japanese bride. The people around me, you know, were my best friends there. And then this fellow—this is the back row—he made maps. What would you call that, someone that makes maps?

02-00:26:21

Tewes: A cartographer?

02-00:26:25

Nengudi: Yes, and deeply unfortunately, this was around the Vietnamese War, and so we never knew what happened to him, because when we got back, they immediately grabbed him because of his skills. And he was terrified. The

whole thing at Waseda was—it was like Cal Berkeley. There were demonstrations every day about the war and, you know, it was pretty intense, pretty intense.

02-00:27:03           And the family, the Japanese family that I lived with, the husband was an animator, and he won an award for anti-American, anti-war film, animated film. [laughs] So yeah, it was really interesting. The family I stayed with was interesting. I think it was really all about the money. The wife had MS, and so she was in a wheelchair. And the mother, his mother kind of ran the house, my obachan, my grandmother. She's a wee, little one, but she had—even though this guy was a—forgive me for saying—a grown-ass man, she still had to do everything. She had to polish his shoes every day, she had to cook, she had to do this, she had to do that. I mean, it was a real traditional role, even though he was progressive in his thinking. So it was an interesting setup.

02-00:28:23  
Cooks:            Could you tell us why you went to Japan, how you—it's a big trip, and I didn't ask, but I'm thinking maybe you didn't know anyone there already.

02-00:28:39  
Nengudi:           [laughs] Right.

02-00:28:41  
Cooks:            And you're right out of undergraduate, and so this was a formal kind of graduate educational program that you were involved in?

02-00:28:50  
Nengudi:           Yes, it was, and there were—oh, I can't remember how many of us came from California. Maybe about eighteen from different state universities. They had another group of students that were from the East Coast, and they got along a bit better than we did, because they—there was already this thing about etiquette, and so on. Being from California, you know, whatever, whatever. We weren't accustomed to all of these rules of society, and it's all about rules in Japan. So they were able to manage a little—that part of it—a little bit better.

02-00:29:48  
Cooks:            In terms of the formal education, what did you want to learn when you were in Japan, and did you find any mentors that could help you figure that out? Or did you learn some things you didn't know that you needed to know?

02-00:30:04  
Nengudi:           Well, first I must say that I have been getting so many interviews—I have given so many interviews that I can't remember what I've told to who. So it feels like—

02-00:30:19  
Cooks:            We haven't talked about it.

02-00:30:20  
Nengudi:

—I've told you some of this, and that's why I'm hesitant about saying it. But *you* can stop me if you say, "Oh you know, you told us that." But the reason I went was because of constantly looking at art books. I saw an art book on Japan—excuse me—contemporary art. And in that book it had—in the beginning it had paintings, you know, contemporary Japanese painters. To my mind, it was just like warmed-over Western art. But when I flipped it to the back and I saw the Gutai group, I went oh my God! Oh my gosh, I could not—I just was almost eating every page, and I said, "Oh, I've *got* to go there. I've *got* to see these people."

02-00:31:20

I wanted to do foreign study, but I didn't have any language proficiency in any particular language, and so they had three choices: they had Taiwan—didn't want to go there, because they were dropping bombs. Then they had, I think it was Sweden, and I didn't want to go there, because I totally—I wanted a new way of thinking. I had been trained all my life in Western history, in Western everything, in Western thought, so I wanted to see what Eastern thought was like, and so that was the reason that I chose Japan. And ironically, I never found the Gutai group, never found them, but of course I found so much more. That is such a rich, rich, rich, rich culture, oh my gosh.

02-00:32:17  
Cooks:

So when you got there, was the—do you think you didn't find the Gutai group because they were so avant-garde it just wasn't part of the curriculum, or—

02-00:32:28  
Nengudi:

Oh, it certainly was not part of the curriculum, I can tell you that. And Waseda, they have—I don't know if it's the same now—but they have a different system of education there. If you go to the university, you have to take academic courses, and if you want the arts, you have to take that separately; they don't have it at the university. The whole thing about the university is that it is so tough to get in. I mean, people commit suicide if they don't get in, and so on. So they're really working on these tests that they have to take to get in. Once they get in, you know, they can kind of almost float. [laughs] But they have to do that. So I had to take dance from a private person. I had to take art from a private person, you know, like block printing with block printing, and all of that. So that was separate. I took language, Japanese language. I took Japanese culture, history, all that sort of thing. So it was like a cultural program, a cultural curriculum. And plus, you know, like a lot of the more way-out people did not want to speak English. You know, they thought, [makes a noise] you know? So I couldn't really talk to those people in depth, but the level of conversation I would like to have wasn't available to me.

02-00:34:07  
Cooks:

Okay. I wanted to ask: you were there for a year?

02-00:34:11  
Nengudi:

Mm-hm.

02-00:34:12  
Cooks:

And then you came back to California, and I have in my notes several things happening. So one is you becoming a social worker in Pasadena in 1967. And so I wanted to hear what you have to say about that. It seems to me like you've already had some informal social work experience. [laughs]

02-00:34:43  
Nengudi:

Yes. But I want to tell you a little bit more about Japan, because it was significant.

02-00:34:48  
Cooks:

Oh, please do!

02-00:34:52  
Nengudi:

This whole issue of approach to things I found fascinating, that even talking on the phone, it had to be done in a particular way. And my family was—they said, "You're not going to get out of this house until you learn these basic rules of etiquette." That's when this whole desire—something's coming up on my screen, hold on—that's when this whole desire of trying to connect African and Asian—or Japanese specifically, because there's a difference—I wanted to see these connecting links. And this whole issue of ritual and performance, with the performance being total, it incorporated everything: music, dance, art, myth. That was really intriguing to me. So the—let's see gagaku—[phone rings] Hold on one second. Sorry. Hi, Thomas. I have to call you later. [break in audio]

02-00:36:20

So you know, I'm trying to think of—oh, Noh theater. Oh my God, I love Noh theater and Kabuki theater. And you know, this emphasis on, I guess, yeah, myth and storytelling and just the way it was framed. I've never been the speediest turtle on the beach, so when I saw Noh theater, I went, Wow, these people are really moving slow. I could get with that, you know? [laughs] All these forms of theater were really important, and there was also this issue with music. What they would do with music is instead of music evolving, like a school of music evolving, they would—I don't know what you'd call it—in a sense, crystallize it, or if there was some—or keep it pure. If there was something that changed with that music, then that would become another school. It wouldn't, I don't know, contaminate or something, it would be pure. And so all of these wonderful, wonderful forms of art and, oh gosh, theater.

02-00:37:52

They also had this issue of imperfection. They're so good at being perfect at things, sometimes they would make it imperfect, so that the human part of it would be there. You know, like you'd see a ceramic bowl that wasn't perfectly done or—what would you call it. Anyway—

02-00:38:24  
Cooks:

Perfectly round or—

02-00:38:27  
Nengudi:

Right, right. And also, with the tea ceremony. Another humbling thing is when you go—have you seen a tea ceremony situation? You have. Okay. So you know, the door is lowered, so you have to bend down, you have to humble yourself to go into the space. So all of these humbling things. Of course, you know, at that point—I don't know if they do it anymore—but they were constantly bowing. So this issue of being aware of how egotistical people can be, and this constant checking that by doing things that are more humbling. All these amazing, amazing elements of the Japanese culture just really knocked me out. And this issue of just clean lines, clean space. This is for someone who doesn't have a tabletop that's not covered at home, but you know, just these really—just simple and precise. All of that was really so significant.

02-00:39:49

And you know, it was my first time away from home, so it was like I was crying and smiling at the same time. I was crying, because I missed my family, but I would not have—rather, I would have not rather been—how can I say that? I enjoyed being there, so I was fine if the tears had to come. And they told us when we were there, they said, "Well you know, you're going to go through three stages." This is during our orientation. "And one stage you'll just be disgusted that these people just don't know how to do things, and they just—why are they doing it this way when Americans are better at it? And then you go through the second phase, which is just loving every bit of it and wanting to be Japanese. And then you go through the third phase, which is you come to a happy balance where you can appreciate the culture, yet you're fine within yourself and your own culture."

02-00:41:05

Cooks:

So it seems like the bigger takeaway for you with your time in Japan was not about the formal education, it was about the whole acculturation.

02-00:41:16

Nengudi:

Exactly.

02-00:41:16

Cooks:

Yeah.

02-00:41:16

Nengudi:

Yes, oh my gosh, exactly.

02-00:41:20

Cooks:

Yeah.

02-00:41:20

Nengudi:

And you know, traveling to some of the sites up and down Japan and seeing all these amazing Buddhas, it was just stunning. We went up in the mountains once and it was snowing. And there was this temple, this Buddhist temple and snow all around, and just these glowing lights and incense and bells and stuff in the setting along with these—what do you call them—baboons. You know,

are they the ones that have the colored butt? And in the snow, with them, I mean, just such magical things, that I felt so privileged to see and experience.

02-00:42:21

Cooks: So it also seems like there's a connection between all of that ritual and difference from Western culture, and the idea of the total environment, you know, that you are still really—find delightful.

02-00:42:41

Nengudi: Yeah, absolutely. I do, I do.

02-00:42:45

Cooks: That's part of your environment, and part of the kind of space that you're wanting to create for other people.

02-00:42:52

Nengudi: Exactly, exactly.

02-00:42:54

Cooks: And did that time, learning about Japanese culture and history, did that also, at some point, I suppose, encourage you to even dig deeper into your own cultural history?

02-00:43:06

Nengudi: Absolutely, absolutely. Yeah, that's the truth. And you know, I found out more about, well, American culture in general, and they said that would be the case. You find out a lot about the country you're in, but it gives you this perspective about where you came from, too. But yes, it absolutely—it did.

02-00:43:33

I'll tell you very quickly: when it was time to go, they told us that if we got to Paris, that we could take that plane home with the other students and that would be cheaper, you know, that sort of thing. So we went from Tokyo to Russia, and then we took the Orient Express across Russia. When we were in Russia, it was the fourth of July, and that was quite interesting. On the boat, it was a Russian boat. It was so funny, because the people, the hands, the ship hands, and all that, when the day was done, they would become the musicians. [laughs] They would become the entertainment. There was a very famous—of course, I don't remember her name—but there was a famous-to-them singer on board. and so she also chose to sing.

02-00:44:55

And so then we got to some port, and then we finally got to—I think it was Moscow—yeah. They divided us, and we went, Oh lord, what are they going to do? They divided us in terms of countries. So the Japanese people that were on the board went to one hotel, and the Americans—although we thought, Uh-oh, they're going to divide us even more, but they didn't—Americans were in another hotel. And they would just go through your stuff like it was their own. If you caught them in the room, you know, they would just walk away.

02-00:45:45

Tewes: Was this a security measure on their part?

02-00:45:48

Nengudi: This is the Iron Curtain and this was the Cold War. And so you know, they did what they wanted. And even as we're traveling on the Orient Express, periodically soldiers would come on board and look at our passports, and guns and all that kind of stuff. It was kind of spooky, since we, at the time, didn't have stuff like that here. So yeah, so it was really interesting.

02-00:46:22

Well, we got to Italy, and that was really funny, because on one side I think it was—it was either Germany or—what's the other place like Germany—hm, what other country is next to Germany?

02-00:46:45

Cooks: Austria—

02-00:46:46

Nengudi: Yeah, it was Austria. And so clean a place, so clean. At the border they have a little kind of guard area, you know, a little kind of guard thing. So they had a little kind of guard thing on the Austrian side, and they had a little guard thing on the Italian side. I mean, they're like a couple of feet apart, but the difference was so amazing. On the Austrian side, they were like this [imitates a serious, upright soldier holding a gun]; on the Italian side, [gestures with hands and imitates Italian words] they were just like, oh! And such a difference culturally, and yet they're side by side. So we had a good time.

02-00:47:41

Cooks: And did you make it all the way to Paris?

02-00:47:42

Nengudi: I did.

02-00:47:43

Cooks: And then you flew—

02-00:47:44

Nengudi: Home.

02-00:47:46

Cooks: So this was your first time in Paris. Did you go to the museums, or did you just absorb the culture?

02-00:47:53

Nengudi: This is another, I guess, interview, because I definitely talked about this. France was my all in all, I was a Francophile and all that. I had taken French in school, and so on. I was so excited about Paris. I mean, oh my God, a dream come true, really. And so I go to the [National Museum of Natural History], right? And so here she is—I can't remember her name.



- 02-00:48:34  
Cooks: You did mention this before. I know we—
- 02-00:48:37  
Nengudi: I thought so.
- 02-00:48:40  
Cooks: Kind of out of time, but—yeah, you had mentioned really being in love with French culture through books.
- 02-00:48:46  
Nengudi: Yeah, right, right, right.
- 02-00:48:49  
Cooks: And then you saw Sarah Baartman's remains.
- 02-00:48:52  
Nengudi: Yeah, exactly.
- 02-00:48:55  
Cooks: And it just was so disgusting to you that it really had an impact.
- 02-00:48:58  
Nengudi: Yeah, right. So yeah, so that was my time in Paris. Should I go to that?
- 02-00:49:10  
Cooks: Yeah well, I was going to ask, just before we leave Paris, if you did go to the Louvre and did all the other kind of rituals of—
- 02-00:49:19  
Nengudi: Yes, yes. Yeah, I did. That was my first time there, and we didn't have that much time. My friend that I traveled with from Japan, she had, as a teenager, as a high school student, she had gone to France, because she was speaking French, taking French. And so she knew of a place we could stay and all that kind of stuff.
- 02-00:49:53  
Oh, I remember I had a problem with my eyes, and they took me to this hospital. And this guy comes in with blood all over. [laughs] He had just come out of surgery or something. He didn't even bother to change his clothes, and he had paint—you know, had blood all over him. So they told us that they couldn't do anything for me there. And this very kind man gave us enough money to get on the train and go to this place that also, I think, was an insane asylum, [laughs] because it was a sanitarium of some sort. They fixed me up and—you know, so I thought that was really lovely. He didn't know us from anything and gave us the money to go.
- 02-00:50:55  
Cooks: Senga, that's terrifying!

02-00:50:56  
Nengudi:

[laughs] I know.

02-00:50:58  
Cooks:

And your eyesight. I mean, that's—

02-00:51:01  
Nengudi:

I know, I know! And I think really, now that I look back on it, although I don't remember any animals, I have—I'm allergic to animal hair, and if I pet an animal and then rub my eyes, then they swell and do all this other kind of thing, but I didn't realize that at the time. They put some drops in and all that kind of stuff, but yeah.

02-00:51:27  
Cooks:

Wow, okay. So now I was going to bring you back to California, unless there's something else, because everything you've said, I would have been horrified if I skipped over it.

02-00:51:40  
Nengudi:

Uh, yeah.

02-00:51:42  
Cooks:

Okay. So you do come back to California, and you're ready to come back, I suppose?

02-00:51:48  
Nengudi:

Yes.

02-00:51:50  
Cooks:

[laughs] Okay. And then are you becoming a social worker before you go back to school, or are you doing those things at the same time?

02-00:52:02  
Nengudi:

No, I'm not doing them at the same time. I wanted a break, but I also needed the money, you know, to go. Yeah, I was in Pasadena. I had a new love, and so we—he lived in Pasadena, and so we were together and I was there for a year. I had a—let's see, what was it called—a something minor mother file. And these were teenagers that were pregnant and needed to have, what would you call it—

02-00:52:51  
Cooks:

Assistance or—

02-00:52:50  
Nengudi:

Assistance, yeah.

02-00:52:50  
Cooks:

Yeah.

02-00:52:51

Nengudi:

And so it was interesting. Like you said, that's kind of my leaning anyway, and I was just like—you know, it was really important. I saw cultural differences. Like I hate to say it, but a lot of white parents would just kick the kids out. I mean, boom, that's it, sorry. And Latino parents/families and Black families tended to just roll with it and give them the support. So yeah, it was interesting. And after a year, I was done with that. [laughs] I had enough to finish, so that's what I did.

02-00:53:38

Cooks:

Did they give you any training for that, to be a social worker? Or are they just—

02-00:53:44

Nengudi:

Yeah.

02-00:53:43

Cooks:

Okay.

02-00:53:44

Nengudi:

And actually, the class I was in, believe it or not, in terms of—you know, being oriented and so on, because at that point you just needed a BA, you didn't have to have something specific in social work. And Sharon Tate, you know, the one that was killed? She was in my class, in my orientation class. So yeah—

02-00:54:19

Cooks:

Really?

02-00:54:19

Nengudi:

Mm-hm.

02-00:54:20

Cooks:

So she was also a social worker. Wow.

02-00:54:23

Nengudi:

With me, yeah, yeah.

02-00:54:25

Cooks:

Even though you had only been gone for a year, did it seem like a different California or a different Pasadena? Or did you feel like you had developed so differently?

02-00:54:39

Nengudi:

That's a really good question, and I would have to look in my journal to really tell you. I'm sure. Obviously, I had a wealth of information under my belt—excuse me—from being there. I don't remember.

02-00:55:08

Cooks:

Okay. When you came back, though, did you know that you wanted to go back to school, but you knew you had to work for money, but your goal was I've got to—

02-00:55:16  
Nengudi:

Always, yeah.

02-00:55:20  
Cooks:

And so after you worked for a year, then is that when you enrolled at Cal State LA for a master's?

02-00:55:28  
Nengudi:

Yes.

02-00:55:28  
Cooks:

Okay. And did you have to work and go to school at the same time? You quit the social work job.

02-00:55:35  
Nengudi:

Right. Yeah. I think at that point it's possible that I went back to Pasadena Art Museum and did some teaching. At that point, I was actually a teacher, as opposed to assistant teacher. At that point, things had changed in relationship to the Pasadena Art Museum. They had the new building that is [the] Norton Simon Museum, and I just I couldn't comprehend that this museum had so many wealthy patrons, but somehow they could not save the Museum. And this one man, who had all this money, could, you know, buy a museum. It didn't compute, really. But yes, at that point, whatever job I had it was pretty much teaching art or something like that, or workshops, too.

02-00:56:47  
Cooks:

And did you work with the same professors when you came back to school?

02-00:56:52  
Nengudi:

No.

02-00:56:53  
Cooks:

Okay. Did they have new professors, or were they just people that you hadn't worked with before?

02-00:57:01  
Nengudi:

Ooh, that's a question. [laughs] Uh—

02-00:57:05  
Cooks:

Or then when they hire people, you know, like the new contemporary artist will come and start teaching?

02-00:57:11  
Nengudi:

Oh God, I cannot tell you.

02-00:57:16  
Cooks:

Okay.

02-00:57:15

Nengudi:

I think I've mentioned to you before Malcolm—and I couldn't remember his last name—McCullough, McClain, or [Malcolm A. McClain aka Mac McCloud].

02-00:57:25

Cooks:

McCloud? Yeah, we're looking him up to try to figure out exactly who that was. But he's someone you worked with as a graduate student?

02-00:57:32

Nengudi:

Mm-hm.

02-00:57:33

Cooks:

Okay.

02-00:57:35

Nengudi:

As I said, he was the one that said, "You need to go to New York to do your—" what do they call it? Oh, in the army—boot camp.

02-00:57:49

Cooks:

Okay. Basic training, boot camp.

02-00:57:53

Nengudi:

Basic training, boot camp. And that was really very good advice.

02-00:57:59

Cooks:

So you were in grad school then for two years, and coming from Japan. Do you remember how that affected your work? You go to Japan, you come back, you're teaching. But then, here you are in your studio, and now, What am I going to make? Did it look really different from before, when you were there before as an undergrad?

02-00:58:27

Nengudi:

Well you know, as an undergrad I was just exploring materials. And as a grad student, I was kind of finding my voice as to how I wanted to do things. To be honest, it was just—I didn't consciously do certain things. It's sort of like a computer. I just had all of this information, and then whatever I would do, it would come out in whatever I would do. I didn't decidedly say, "Oh, I'm going to do this, because it looks Japanese or because it looks Black." It was my—how should I say—it was my aesthetic or something. I'm going to flip over a bit, because this came up with someone else. I was talking to them about [it], and I think I talked to you about being schooled by television and old movies. Did I mention Katherine Dunham to you?

02-00:59:55

Cooks:

You did mention, yeah, just her name, yeah.

02-00:59:57

Nengudi:

Did I mention, you know, about her history basically?

02-01:00:02

Cooks: I don't think so.

02-01:00:03

Nengudi: Okay, well—

02-01:00:04

Cooks: It's fair to say it again, if you did.

02-01:00:06

Nengudi: Okay. Katherine Dunham was the first Black choreographer to be given work in Hollywood, you know, Hollywood musicals and so on. She and Pearl Primus, who was even more African but didn't work that much in Hollywood. But Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham were the main ones. And Katherine Dunham really was involved with Haitian culture—did I tell you that? Okay. And so even though her Hollywood stuff was kind of—I won't say typical—but she introduced me to diasporic kind of movement. She was very involved—in fact, she was considered a priestess—she was very involved with Haitian vodou, and stuff like that. And so I was really taken—and this is obviously aside from Hollywood—I was really taken with this whole thing of being in a trance and being transported, and being a vehicle for spirit to come through you. So there were a lot of levels of Katherine Dunham that were important to me and I found interesting. I don't know why I brought that up.

02-01:01:50

Cooks: Oh, I think we were just talking about the kind of work you wanted to make as a graduate student, so she [was an] influence.

02-01:01:59

Nengudi: Yeah, she was a big influence. African art was a really *huge* influence. All of the tribes and the countries and, you know, all that kind of stuff. So all of this was brewing inside of me. I didn't intentionally do something, but I kind of called on certain things as my vocabulary. I pulled it up. Oh, this, even though it might be a glass of water, I might say, "Oh, this is a glass of water. But it can also indicate a vehicle for spirits to come into the room." So it didn't matter what it was. It was like, it's just part of me. That's all I can say.

02-01:02:52

Cooks: And when you were exploring these different aspects of—yeah, different cultures and meaning, did you find a community of artists at that time that you were really influenced by or you felt some sort of connection with, I guess? I mean, we're thinking about Katherine Dunham as an influence, but were there peers for you that you really felt like, I believe what you believe, or I'm interested in this, too; can we sort of have—

02-01:03:24

Nengudi: Certainly David Hammons. I mean, he's the top of the mark when it comes to that. Early on, before David, before I really had a friendship with David, people that I looked up to were Mel Edwards. I really liked the power of his sculptures, and he was able to express African American culture in a way that

was abstract. And then I loved—she's in France. Barbara Chase-Riboud. Barbara Chase-Riboud. And she was like the ultimate, because she was living the life that I had fantasized. You know, she lived in France. She spoke perfect French.

02-01:04:33

Cooks: Yes.

02-01:04:34

Nengudi: Hm?

02-01:04:34

Cooks: Yeah, she's incredible. There's no one like her.

02-01:04:38

Nengudi: Yes, yes.

02-01:04:39

Cooks: Did you meet these artists through their work, or did you meet them—did you find out about them in books, did you see them at art openings? How did you meet Mel Edwards and David Hammons and Barbara Chase-Riboud?

02-01:04:55

Nengudi: Well, I didn't meet Mel until, you know, a while. I've yet to meet her. I knew David vaguely before I moved to New York, I mean, that he was part of the circuit, the party circuit. And the Pasadena and LA artists, they were always getting together. You know, just in passing I knew him.

02-01:05:26

But when I moved to New York, I—one day, my cousin, who is an artist, too, Eileen [Nelson], she says, "Oh, well you know, I'm in New York for this conference." What is it called, [NCA, National Conference of Artists]. It's a famous Black conference that happens every year or every other year. And so she says, "Oh, can I come up and stay with you?" I said, "Sure." You know, it was like a weekend thing. No problem. [laughs] Well, in comes David Hammons, I think Dan Concholar, Betye Saar, and there was another person. Yeah, Dan was there, too, Dan Concholar, and there was another person. I thought, Huh? After the first night I think Betye said, "Oh, this is too bohemian for me, I'm going to—" [laughs]

02-01:06:28

Cooks: So Betye Saar was there, too?

02-01:06:32

Nengudi: She said, "I'm out of here." So anyway, we kind of established a friendship there. And because I had opened my home to David, you know, when I got back to LA, he was kind enough to let me share a studio with him, or when he was in New York I would share—you know, use his space. And then over the years it kind of went back and forth when he—let's see, when I went to New York, I could stay in his studio. When he came to LA, because he didn't have

a studio anymore, he could stay in my studio. It was kind of like that. So for me, David's the top of the mark. That's all I can say.

02-01:07:20

Cooks: Yeah, that's incredible. Let me also ask about some of the exhibitions that were happening, or you were having, that were going on around '69 to '70, because I think this is really when you start having your first exhibitions. Okay.

02-01:07:44

Nengudi: Yes.

02-01:07:45

Cooks: So you had mentioned, I think earlier to Amanda, the *Three Artists* show at Gallery Central?

02-01:07:55

Nengudi: Yes.

02-01:07:55

Cooks: Okay, and this was 1970. And this came about through one of your professors at Cal State LA?

02-01:08:03

Nengudi: Yes. And his name is John Manno. I finally remembered his name. [laughs]

02-01:08:09

Cooks: Okay.

02-01:08:10

Nengudi: M-a-n-n-o. And yes, he was one of the newer people there. He was from New York, so he had a whole New York vibe about him. He was one of the first to really go into Central Ave. and set up his own studio, which people weren't really doing that then, right? He opened it up for us to use, and he set it up like a gallery. And yeah, so my cousin, whom I was telling you about, Eileen, that brought the crew in when I was living in New York, and the person I was with at the time, we were the three artists there. That's when I showed my *Water* sculptures, my *Water* compositions, which had also been pretty much my first exhibit in—yeah, definitely my first exhibit in Europe. And you know, that was quite the deal.

02-01:09:19

Cooks: And the *Water* sculptures, these are made out of plastic?

02-01:09:24

Nengudi: Yes, they're vinyl plastic and filled with water. And the vinyl plastic—of course, the problem is that you can't touch anything in a museum, but the vinyl plastic, upon touching it, you know, it responds to you like skin. It has a very—even then, even though I wasn't doing pantyhose—it has that body feeling to it. And the movement of the water, and the minute you touch it, it responds, the water responds.



02-01:10:03

Cooks: Was this like industrial plastic, or where were you getting the plastic from? Was it—

02-01:10:10

Nengudi: Yeah. Actually, you can get it—you know, like if you go to a fabric store, they'll have a section that has different mill sizes of the plastic. They would use it for furniture coverings and upholstery for cars, and so on and so forth.

02-01:10:40

Cooks: Okay. Do you remember what your concept was for that? Because you were saying: we can't touch it, but it feels like flesh or skin.

02-01:10:48

Nengudi: Mm-hm.

02-01:10:50

Cooks: Were you trying to consciously do anything in particular? I know you were saying you were almost like downloading all of the experiences and interests you had. Were you thinking about the figure? Were you thinking about abstraction, or you were just trying to remain open?

02-01:11:10

Nengudi: You know, I like to stuff things, including myself. [laughs] I did a lot of stuffing before that. When I was experimenting, I would make different sculptural forms and stuff them with stuff. But I like this idea of movement, and I'm ever in the search for that. And so when I was able to put water in it and saw that it had its own energy and almost life, all you had to do was touch it, then that was the thing that was exciting to me. I had done other stuff, like with plastic. You know, I created a very long, involved kind of a—almost like a tube that I included air in, and that was at Pasadena Art Museum. And the kids could manipulate it and go around it, and all that kind of—so it was very long. Yeah, so it always—I won't say always—but this energy of movement is always there in one form or another.

02-01:12:36

Cooks: And the other two artists that were in this *Three Artists* show that John Manno put together, do you remember who they were or what their work looked like?

02-01:12:47

Nengudi: Yes.

02-01:12:48

Cooks: Okay.

02-01:12:49

Nengudi: Eileen, I'm trying to remember—Eileen did both sculptures. There's a poster somewhere.

02-01:12:56

Cooks: Okay, your cousin Eileen?

- 02-01:12:59  
Nengudi: Yes, my cousin Eileen.
- 02-01:12:59  
Cooks: Oh, so she was one of the other artists?
- 02-01:13:02  
Nengudi: Yes.
- 02-01:13:01  
Cooks: Oh, that wasn't clear. And what's her last name, Senga?
- 02-01:13:05  
Nengudi: Her last name now is Nelson; her last name then was Abdulrashid.
- 02-01:13:12  
Cooks: Okay.
- 02-01:13:13  
Nengudi: But she divorced that fellow, and she's been with this amazing—I call him Saint Alphonso, because for, oh boy, twenty years, she's had MS. And even though she has it and she's confined to a wheelchair, she still paints.
- 02-01:13:35  
So anyway, I think she had some sculptures [in *Three Artists*]. She kind of did like assemblages. And then Roger [Summers], I believe he had like clay kind of sculptures.
- 02-01:13:58  
Cooks: Okay. Also in 1970, you were part of the *Sapphire: [You've Come a Long Way Baby]* show.
- 02-01:14:04  
Nengudi: Yeah.
- 02-01:14:03  
Cooks: And I know you've talked about that a lot, but we still want to get it on record. You know, this is this iconic exhibition for people in my generation and after, really because of Kellie Jones's work in the *Now Dig This!: [Art in Black Los Angeles 1960-1980]* show that she really introduced thousands of people to this exhibition. And what I'm thinking, you know, for you, was this a really—as wonderful as it seems to us to be in an exhibition [with] six women in one of the first galleries run by a Black woman, who's also an artist, Suzanne Jackson and Gallery 32—if you could tell us whatever you want to about how that show happened, what it was like working with them, or yeah, anything you want to share.
- 02-01:15:03  
Nengudi: Yeah, it was wonderful. It was powerful, because the guys had it. [laughs] So we didn't have as much of a presence as they did. Brockman was the main Black gallery in town, and then Suzanne opened it up, and it wasn't just for women—that particular show was, but it brought all of us together, to prove

that we do exist. I'm trying to think of the name in New York. In New York they had sort of an equivalent group called "Where [We] At" [Black Women Artists, Inc.], and they were all women artists, too. And so it was really significant for us to have a platform to show our work. And Suzanne is ever amazing, and she is a person of such style and grace. She had these Afghan dogs. [laughs] And her house was just amazing, and so she always was stylish. I won't say she was *about* the style; she *was* style. It was really a huge, courageous act to open up a gallery and to show some of the work that she showed.

02-01:16:33

Cooks: And were you showing some of these *Water* works in that exhibition? [static sounds]

02-01:16:42

Nengudi: There's a staticky situation.

02-01:16:45

Cooks: Oh, let me see if I can fix that. I was going to say that I was just wondering: what was the work that you showed in the exhibition? Because I've seen the invitation. But go ahead.

02-01:16:58

Nengudi: I haven't a clue.

02-01:16:59

Cooks: [laughs] Okay.

02-01:17:00

Nengudi: I'm pretty sure—in fact, yeah, I'm more than sure it was not a *Water* sculpture.

02-01:17:04

Cooks: Okay.

02-01:17:05

Nengudi: But it could have been. I really don't know.

02-01:17:12

Cooks: Okay. I wanted to also ask about a show that I didn't know about until I was doing research so I could speak with you: the *Eight Afro-Americans* show, 1971, in Switzerland!

02-01:17:28

Nengudi: Yeah, that was my first exhibit in Europe, and for the *Water* compositions.

02-01:17:37

Cooks: Okay.

02-01:17:38

Nengudi: And Henri Ghent was the curator.

02-01:17:40

Cooks: Oh!

02-01:17:42

Nengudi: And he's a story in himself.

02-01:17:44

Cooks: Yes, okay.

02-01:17:46

Nengudi: I don't know how he found out about me, really, but it was very special. He really supported me, and it was amazing.

02-01:17:57

Cooks: I didn't have that show on my radar, and I was thinking, Why were the Swiss interested in what Black artists were doing? And but Henri Ghent, thinking about him as a kind of ambassador for Black artists really helps to frame that. I could understand how he was someone who was connected, and that's wonderful that he was able to introduce a group of artists to them. Did you have a relationship with him as a mentor or a colleague in any way?

02-01:18:37

Nengudi: Not so much a colleague, but certainly a level of mentor, mm-hm. You know, people don't—they're almost dismissive, I think, about curators, in a sense. They don't put them on the same plateau as artists. But they are so critical. I mean, I cannot even tell you, because all of the major shows I was in were curated by very special people. These are mega shows. They don't think of it in the same box, in a sense. I very much think that curators are artists, and they don't get enough of the proper credit. They get credit, but they are very significant, in terms of support and creating an environment for you to be seen and all that kind of stuff.

02-01:19:54

Cooks: So Henri was that, Suzanne was that. You mentioned Brockman [Gallery]. I think about you working with them after you came back from New York, but is that right? Did you work with them earlier?

02-01:20:07

Nengudi: No. I really never worked with Alonzo [Davis], except for the CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] Program.

02-01:20:14

Cooks: Okay.

02-01:20:15

Nengudi: Yeah.

02-01:20:15

Cooks: And that's later in the seventies.

- 02-01:20:17  
Nengudi: Yeah, and I worked with Greg Pitts and his gallery that he set up, because it was, for me, more open.
- 02-01:20:28  
Cooks: Okay.
- 02-01:20:27  
Nengudi: You know, he was willing to put certain work in there. You had a freedom to explore and so on.
- 02-01:20:41  
Cooks: His gallery was the Pearl C. Woods Gallery.
- 02-01:20:43  
Nengudi: Yes.
- 02-01:20:44  
Cooks: Yeah, and but that comes later on for you.
- 02-01:20:46  
Nengudi: Yes.
- 02-01:20:47  
Cooks: Okay. So you know, we are almost out of time, and we haven't gotten to New York yet. [laughs] Let's get to New York. Amanda, does that sound fine, and then we can stop after that?
- 02-01:21:07  
Tewes: That sounds good. Let's get you—
- 02-01:21:12  
Cooks: So Malcolm McCloud or McCullough, [Malcolm McClain], who you knew, a sculptor who was at Cal State LA, he's the one that said, "You've got to get to New York for basic training, for boot camp."
- 02-01:21:23  
Nengudi: Yeah, go east, young woman—instead of going west. [laughs]
- 02-01:21:29  
Cooks: Yeah, I mean, how much farther west can you go? [Nengudi laughs] So you decided to move, and you were able to move in 1971?
- 02-01:21:36  
Nengudi: Yes.
- 02-01:21:37  
Cooks: And do you remember, in a way that you can share with us, what your hope was for going? Was it a kind of training you were looking for or just absorbing, or were there artists or movements that you were particularly interested in?

02-01:21:55  
Nengudi:

Everything. You know, I had this fantasy or this romantic notion of New York, just like I had with Paris and Japan, and so on. I was really very excited about it, very scared, but very excited. I think I may have mentioned, I was quitting a relationship at that point, so the minute I graduated from Cal State, I hopped the next plane out of town. And I had a considerable amount of names that people had given me. You know, "When you get there, talk to this person." I did not know one single person. I have cousins in Queens, and they were kind enough to let me come and stay with them, and they really—I mean, I just adored them and they really became my family.

02-01:23:03

And so I stayed in Queens for a while, and then finally, in her infinite wisdom, my cousin said, "Well you know, we have somebody else that's coming in, so you're going to have to—" you know, move basically. [laughs] So she booted me out, which was the best thing she could have done. I think I was there for about three months. I went about trying to find a place, and—that place I told you about that you saw the photo of, I found that place, and ironically, it was because of my grandmother. Someone she had taken care of a long time ago, they had a brownstone. You know, it was kind of like that.

02-01:23:44

It was really important for me to find kind of a brownstone situation, because in my life I had never—I think once I stayed in an apartment, in my life. And I maybe did that for a couple of months, and I really—I just can't stand the idea of elevators, first of all, because they were always going out. I've always been in a home. The brownstone was really wonderful. I had no furniture. They gave me a cot. My cousins gave me a cot and a radio, and I had this one little mouse that would come out, and that was my only friend. [laughs] But I loved it! I wasn't really particularly going out at night, but the thing about New York is you can feel the pulse of the city. And so I knew, even though I might not be going out, I could go out any time of day or night and it would be there. And every square inch of the blocks there had something going on. I mean, it was layered, and it was so exciting to me.

02-01:25:11

[laughs] Our place was one of the only ones that didn't have roaches or anything, because the landlord lived in the basement. And so it was myself; the landlord; there was a woman from—I think she was from England—and then there was Jimmy and Robert, who lived downstairs. So that kind of blew David [Hammons's] mind, too, because we all had our doors open. And so Jimmy and Robert had this huge St. Bernard dog, and they would bring the dog in, and as people were sleeping on the floor, the dog would step all over them. [laughs] It was a family, you know, it was a family situation.

02-01:26:03

And I finally got a job at the Children's Art Carnival, which was—it was in Harlem—oh, I'm trying to remember. It's near Morningside Park, I think. And Betty Blayton-Taylor, who was an artist in her own right, she was the director there. We taught classes there for the schools. They would come to our facility, and we would teach the art classes.

- 02-01:26:38  
Cooks: Okay, so like an after-school program or during schooltime they would come there and—
- 02-01:26:42  
Nengudi: Yeah, mm-hm.
- 02-01:26:43  
Cooks: Okay.
- 02-01:26:44  
Nengudi: During and after.
- 02-01:26:46  
Cooks: And so—
- 02-01:26:47  
Nengudi: Everybody there was an artist, everybody there—it was keeping them alive, so to speak.
- 02-01:26:53  
Cooks: Yeah. You know, I wanted to ask next questions about how you connected to artists, how you found a community of artists, but I know—maybe this is a good place to stop, Amanda.
- 02-01:27:07  
Tewes: I think we have a little time.
- 02-01:27:08  
Nengudi: Well, I'll tell you really quickly, and then I can tell you again [next time].
- 02-01:27:11  
Cooks: Okay, perfect.
- 02-01:27:13  
Nengudi: As I said, I slowly would try some of these phone numbers that people gave me. And this one person, who's my dear friend to this day, Edna Watson, she was a costume designer. And so we had lunch. She said, "Oh, let me show you this and that." In that one day, I met everybody that I was to know in New York. She took me to Weusi. I don't know if you're familiar with Weusi. She took me to Weusi. I met all the Weusi artists. She took me to Studio Museum. I met Valerie Maynard; I don't know if you know who she is. And all these people in this one day, all these events were happening. And they ultimately became dear friends.
- 02-01:28:11  
Cooks: And she—
- 02-01:28:11  
Nengudi: That's how it is in New York.

02-01:28:13

Cooks: Yeah, and she was a costume designer, so you must have been—or were you really interested in what she was doing?

02-01:28:21

Nengudi: Oh yeah, I was really excited. I would go with her on a couple of her scouting trips. Even though she physically did the work, she also had to go and find a hat from the 1940s or a this or a that from, you know, these different time periods. So I'd have fun seeing all these different places.

02-01:28:44

Cooks: Wow, okay. So let's start there—

02-01:28:49

Nengudi: Okay.

02-01:28:50

Cooks: —next time.

02-01:28:51

Nengudi: All right.

02-01:28:53

Cooks: But yeah, this will be a good place to end and keep us on time.

02-01:28:56

Nengudi: Okay. We're talking about October 20.

02-01:28:58

Tewes: Thank you, guys.

02-01:28:59

Nengudi: Okay, thank you!

### Interview 3: October 20, 2020

03-00:00:00

Tewes: This is a third interview with Senga Nengudi for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. This remote interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes on October 20, 2020. Ms. Nengudi joins from Colorado Springs, Colorado; Dr. Cooks joins from Irvine, California; and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thank you all for joining today. Bridget, why don't you start us off with some questions here?

03-00:00:32

Cooks: Great. Senga, last time we were in New York. We were talking about your time there—I think she disappeared! [break in audio]

03-00:00:50

Tewes: Okay, we are back from a break. Bridget, go ahead and continue.



- 03-00:00:55  
Cooks: Okay, so when we left off, Senga, you were arriving in New York. Edna Watson was taking you around.
- 03-00:01:05  
Nengudi: Okay, you were frozen for a while.
- 03-00:01:09  
Cooks: Oh, okay. Are we back? Can you see us?
- 03-00:01:10  
Nengudi: And it's because the Internet connection is unstable.
- 03-00:01:16  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-00:01:17  
Tewes: Okay.
- 03-00:01:17  
Cooks: How is it working right now?
- 03-00:01:20  
Nengudi: Fine, except your speaking is delayed. Your lips are going, and then [laughs] we catch up with it.
- 03-00:01:31  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-00:01:32  
Tewes: Let's pause for a second, then. [break in audio] Okay, we are back from a break. Bridget, you're up.
- 03-00:01:40  
Cooks: Okay, so we were talking last time about Edna Watson in New York. You connected with her, and in one day she introduced you to everyone who—
- 03-00:01:52  
Nengudi: Yes.
- 03-00:01:54  
Cooks: And it was so exciting that there were people that you remained friends with for decades after that. So we want to talk about your time in New York. You moved there in 1971. And is it correct that you were living in a brownstone in Spanish Harlem?
- 03-00:02:16  
Nengudi: Yes, 243 E. One Hundred Eighteenth St., between Second and Third.
- 03-00:02:23  
Cooks: Okay, perfect. That's incredible, Senga. And you were working at the Children's Art Carnival in Harlem. We wanted to hear you talk about your

early impressions of New York in the early 1970s. What do you remember of the art world in New York versus Los Angeles? Did you feel like your education in California really prepared you to be an artist in New York?

03-00:02:56

Nengudi:

That's a very long question. Can we go back and forth a bit?

03-00:03:03

Cooks:

Absolutely.

03-00:03:05

Nengudi:

Okay, so what I want to tell you about Edna, when I first met her she was a fashion—she was a costume designer for plays. I think she worked with August Wilson and people like that. And the interesting thing—the only reason I want to bring it up, because it tells the climate of the times—she was really good. She had a lot of plays under her belt, but getting into the union was near to impossible. Oh my God, I don't even know if there was one Black person in the union at the time, so that was a really big issue. That's the only reason I wanted to bring that up, that across the board, whatever you were trying to do, it was quite difficult to get into the circle, I guess you might call it. So that's the only reason I wanted to mention that.

03-00:04:04

So I'm going to go back a little bit, as well, because when I first moved to New York, I didn't know anybody—and did I tell you about my cousins?

03-00:04:17

Cooks:

Yes, you did. You told us about your cousins, yeah.

03-00:04:21

Nengudi:

In Queens.

03-00:04:22

Cooks:

Yes.

03-00:04:23

Nengudi:

They kicked me out.

03-00:04:24

Cooks:

[laughs] After a month, I think you said?

03-00:04:28

Nengudi:

Yeah, so when they brought me into the city before they kicked me out, and we went to the Apollo. That was an experience, of course, I could have never had in Los Angeles. To me it was like, wow, because I think Aretha [Franklin] was singing at that point at the Apollo. But when we went into town, there were apartment buildings that were ablaze, and so it was like this scene that I had never experienced. Here's all this fire and music and, you know, just this whole energy scene, that my eyes were opened. And at the time at the Apollo,

which wasn't unusual for other places, like downtown—what's that place where the girls dance? [makes kicking movements with hand]

03-00:05:31

Cooks: Oh, the Radio City [Music Hall]?

03-00:05:31

Nengudi: Music City—

03-00:05:33

Cooks: Radio—yeah.

03-00:05:34

Nengudi: And at the time what they did was—which, I don't think anybody has any patience anymore—they had two feature films, a cartoon, and then they had a talent show, which you're—it was pretty infamous—and then they had the main talent. That night it was Aretha. And so all of this was on one night, one bill. They had a section, it was sort of like a balcony section where all the gay guys would be, and they'd be *flamboyant* and they'd have their thing going. I mean, it was just so wild, coming from what seemed to be tame LA. So that was my introduction to New York City. Just like I pictured it, really. [laughs]

03-00:06:34

Cooks: Senga, when you said that the buildings were on fire, you mean literally they were on—do you remember what was going on?

03-00:06:39

Nengudi: Yeah, it was, you know, a fire, and one didn't know if it was a fire that was actually set by the landlord so he could get his rent or whatever, or something else happened. But it was ablaze. It wasn't just [makes noise], it was *ablaze*. So that was the nature of Harlem at the time.

03-00:07:06

Cooks: Wow.

03-00:07:07

Nengudi: Yeah.

03-00:07:08

Cooks: Okay.

03-00:07:09

Nengudi: So then after a point—and I really don't remember how I got the job, but I did get the job at Children's Art Carnival. And as I recall, it was originally sponsored by, I think it was MoMA [Museum of Modern Art]. You might have to check that.

03-00:07:29

Cooks: Okay.

03-00:07:31  
Nengudi:

And the reason they wanted to do that is they wanted to have an uptown presence or an uptown version. Betty Blayton-Taylor, who was a painter in her own right, was the director. You know, were kind of a happy family. What we would do is the schools would bring their children in for an art experience that they couldn't have in their school. So it's really interesting how it worked out, because it was a real difference between the families who really talked to their kids about their history and culture, and the ones that didn't. They were really on it. They really knew about their culture and all of that kind of thing, and then the other ones didn't. [laughs] So it was a really great environment.

03-00:08:37  
Cooks:

And, Senga, do you remember going to art museums at this time? You know, you're in New York, you're surrounded by so much visual culture, dance culture. Were there artists who you were introduced to, by going to museums, that had an impact on you?

03-00:08:59  
Nengudi:

Artists that I was introduced to. Well, that was pretty much uptown. You know, the Studio Museum in Harlem was just wonderful. It was fresh. I'm trying to remember the—God, what was his name? He died.

03-00:09:21  
Cooks:

What kind of work did he make?

03-00:09:26  
Nengudi:

[Ed Spriggs] was the director, and he—I think he could have been a part of—what's the group that came—

03-00:09:40  
Cooks:

We can come back to it, we can come back to it. We can put it in the transcript, yeah.

03-00:09:44  
Nengudi:

Okay, all right. [It was AfriCOBRA.]

03-00:09:47  
Cooks:

But you were going to the Studio Museum of Harlem and influenced by some of the things that you saw there. And were you meeting some of those artists that were showing there?

03-00:09:59  
Nengudi:

Yeah, there was an internship there at the time, which certainly looks quite different from now—Jimmy Phillips, James Phillips [and Valerie Maynard were part of the residency program]. Some of the Weusi people, you know, they weren't at the Studio Museum, but they [influenced me]. Ronald Okoe Pyatt, which was my son's father's brother.

03-00:10:39  
Cooks:

Okay.

03-00:10:41  
Nengudi:

They were twins. And so there was a group. Downtown, I met William T. Williams. And you know, I just met a lot of people. Of course, I was going to downtown events, as well. I mean, the Guggenheim [Museum].

03-00:11:07  
Cooks:

Yeah, I was wondering about—when I look at your work, sometimes I'll think about other—particularly women—sculptors who were doing really interesting things with materials, choice of materials and the way that they used space, the way that they transformed space. I don't know if you've said this somewhere else, but I wondered if you remembered seeing Ruth Asawa's work anywhere or if it registered for you, or Eva Hesse's work. Yes? Okay.

03-00:11:41  
Nengudi:

Yeah.

03-00:11:44  
Cooks:

Okay, could we talk a bit about maybe some of the things you saw? And those two might not be the main people, but were there people—

03-00:11:51  
Nengudi:

It's funny, I had the nerve as a young artist, but it feels like she was not that much different in age. You know, I'd pooch my lip out, because I'd say, "Eva Hesse? *I'm* doing that. Why is *she* getting all the play? Is it only because she's in New York, and all that kind of stuff?" So yes, I'm very aware. [Cooks laughs] And really liked her work, of course. Even though I've never met her, I really liked—every time I say that I blank on a name. In France, she does kind of fabric stuff. Oh man, you know who I'm talking about. She wrote a book on, I think, slavery or something like that. What's her name?

03-00:12:51  
Cooks:

Oh, it'll come to me, too, but we'll—

03-00:12:57  
Nengudi:

She lived in France.

03-00:12:58  
Cooks:

Yes.

03-00:12:59  
Nengudi:

And so two of my strongest influences, outside of the people I was actually working with, were Mel Gibson—Mel Gibson? [laughs] Mel Edwards— [laughs]

03-00:13:11  
Cooks:

That would be fun, yeah.

03-00:13:14  
Nengudi:

Mel Edwards and—oh, it's three names. And ta da, ta da, ta da. What is her name? Anyway, and her.

- 03-00:13:30  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-00:13:30  
Nengudi: I really thought it was so lovely—she spoke another language, and she was able to have a full career in France as well as here.
- 03-00:13:40  
Cooks: Senga, was it Barbara Chase-Riboud?
- 03-00:13:43  
Nengudi: Yes.
- 03-00:13:45  
Cooks: Okay, yes. We know who we're talking about, yes.
- 03-00:13:48  
Nengudi: Yes, we know who we're talking about! [laughs]
- 03-00:13:50  
Cooks: But sometimes the names aren't right at the—
- 03-00:13:52  
Nengudi: I know, I know! So Barbara Chase-Riboud was really quite an influence.
- 03-00:14:00  
Cooks: And where did you see her work? Was it uptown or downtown? I wonder who was getting recognized.
- 03-00:14:08  
Nengudi: I don't think it was uptown.
- 03-00:14:10  
Cooks: No.
- 03-00:14:11  
Nengudi: And in fact, it might even have just been in books in the beginning.
- 03-00:14:14  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-00:14:18  
Nengudi: Hard to say, but I don't think it was uptown.
- 03-00:14:26  
Cooks: Okay. Well, it's interesting to hear you talking about Eva Hesse's work, because you like it, but you weren't getting recognized, and you were coming into your own.
- 03-00:14:39  
Nengudi: Yeah, I was doing a lot of explorations. I won't say similar, but I was doing explorations and yeah.

03-00:14:50

Cooks:

So two questions I have after that: did you then aspire to be shown in the same places, and did you find other places where you thought you would be able to show that work? What did you think about where you were going after seeing that work, or just being around a community of Black artists in Harlem?

03-00:15:16

Nengudi:

Actually, to be honest, as I search my brain, it feels as though I was having those feelings when I was in Los Angeles, so it could have been after I was in New York that, you know, I really honed in on her work. Excuse me. So what was the other question? I'm sorry.

03-00:15:41

Cooks:

I was just trying to imagine, as a younger artist, how you envisioned where you wanted to show your work. And did you think, It'll be at the Studio Museum, it'll be at the Guggenheim, it'll be France, it'll be all these places?

03-00:15:58

Nengudi:

Yeah well, I really did dream big. I really did dream of being in all of those places, and that has come true—to the point where it's beyond my dreams.

03-00:16:15

Cooks:

Wow.

03-00:16:15

Nengudi:

Sometimes I think about it, and I'm speaking with a curator in Germany or France or this or that, and sometimes I have to pinch myself when I'm having these conversations. Yes.

03-00:16:33

Cooks:

That's incredible.

03-00:16:33

Nengudi:

Yeah.

03-00:16:35

Cooks:

That's so wonderful to hear. That's worth the whole oral history. I mean, just to document that you've become who you are, and that people really appreciate what you do.

03-00:16:49

Nengudi:

Yeah, and it was like I dream a lot, and I dreamed a lot then. One might call it visualizing, I don't know, but I just was in this world where I just kind of visualized myself. I remember early on I was doing my *Water* pieces, and a young kid came in and he says, "Wow, this looks just like you'd see in a museum." I thought, Wow, that's really a compliment, that he thought that the level was such that the work was worthy of that. So I guess, yeah, I did have those ideas. But along with it—maybe the sting of it is gone now—but I really enjoyed being in alternative galleries and being in settings where people were really doing new things that at that point was not accepted by the mainstream.

03-00:18:11

Cooks:

So, Senga, we're also wondering about a couple of things. One is we know that racism exists, that it existed then, it exists now; it has been very challenging for Black people in the art world. Is there a way that maybe you could talk about how you had these dreams that have come true? And at the same time, how did you think about the kind of exclusion or the attitudes that you were experiencing, where it seemed like it could have been very limited and maybe you wouldn't have been successful. You know, how did you negotiate the kind of reality of racism in the art world?

03-00:19:07

Nengudi:

I guess, in a sense, it was negotiated like any other part of our existence in America. It is quite a bit of negotiation involved, and—let me think on that question. Oh boy, it's like today the bandage has been, as they say, the bandage has been ripped off, and you see the rawness of racism. At that point, we were fighting against racism, fighting against [not] getting into the museums and so on. But I don't know quite how to—it's really a layered question and answer, because, I don't know, a lot of this—to be honest, I just, I'm not as angry anymore. [laughs] So it was like there was a lot of anger at the time.

03-00:20:28

You know, I think then equity, for me, was—which I may have mentioned; it's hard to remember what we said last time—this whole issue that in public museums that were funded by taxes, there was no representation of everybody in a museum. Yet our money—just like Vietnam—our money was going to this thing that we had no representation with, and that was really terrible. Then there was this issue of, well, sure, we'll let you in, but we're kind of still in charge. And Howardena Pindell is such an amazing person. You know, she's so smart. She said once that we can't come with our hat in our hands. This has to be equal across the board. If you're still saying, "Well, *we* think your aesthetics is good now," then that doesn't work. You know, you're still in charge. You're still the one that's making the criteria for what is good and what isn't good. So this whole thing about—and stop me if I've said this—okay, this whole thing about them calling the shots was just really annoying.

03-00:22:18

My situation is, if you don't do it across the board, then it's not sincere. If you don't pay attention to everybody, if you don't pay—obviously pay attention to us, but if you don't pay attention to Latino artists, if you don't pay attention to Indigenous artists, all that kind of stuff, then you're just playing a game, it's the pressure point that's on you, so you do that. But that doesn't include anybody else until somebody else puts pressure on you. It's not coming from an honest point, it's not honest; it's just a game that they're playing. So until everybody sits at the table equally, it's not real.



03-00:23:17

And a couple of people have always said, "Oh yeah, okay, in the eighties, the beginning of the eighties, there was a look at Black art." In fact, I'm trying to remember what magazine that was. Was it *Time* magazine?

03-00:23:32

Cooks:

I think *Time* magazine had a feature about Black artists, and Bill T. Jones was on the cover. That might have been—

03-00:23:38

Nengudi:

Oh, was he? Okay, yeah. But that's not the one I'm talking about.

03-00:23:41

Cooks:

Oh okay.

03-00:23:41

Nengudi:

It was another one. But anyway, it was that same kind of thing. There's this flash, and then after a while it's forgotten and everything kind of goes back to normal and so on. The same thing with Latino artists. There was a—let's see, what was the name of that—there was a huge Latino show in the eighties. It was called *CARA*, [*Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*] or something like that.

03-00:24:05

Cooks:

Yes, it was *CARA*, yes.

03-00:24:08

Nengudi:

There you go again. Pow, and then it just kind of fades away. So they'd have these huge shows, and then nothing really happens, because it's not incorporated into the fabric of the main culture. It's just somebody knocks on the door hard enough where they *let* you in. And so that's how it is and how it was.

03-00:24:43

Cooks:

So, Senga, a couple of things I want to talk about next. I would like to look at some of the art that you were making at that time. I don't know if you have in front of you the pictures that we sent so that we could look at those together. And then, we're also wanting to know when you met Linda Goode Bryant and thinking about Just Above Midtown [JAM] Gallery.

03-00:25:13

Nengudi:

Well, curiously enough, I didn't meet Linda until after I—

03-00:25:21

Cooks:

Moved back to Los Angeles?

03-00:25:23

Nengudi:

Yes.

03-00:25:24

Cooks:

Okay. We've been trying to figure that out, because we thought, They must have met while she was in New York, but you didn't start showing there until '77, in my notes.

03-00:25:33

Nengudi:

Right, right.

03-00:25:35

Cooks:

Okay, so that is helpful for the timeline. For instance, I'm looking at the pictures now, this work from 1972, *Death's Got a Hold on Me*. That was work that you were making—

03-00:25:48

Nengudi:

Yes.

03-00:25:49

Cooks:

—before JAM opened, but this was work that you made soon after you came to New York. I would love to hear you talk about this work. I have in my notes that you talked about them then as spirit figures or as souls, and it would just be delightful for you to talk about your ideas about this work, and how you presented them, who saw them. You tend to sometimes work collaboratively. Were there other people involved? So please, just tell us whatever you want to.

03-00:26:31

Nengudi:

Well, I didn't show them anywhere. I installed them, so whoever saw them, saw them, but I didn't show them in any exhibits there.

03-00:26:49

Cooks:

Okay.

03-00:26:50

Nengudi:

I was taken by certain aspects of life in New York, and I think I may have mentioned about the heroin addicts and so on and so forth. Did I?

03-00:27:06

Cooks:

I don't think so. I've read that, but I'm not sure if you've actually said it for the oral history.

03-00:27:09

Nengudi:

Okay, all right. So at the time, heroin was the drug of choice. It had this peculiar thing when people were high, they would just kind of weave around and go like that and like this, but they would never fall. They would just be like swaying trees, to the point where on street corners it would be like almost like a forest of them. There might be ten, fifteen people that were just high. And so there'd be this amazing movement, this amazing choreography, even, that would go on. And you know, obviously it was a terrible thing. But that is what I got out of it: this grace, in a sense, that was happening. And there was a lot of death, there was a lot of overdoses. And so that's why this came. That

particular piece I created, because it just felt like the Black person didn't have a chance, that there was always this gripping of death going on in the lives of us, in our lives, in our daily lives, for one reason or another.

03-00:28:49

I remember in *For Colored Girls*, there was an actual incident—I don't know, are you familiar with *For Colored Girls*?

03-00:29:06

Cooks: I am, the play, yes.

03-00:29:07

Nengudi: Yeah, okay. There was an incident where this man did drop his own children out of a window, and it was the most horrific thing. All this kind of intensity of life going on there, and that was why I did that piece.

03-00:29:33

Cooks: Okay. And these are made out of fabric, so they can also move.

03-00:29:39

Nengudi: Yes.

03-00:29:39

Cooks: Okay.

03-00:29:41

Nengudi: This particular piece I think I made out of vinyl plastic, like you would do for upholstery. Let me see [looks at image], yeah, that was vinyl plastic. It was placed on the flag kind of material that I used for the outside pieces, but the piece itself, both the skeleton and the figure, were made out of vinyl plastic.

03-00:30:20

Cooks: Okay, so these were installed in your studio, so people could come to your studio, but—

03-00:30:25

Nengudi: At my house.

03-00:30:26

Cooks: Okay, your studio on the ground floor.

03-00:30:28

Nengudi: Like a preview at my house, yeah.

03-00:30:29

Cooks: Okay. I wanted to look at the next picture with you. These are just for people who are going to try to follow along in the archive and see what we're looking at. These are photographs that I took from the Archives of American Art website, so they can find them there, and I was happy to see them. But this next picture shows another work by you onstage, so I'd like to hear you talk

about how you started this kind of collaboration with—was this a theater company or—

03-00:31:08

Nengudi: This is Dianne McIntyre.

03-00:31:11

Cooks: Okay.

03-00:31:11

Nengudi: Okay, and I personally hate this piece.

03-00:31:14

Cooks: Okay, sorry.

03-00:31:16

Nengudi: No, that's all right. It didn't turn out as I expected it would, it didn't take the form that I expected. I did the web, as well.

03-00:31:30

Cooks: Oh okay.

03-00:31:32

Nengudi: But yeah, I wasn't real happy with that.

03-00:31:34

Cooks: Do you remember what year this was? Was it '73 or sometime around there?

03-00:31:45

Nengudi: Yeah, I don't remember.

03-00:31:46

Cooks: And do you remember what this performance was or where it was?

03-00:31:52

Nengudi: I do not.

03-00:31:53

Cooks: Okay.

03-00:31:53

Nengudi: I was so traumatized by it, in fact. I wasn't happy with it. All I can remember [is] it was Dianne McIntyre's company.

03-00:32:03

Cooks: Well, let's move on to the next picture then. [laughs]

03-00:32:05

Nengudi: Okay.

03-00:32:08

Cooks: So, this one, how do you feel about this one? This is *Twins (Soul I)*.

- 03-00:32:13  
Nengudi: Yes, I like this one.
- 03-00:32:15  
Cooks: Okay, good.
- 03-00:32:15  
Nengudi: [laughs] This is kind of a harkening back to kind of African forms. The twin is very—the twin is/are—the twin is very important in African—certain African cultures. As I told you, René [Pyatt], who's my first son's father, was a twin. And so I was looking at that, but I was also looking at this energy, this kind of mystic, even mythical element of the twin.
- 03-00:33:13  
Cooks: So, Senga, do you remember what you were reading at this time? I know that you've talked a lot about reading and learning so much from books when you were in LA, but I wonder what you were reading and what other—just hearing you talk about this work, I think, What was she reading? What else was she doing that was really influencing the way you were thinking—
- 03-00:33:35  
Nengudi: Yeah—
- 03-00:33:41  
Cooks: —or things you were interested in.
- 03-00:33:43  
Nengudi: Yeah, really, I was intrigued by the whole Yoruba thing. I was reading some about it, but mostly having that experience. And I've always been good for picture books—[laughs] namely, art books—to the point where sometimes just to calm myself down, I have to go to the library and get a book and just take that time out to look at every page and so on. I am trying to think what I was reading at the time.
- 03-00:34:33  
Cooks: You were going to the New York Public Library and finding things to calm you or inspire you?
- 03-00:34:42  
Nengudi: Well, that's been in the history of my life. You know, I love libraries wherever I am. I'm drawn to the library, the main library of that city or town even. So it wasn't just in New York. You know, the Schomburg [Center for Research in Black Culture], I think it was.
- 03-00:35:05  
Cooks: Yeah, it's the Schomburg. The mecca for Black resources, yeah. So you were there, too.
- 03-00:35:14  
Nengudi: Hm?

03-00:35:14

Cooks: You were also at the Schomburg.

03-00:35:16

Nengudi: Yes, yes. Well, I sure am glad you're getting me now, because I didn't realize I had forgotten so much, and I have to really massage my memory. To remember, I'd even have to go into my journals, because I would always write down this or that. And my journals are in, let's see, is it Amistad [Research Center]? It's an archive in New Orleans.

03-00:35:55

Cooks: Okay, in New Orleans, okay. Great.

03-00:35:59

Nengudi: They have most of my journals. So I would write down what I was reading, but in the moment. I was reading stuff that in the moment most people were reading. You know, there's always two or three books that everyone's reading at the time that is impressing everyone at the time.

03-00:36:19

Cooks: Okay. You know, let's look at this. I think I have one more picture from this time. This was a CAP [Community Arts Partnership] grant. This was something else that's in the Archives [of American Art]. I like this, because it gave me a sense of where you were as an artist, what your project was at the time. I just wanted to know if you wanted to—well, I wanted to know if you got the grant, and I wanted to hear you say more about what you were interested in at the time.

03-00:36:54

Nengudi: I got the grant.

03-00:36:56

Cooks: Great.

03-00:36:56

Nengudi: If you ask me what I did, I cannot remember. It feels like it might have had to do with those *Souls*, those installations I was doing. But I was incredibly excited. I thought, Oh hey, this is it, I'm on my way! You know, it was *huge*.

03-00:37:22

Cooks: So that's really exciting.

03-00:37:23

Nengudi: It was really huge.

03-00:37:27

Cooks: It's like a vote of confidence, you know, that somebody believes in you.

03-00:37:30

Nengudi: It is, it is.

03-00:37:32

Cooks:

And it's important to have that. I had also noted places where you were able to show your work while you were in New York, and one of those places was the Cinque Gallery. Could you talk to us about how you met Romare Bearden, or how you found out about the gallery? What was that like?

03-00:37:56

Nengudi:

Well you know, I don't recall how I found—it was just one of those places. It was so limited where you could show. I did not meet Romare Bearden, I did not meet him. But you know, obviously he was the founder of it. And oh my gosh, maybe I did meet him.

03-00:38:25

Cooks:

Do you remember who you connected with to have a show there?

03-00:38:31

Nengudi:

I don't. I mean, it's sad. I'm so sorry.

03-00:38:33

Cooks:

No, no, it's fine. I'm glad you had a show there. You don't have to remember all the details.

03-00:38:40

Nengudi:

No, but I mean a lot of this, like I said, I really didn't realize how much I've forgotten until you're probing. There are certain things that I remember extremely well, and then there are other things that, you know—excuse me—I don't know if it made an impression, enough of an—excuse me—enough of an impression for me to remember it. And—

03-00:39:07

Cooks:

Okay. Do you remember some of the work that you showed in the gallery? Was it the spirit works or the *Souls* work?

03-00:39:19

Nengudi:

No, it was not. I took classes at Bob Blackburn's print workshop, and it feels like it was a two-dimensional piece, like a print or something like that.

03-00:39:44

Cooks:

Okay.

03-00:39:45

Nengudi:

And I have to go all the way back—this is going way back to my childhood. I feel as though I need to say this, because I was interviewed and I've been giving all these interviews.

03-00:39:59

Cooks:

I know.

- 03-00:39:59  
Nengudi: I've had to give all these interviews, so I'm not sure what's what. But I just recently did an interview with the *New York*—the *T Magazine*, the *New York Times Magazine*.
- 03-00:40:16  
Cooks: Yes.
- 03-00:40:18  
Nengudi: And I felt compelled to say that between the ages of ten and thirteen, I was sexually abused. They say sometimes it has to do with your memory, too, you know, that you've just got to block out stuff. But I think I need to kind of have that on the record. The reason I've never mentioned it—well, obviously it's something one wouldn't mention—but also, I didn't want my art to be seen through that lens, I didn't want it to be limited. But I think at this point in the game, you know, it's an element that needs to be mentioned.
- 03-00:41:14  
Cooks: Well, thank you for putting that on the record. It is a lot more common than I think people realize.
- 03-00:41:19  
Nengudi: I agree, I agree.
- 03-00:41:21  
Cooks: I can imagine it affects your life, but it's not your whole life.
- 03-00:41:28  
Nengudi: Right, right, and I've been most fortunate. I've been fortunate, in terms of men—my husband of forty-some years, other male relationships I've had have been wonderful. But all I can say is, women should watch out for boyfriends, you know, that they're going to allow their children to be babysat or whatever. I've been seriously fortunate. But I thought since I mentioned that in that article, it seems like it's important that I mention it here.
- 03-00:42:11  
Cooks: Okay. Thank you, Senga.
- 03-00:42:17  
I wanted to also ask you about dance in New York. We've focused on the art, but I was talking to someone recently who said that you had some collaborative work with Blondell Cummings, and I said, "Oh, I'll ask her—"
- 03-00:42:36  
Nengudi: Yes.
- 03-00:42:37  
Cooks: "—when we get to that point." So you can start, please, by talking about working with Blondell—



- 03-00:42:47  
Nengudi: Okay, so Blondell—and that was through Just Above Midtown and Linda.
- 03-00:42:53  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-00:42:53  
Nengudi: And that was like in the, I think, early eighties or something like that.
- 03-00:43:01  
Cooks: So later on.
- 03-00:43:01  
Nengudi: Yeah, it was later on. And she had some incredible combinations, like David Hammons worked with Bill T. Jones. I mean, you know, some really incredible combinations, but that was later on.
- 03-00:43:17  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-00:43:19  
Nengudi: So if we're talking about New York, I, you know, I took classes. I took African classes. I'm trying to figure out where I might have taken the modern classes. I took a couple with Dianne McIntyre. Hers was mostly modern art based. I'm trying to think who else I took.
- 03-00:43:53  
Cooks: Were there performances you saw or places where you hung out to see dance? All of that was part of your universe in New York in the seventies? Yeah.
- 03-00:44:05  
Nengudi: Well like I said, Dianne was one. She was amazing because she worked with jazz musicians, which was a little bit different. And a good friend of mine was Cheryl Banks, who's now Cheryl Banks-Smith, and she danced with Sun Ra; that's how I met her. And Danny Davis, who was a Sun Ra musician, was also a good friend of René Pyatt's, and so that's how I met him. And through meeting him, I met other people with Sun Ra. So that was a major influence.
- 03-00:44:51  
Cooks: So were you going to Sun Ra shows? Did you meet Sun Ra? What was that like?
- 03-00:44:56  
Nengudi: I met Sun Ra personally once, but it wasn't—it was after my New York days.
- 03-00:45:06  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-00:45:08  
Nengudi: It was really weird, because everybody I knew really hung out with Sun Ra, but I wasn't that close in that group to hang out with him. And plus, you know,

I'm shy, I don't stay up late, [laughs] and so these things were like all night long things that I just could not hang totally with.

03-00:45:38

Cooks: Okay. So at this point, you are—in our timeline it's 1974. So we'd love to hear you talk about how you decided it was time to come back to Los Angeles. What went into that decision, and then talking about coming back to LA?

03-00:46:04

Nengudi: Okay. Well, I did tell you about how I met—well, how I re-met David, right?

03-00:46:17

Cooks: I don't think so, no.

03-00:46:20

Nengudi: Hm. I [was] sure I told you like—I can't remember when it was, if it was 1972—it feels like it possibly was that—there's a Black arts [conference]—[coughs] excuse me—a Black arts—

03-00:46:35

Cooks: Oh yes.

03-00:46:37

Nengudi: Yeah, I told you, right.

03-00:46:38

Cooks: Yes, and you were all staying at the same place.

03-00:46:41

Nengudi: Right.

03-00:46:41

Cooks: Okay, and at that point, David, he was living in Los Angeles?

03-00:46:46

Nengudi: Yes.

03-00:46:46

Cooks: And so was that meeting, where the conference was happening, was that influential on you coming back to LA?

03-00:46:56

Nengudi: Yes. Okay, but I didn't realize I had spoken to you about that, because that was really significant, that all these wonderful people were staying in my apartment and having that exchange.

03-00:47:12

Cooks: Okay, and when did you start to feel like it was time to leave New York, or what—how did you make that decision?

03-00:47:20  
Nengudi:

Well, that was really easy, because I got pregnant. I wanted to be pregnant, I wanted to be pregnant. But I got pregnant, and I could not visualize myself dragging a baby carriage, a baby stroller up and down the subway stairs. And as most girls want, I wanted to be by my mother during this time so she could help me and all that kind of stuff. So that was the main reason I left.

03-00:47:53  
Cooks:

Okay.

03-00:47:54  
Nengudi:

That was *the* main reason.

03-00:47:57  
Cooks:

[laughs] Okay, so you wanted to get pregnant, you got pregnant and wanted to be in a space where you felt more comfortable raising your son.

03-00:48:06  
Nengudi:

More supported.

03-00:48:16  
Cooks:

And so that was in 1974. Is that correct?

03-00:48:20  
Nengudi:

Yes.

03-00:48:21  
Cooks:

I also have that that's the year that you changed your name from Sue Irons to N'Senga Nengudi. Would you talk a bit about how—did those two things happen at the same time? Did it work together that you were giving birth to your son and you were giving birth to a new identity? Or however you want to tell us those stories.

03-00:48:45  
Nengudi:

Yeah, it was sort of like that. And it took a while. Even though I declared it at the time, it took a while for that to happen. The law is if you use the same name for seven years, you don't even have to go through a court or anything, it just becomes your legal name. And so, needless to say, people transitioning from calling me Sue to Senga was quite a thing. My mother never did, basically. [laughs] And she was highly insulted and upset, and all that kind of stuff. It just felt like I had kind of turned a corner, and it felt just sort of like clothes that don't fit you anymore; it felt like that name didn't fit me anymore.

03-00:49:45

I know you've noticed that during certain times there are certain names that are—I won't say fashionable, but common; you know, like Ronald. [laughs] I've known so many Ronalds, it's not even funny. I don't even know what that's about. But anyway, there's all these names, you know, Sue, Sally. There were so many Sues around that I didn't even know who they were talking to.

I'd go into a store, and, "Hey, Sue, hey, Sue," and I'd always turn around. It was never for me. So you know, those little—

03-00:50:33

Siri: I don't know what that means. [Nengudi laughs and holds up phone] If you like, I can search the Web for it.

03-00:50:37

Cooks: She doesn't know who Sue is either. That's funny.

03-00:50:40

Nengudi: What did you say?

03-00:50:42

Cooks: I said your phone doesn't know who Sue is either!

03-00:50:44

Nengudi: I know, right! [laughs] So it was that combination of things. And you're talking about reading a book. I read a book where, I think it was in certain elements of Chinese culture, when you reached a certain mastering of something, then they officially changed your name, and that name would kind of indicate that you have reached a certain level of enlightenment. It can go on and on.

03-00:51:19

So Muhammad Ali, you name it. All of these people. And a lot of people had a really hard time with it, and I said, "Well you know, why are you having this hard time when there are so many examples?" Like, Jewish people would change their names all the time, because they couldn't get into this or that—get into show biz or this or that. So this whole thing of name changing, you know, was a really, really big deal to some people. It kind of goes back and forth, because a lot of people I met in New York, they changed their names. And then there are people that change their names, and then they go back to their other name later. You know, like Kwaku. When I met him—Kwaku Young, that's how I met him. But now it's Kwaku-Roderick Young.

03-00:52:29

So I mean, the name game is really fascinating to me, as you can imagine, with my little whole persona thing. I love names, and I love names so much that I thought, Well, I could never have enough children to think of all the names I want to use, so I went to the persona thing.

03-00:52:58

Cooks: Yeah, it's very personal, but it does involve other people, because then they have to—

03-00:53:05

Nengudi: Exactly.

03-00:53:05

Cooks: Now how did you choose your name, or did someone suggest the name?

03-00:53:10

Nengudi: Yes, I had a friend who was from—at that point it was called Zaire—he was an African student from Zaire, you know, he went to USC [University of Southern California]. I told him that that's what I wanted to do, and so he did supply me with a name. And the name really—you know, it means woman of the village, auntie of the village that has wisdom, and you come to her and everything. So it wasn't until maybe about two or three years ago that I realized really what that was all about, because I've met some young African women artists and they call me auntie, and I go, Oh, how wonderful. And then a friend of mine, her son married someone from Zimbabwe, I think it is. And in truth, it's really important, "Senga" is really important. It *is* an auntie that they have to come to if they're getting married. Whatever is going on, they have to have that auntie's approval and support, so it's really significant in a number of African countries.

03-00:54:40

Cooks: Yeah, that's wonderful. And now you have that relationship.

03-00:54:43

Nengudi: Now I'm into it! Huh?

03-00:54:45

Cooks: Now you have that relationship, where your life is fulfilling the name.

03-00:54:50

Nengudi: Yes, exactly. It just makes me feel so good. You know, they'll write to me and they say, "Auntie this" and "Auntie that." I mean, it's just lovely.

03-00:55:00

Cooks: Yeah.

03-00:55:01

Nengudi: And I'm happy to support them.

03-00:55:04

Cooks: Right. Oh, that's a great story. One of the things Amanda and I had talked about this is something that many women artists who decide to be mothers seem to have to think about—and maybe male artists don't—which is that you are an artist, that's what you're going to be, that's who you are already—and you're going to be a mother. So you're back in Los Angeles, you're with your family.

03-00:55:35

Nengudi: Right.

03-00:55:36

Cooks: And did you think about, Well, maybe now I have to get a "real job," quote, unquote? Or now, how can I—I can't be an artist anymore. Or was it always,

Well, I'll see how this is just going to have to work. What was your attitude about being an artist and being a mother?

03-00:56:03

Nengudi:

It was, Well, I'm just going to have to see how this works, because I'm not going to give it up. And Suzanne Jackson—are you familiar [with her]?

03-00:56:14

Cooks:

Yes!

03-00:56:15

Nengudi:

Well, Suzanne and I, yeah, we would crack up about that, that this other artist, whom we all know, told us that, "Well, you can't do that. You have to wait until you raise your children—" because that's what she had done—"and *then* you can start your career." We both said, "That's not happening," and we were, thankfully, able to prove her wrong. But yeah, there was no question that that's how I was going to proceed. You know, I got temp jobs and this kind of job and that kind of—I just made ends meet, I just did it.

03-00:57:01

Cooks:

Okay. So you had your son in '74, and it's a big transition geographically, but your life changes. You're still going to be an artist, and you're just—and you did, you made it work. You're still a mother and an artist.

03-00:57:23

I wanted to ask you about something I had noticed in my research, that you went to see an exhibition called *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act [in the Collection of Katerine Coryton White]* at the White Gallery at UCLA [in 1979], curated by Robert Farris Thompson. I wanted to hear any memories you had of that, and maybe how that helped you think about your future as an artist, or if it influenced you to do certain things in your work.

03-00:57:58

Nengudi:

Well yeah, I mean, he was an amazing person and, again, curiously enough, friends of mine. Because they lived in New York, were able to go up to—where was he, Princeton? Where was he?

03-00:58:18

Cooks:

He was at Yale, and he just retired.

03-00:58:21

Nengudi:

Yale. They were able to go up there and listen to his lectures and all that kind of stuff. But his stuff was really influential. And I didn't realize, honestly, that *he* was the one that had curated that show. But what I remember about the show, and I guess that speaks to my interest in there being a number of things that are going on in a show, as opposed to just the work itself: I remember passing by this sculpture—and it was a tight show, in that there wasn't that much room between things—and so when I passed by it, I could smell the work. And this was an African sculpture; I don't know from what region, but I could smell it, and that just *really* was significant to me. That it wasn't just the

work, there was a whole thing going on with this work, and I was allowed to smell it, which you normally usually aren't. The complexity that goes on with certain artwork, and in this case African artwork. Because it's a sculpture, it has all these textures, but it also has this religious meaning, this spiritual meaning that enhances and gives additional power to the work. So I'm just really interested in not just one, okay, I'm looking at a picture. I'm interested in how involved that piece can be, if that makes much sense.

03-01:00:36

Cooks:

Yeah, that does make sense. And it seems like because you're so interested in objects in space, that there's something about the artwork becoming part of *your* space in that way and part of your body. That makes perfect sense coming from you. [laughs]

03-01:00:58

Nengudi:

Right, right.

03-01:00:59

Cooks:

That makes sense.

03-01:00:59

Nengudi:

Right, right. Yeah, and it's sort of like iconic paintings and it's sort of like aboriginal paintings. Okay, so with the icons, you have the saint, but you're supposed to look *through* that to another reality. They're just giving you kind of a pathway in, so when you look at this gold painting, you know you're looking through it onto something else. And similarly, with aboriginal work, that always excites me, because you're going on this dreamtime, you're going on a journey, and you almost can't help it. I've always been so fascinated with aboriginal art. I'm looking at it and I'm mesmerized by it, and it takes me on this journey. It's so fascinating when work *can* take you some place. As even Monet. You know, I'll go to MoMA, and I'll sit there, and it ever amazes me that I'm sitting there, and all of a sudden these lilies appear. Or, oh, what do—

03-01:02:32

Cooks:

Yeah, the water lilies?

03-01:02:34

Nengudi:

Yes, yes. What do they call it in fashion? The great reveal.

03-01:02:41

Cooks:

Okay. [laughs]

03-01:02:42

Nengudi:

You know, you're sitting there, you're looking at this abstract kind of thing, and then all of a sudden it reveals itself to you. And I love that.

03-01:02:54

Cooks:

Yeah. You're lucky to be someone who's receptive to that. I think about some people—it never reaches them. But you are sensitive to it, and then you also bring that out in your own work.

03-01:03:09  
Nengudi:

Yeah, and, I mean, to each his own. That excites me, but somebody might be in front of a velvet painting and say, "Hey, you know, woo-hoo! This is great. Let me meditate on this with a beer and a joint or something." You know, to each his own.

03-01:03:28  
Cooks:

Right. That's hilarious. So, Senga, did you ever—well, I guess I'm thinking specifically when you went to see art after you had your first son, did you take him with you to the museums?

03-01:03:44  
Nengudi:

Mm-hm.

03-01:03:45  
Cooks:

Yeah, that's cool.

03-01:03:46  
Nengudi:

Well, I took him, I took him—well, this is kind of a happy/sad story. In LA they had, every year, a Black arts festival at the time. And this time they had it—I think it's MacArthur Park. Is that the place that was like around—

03-01:04:13  
Cooks:

It's on Wilshire [Blvd.]. It wasn't far from Gallery 32.

03-01:04:16  
Nengudi:

Yes, exactly. That's what it was. And it would just be wonderful, you know, it would be so African and so Black, and I would just get drunk off the faces. There were so many faces. But it had been in another location before that. And even though this was a lovely thing, all around the rim of all the buildings there were police with guns. They were so insecure about Black people getting together that they had this presence that was ridiculous and undeniable. I was there selling this and that, little books, and so on, and I had my son in his little African outfit, and so cute. He was one year old. So his father and I had a kind of a back-and-forth relationship, and that was the last time we saw René, because he passed shortly after that. He died when he was one year old, my son was one year old. So anyway, yeah, so that was kind of the climate, because LA is LA, and the police are the police, and all that kind of stuff. But it was really quite absurd that they had that level of presence. And it was such a wonderful thing. I mean, just full of Africanism kind of stuff, and a strong cultural event.

03-01:06:16  
Cooks:

So just because you mentioned René again, I just wanted to ask: did he move to LA with you or was he in New York and you came—

03-01:06:27  
Nengudi:

He came shortly after.



03-01:06:30

Cooks: Okay.

03-01:06:31

Nengudi: And yeah, moved there, but it was a complicated situation.

03-01:06:35

Cooks: Sure.

03-01:06:37

Nengudi: Yeah.

03-01:06:36

Cooks: Well, I'm sorry that he died. I didn't know. All of that information is new to me. So yeah, sorry to hear that.

03-01:06:46

Nengudi: Yeah.

03-01:06:47

Cooks: Well, I'd like to also talk about after you're in LA, and you're seeing art and you're a new mom, and there are some exciting things going on. How did you become part of this important community of artists? You knew Suzanne already, but I'm also looking forward a bit, thinking about the Studio Z Collective, which comes a little later, but how you met Maren Hassinger, and just how did that whole community develop that helped to nurture your life as an artist?

03-01:07:27

Nengudi: It's hard to explain. It was just being in LA. And I went to Dorsey High. Oh, what's his name, Bob Kardashian was our class president, and Alonzo [Davis] was at Dorsey, as well. Then he started Brockman [Gallery]. So all this kind of stuff, we were all kind of there. There was a community, an arts community in Pasadena and Altadena, as well as Los Angeles, and so there'd be different functions. I had met David [Hammons] there, too, but I was never friends with him per se. It was part of the crowd.

03-01:08:26

And so when I came back—my cousin was an artist, too, from Chicago, Eileen [Abdulrashid Nelson]. She was more outgoing than myself, so she would say, "Oh, come on, go to this, go to that." I think it started gelling around the time we did the CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] Program together, because Alonzo Davis was the agent, I guess you might call [him]. Brockman Gallery was chosen as the official functioning organization that got artists together, and all of that sort of thing. And there was a kind of a commonality, again, around Sun Ra and just us being impressed by his work. I'd always been interested in jazz. We considered ourselves almost bohemian in high school. We would go on the weekend to—even though we were too young to get in—to the jazz boîtes, so to speak. So there was always that interest, and so we kind of intertwined.

03-01:10:00

I think I told you that David had this studio on Slauson [Ave]. It was a dance studio, it looked like what you'd see in a 1940s movie of people going to a dance hall. And so there were people there that he rented to beneath him. I'm not sure if he rented it or—but anyway, they were underneath, you know, say, like there were little shops? Well, each one of those was a studio. And so we just kind of got together. It just kind of happened.

03-01:10:45

Cooks:

And so, Senga, in terms of timeline, I'm wondering, did the Studio Z Collective happen, and then you started to show your work in places like the [Pearl C.] Woods Gallery and Brockman Gallery? Which came first?

03-01:11:07

Nengudi:

That's a very good question. It all kind of came at the same time. Like the Pearl C. Woods Gallery, I knew Greg Pitts. He's an artist into everything. We just were friends, and he was willing to have that gallery up there for us to do things. He also showed—what was her name, oh dear—Varnette Honeywood and people like that.

03-01:11:42

Cooks:

Okay.

03-01:11:43

Nengudi:

And I just felt more comfortable, because it was a little bit different at Brockman. I was just doing another type of exploration with my work. We felt more comfortable being at Greg's place.

03-01:12:03

Cooks:

In the work that you showed there, at the Pearl C. Woods Gallery, the *Nylon Mesh Series*—so I think at this point, this is the beginning of at least—correct me, if I'm wrong—working with nylon, from the work that we talked about in New York with the flags and the vinyl. Is this a shift, and can you talk about that shift in materials or the kind of things you wanted to make?

03-01:12:31

Nengudi:

Well, the shift is that, like I said, I had my first son, and I really wanted to somehow express that experience. I remember at that time—let's see. Well, at that time I didn't have a studio.

03-01:12:56

Cooks:

Okay.

03-01:12:56

Nengudi:

You know, fresh and new. So David was kind enough to—as I've mentioned, when he would go to New York, I could use his space. And then later on, when he no longer had that space and I had a space, then when he came to town, he could stay at that space.

03-01:13:20

So anyway, I remember trying all kinds of things up in that studio. I put raw eggs in there and I put glue and—oh boy, I was going to town with so many different kinds of experiments, and it was pretty exciting. And it took a while to get to that—the sand, where I just noticed that the sand had such—once in the nylons, it had such sensuality to it, because it had this kind of natural body form from the weight of the sand. So really, it started developing there, I was able to do my experimentations right there. And like I said, everything kind of came together because Maren was one of the artists [I met] through the CETA Program.

03-01:14:20

Cooks: Okay.

03-01:14:21

Nengudi: We just kind of instantly became friends, because there was this commonality. She was involved with dance, she was involved with sculpture, all that kind of stuff. You know, I had been doing these little private performances on my own, but it wasn't until I had that show at Pearl C. Woods that I decided to take it to the next step and go actually inside the sculpture, which was also Maren. So originally, although all the photos show her, we were actually doing it together.

03-01:15:06

Cooks: Okay. Yeah, most of the photos that I've seen are of her, but there are a couple where you're sitting side by side in black tights and a leotard, so—

03-01:15:15

Nengudi: Yeah, so—

03-01:15:17

Cooks: No, go ahead, please.

03-01:15:19

Nengudi: And so you know, there was a grouping of us. Harmon Outlaw did the photographs for that, and then Barbara McCullough did the photograph for *Freeway Fets*—well, no she didn't really. She was going to do video, and then—she did the whole thing, and then the video didn't work. So thankfully, Kwaku did all of these amazing photographs, slides, otherwise there wouldn't be a record of it.

03-01:15:52

Cooks: Right.

03-01:15:53

Nengudi: And that was really, really, really important to me, that as much as I could, I documented stuff, because of the nature of performance. When it's done, it's done. I've been most fortunate with that, but I really made an asserted effort to have someone document it. You know, there was a grouping of us, like Studio Z, a lot of those guys, they were able to do musical instruments, so they did

that. And then the photographs were there, and the this and the that. So we all kind of supported each other in our efforts.

03-01:16:42

Cooks:

And yeah, this is so incredible, because I, of course, wasn't around, involved and conscious at that point, but it's such a legendary group of people. [Nengudi laughs] And to think about what's happening in a kind of mainstream art world, and then think about this, really—what seems to me as this intense environment where people really supported each other. And you're all doing things that are definitely off the beaten path, and certainly not expected from Black artists, to be so creative and to be so—it seems to me—confident. You know, like there's something strong coming through, and now the artists are all legendary. What kind of feedback were you getting when you showed that work at the Woods Gallery? Were you getting, I guess, feedback from your peers? Was it like a crit, or was it like they were involved in helping you develop new ideas? Or what was that community like?

03-01:17:59

Nengudi:

It was sort of all of that. And to be honest, with my pieces there was always this incredible thing where a lot of people would laugh, because there were pantyhose. And then they would look at the work, and then they'd go, "Oh," you know? [laughs] And I liked that, I really liked that. That happened at Just Above Midtown, too. Especially men, you know, especially men. They would come in and kind of chuckle and everything. Whereas women would kind of like zone into it as to what was going on. So yeah, it was like that.

03-01:18:52

Cooks:

Yeah, that's interesting, because I do think there's—the work with nylon is serious, but it's also playful. And I also take it as a critique of—because of gendered norms and expectations, because some—I guess there must be some women that like wearing pantyhose. I don't know, I was never one of them. And it's just so lovely. There's that immediate recognition, I would think, between you, your work, and women looking at it. And then to know that it was inspired by your experience having your child, I mean, the elasticity of your body, it just all makes sense. But so, it's interesting that you bring up gender, but also that the men would laugh, but then they would see. You know, that's part of this kind of revelation in your work.

03-01:20:00

Yeah. Is it possible for you to just name some of the artists involved? I know you did some of that—the Studio Z Collective. So you, David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, a number of different musicians, and—

03-01:20:20

Nengudi:

Greg Edwards, who is Mel Edwards's brother, was involved with it. Joe Ray, who was a painter, was involved with it. Shucks.

03-01:20:36

Cooks:

Was Ulysses Jenkins part of that, too?

03-01:20:37  
Nengudi:

No.

03-01:20:39  
Cooks:

Okay.

03-01:20:41  
Nengudi:

He was right after that, he was right after that. When we were doing this—I'm trying to think about Houston.

03-01:20:53  
Cooks:

Houston Conwill?

03-01:20:54  
Nengudi:

Yeah. I'm trying to think—Houston moved to New York. It feels like it was 1981. And before that, Houston, myself, Maren, and Franklin Parker did a lot of collaborations together. After Houston left, Ulysses kind of came in, and for the longest [time] it was the four of us: Maren, Ulysses, Frank Parker, and—[screen freezes]

03-01:21:38  
Cooks:

Okay. Yeah, that's helpful just to have some of those names, because some people are more well-known than others, and their names don't always get recorded. So a couple of other things. I'm looking at 1977 and 1978.

03-01:21:58  
Tewes:

Bridget, I think Senga might be—pause, let's pause for a second.

## Interview 4: November 10, 2020

04-00:00:00

Tewes:

This is a fourth interview with Senga Nengudi for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes on November 10, 2020. Ms. Nengudi joins us in this remote interview from Colorado Springs, Colorado; Dr. Cooks is in Irvine, California; and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thank you all for joining today. Bridget, why don't you take it from here?

04-00:00:35

Cooks:

Excellent, okay. So we wanted to start, again, this fourth interview, in 1976, 1977. And at this moment, Senga, you're in Los Angeles, and your nylon works are really what you're focusing on. You've had your first son in '74, and you've relocated from New York. We have some documentation of your nylon sculptures, and then starting to see images of you performing with the sculptures, activating the sculptures. Did you build the sculptures—did you design them with activation in mind, or did you think about them as sculpture first?

04-00:01:32

Nengudi:

I thought about them as sculpture first. I did not develop them thinking that I would perform in them. My main goal, as I was developing the pantyhose, the *R.S.V.P. [Répondez s'il vous plaît] Series*, was how—hm. It was a complex—how should I put it? It was about exploration. It was about figuring out what the nylons could do and what they couldn't do. How I could preserve them in the traditional sense, in terms of bronze or, you know, longevity basically. And that was my biggest concern. My biggest excitement, really, was to figure out how I could manage to make this acceptable, [makes air quotes] in terms of the art world and what's proper, shall we say. [laughs] And actually, in the art world it's about profit, so if you don't have something that's long lasting, then that becomes an issue with them.

04-00:02:53

So yes, the explorations were really exciting. I put eggs in them, I broke eggs in them, and I did—oh, I used glue. I used white glue, I used hot glue, which obviously didn't last that long. I tried everything—resin. Again, it dissolved in the resin. So really, as I was developing the series, it was all about exploring the material.

04-00:03:31

Cooks:

And so the performance aspect of it, was that part of the exploration of it, seeing the limits of it or—

04-00:03:41

Nengudi:

Well, once I got on a roll, once I started developing the pieces, and once I decided that I would not let this issue of permanence deter me, then I saw a potential of wanting—of being able to perform in it, wanting to have it as a

partner. And I must say that Linda [Goode Bryant] was instrumental in that, because she said—I said, "Linda, I don't know what to do." And she said—[laughs] well, I'll say "screw it" instead of what she said—"Just do it, just do it. Don't worry about that. That's not a concern. It's certainly not a concern for me," meaning her, "as a gallerist." So yeah, that gave me, in a sense, permission to move forward with that.

04-00:04:47

Cooks:

So you met Linda Goode Bryant when you were in Los Angeles?

04-00:04:52

Nengudi:

You know, I don't remember meeting her in LA, to be honest. Do you know that I met her in LA?

04-00:04:58

Cooks:

No. You know, we thought at first that you must have met her in New York, because she's in New York and you were there. But then you came back to LA, so at some point you met.

04-00:05:07

Nengudi:

Yeah, at some point. You'll have to ask Linda how it happened. Of course, David [Hammons] was the connecting factor. You know, he told Linda about my work, and then we started talking. I don't think we met in LA, although she was back and forth, of course, with David's work, and so on. But I think we did a lot of maybe conversing by phone, and then ultimately physically met. But no, I don't recall meeting her in LA.

04-00:05:56

Cooks:

And, Senga, do you remember why you called it *R.S.V.P.*? They were the nylon mesh pantyhose sculptures, and it seems like at some point they had this other name, another kind of formal title. Could you tell us about that?

04-00:06:11

Nengudi:

Well, because I guess with everything I do, I want the viewer to respond to it, and so *répondez s'il vous plaît*, that's what you get on all your invitations, respond: are you coming to this event or not—and so that seemed like it was very much appropriate for the situation. Then some woman by the name Josine Ianco-Starrels—and she was really instrumental for myself and other artists of color in LA. She was the director of Barnsdall [Art Park], and also, actually, an exceptionally dear friend to Betye Saar. She was so nice. She'd get us food, she'd get us clothing. I mean you know, she was wonderful. And she really didn't take much off of anybody. She was constantly fighting with downtown, saying that we needed a venue. So she had a big show—I'm trying to think if that—what was the name of that show, that major Latino show—I'm thinking if that was there first. Do you know the one I'm talking about?

04-00:07:47

Cooks:

Was it at Barnsdall?

- 04-00:07:48  
Nengudi: I'm trying to think if it was at Barnsdall. It was called—
- 04-00:07:53  
Cooks: There's the *CARA*, [*Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*] show.
- 04-00:07:53  
Nengudi: That's it, the *CARA* show.
- 04-00:07:54  
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-00:07:57  
Nengudi: She was instrumental with that. She was instrumental with myself, Houston [Conwill], [and] David being able to show there. At first she says, "Oh, well you can't call it pantyhose, you have to call it nylon mesh, because people—" right, people will devalue it if you call it what it is, basically. And so I said, "Okay." So initially, that first outing at Barnsdall, I used the term "nylon mesh" instead, and I kind of use it interactively even now. Yeah.
- 04-00:08:44  
Cooks: Okay, that's a great story.
- 04-00:08:48  
Nengudi: Yeah, she was a wonderful person.
- 04-00:08:51  
Cooks: Yeah, she's legendary, she really is. She made such a big impact on so many artists.
- 04-00:08:56  
Nengudi: Oh yeah. Yeah. She told me once, she said, "When I take a bath, I have to have the water really, really hot, because I have to feel it." And she was so fiery. Everything had to be done in kind of an urgent kind of way. So I often remember her saying that.
- 04-00:09:22  
Cooks: So we want to get a good sense of where you were showing, because it seems like '77 is a big year where you're really in demand.
- 04-00:09:32  
Nengudi: Yeah—
- 04-00:09:32  
Cooks: So you—
- 04-00:09:35  
Nengudi: None of us is in demand. [laughs]
- 04-00:09:37  
Cooks: Well—



04-00:09:37  
Nengudi:

But it was a big year for me, and I'm trying to think—I'll have to find this article, but John Perreault, Perreault, do you know who he is? John Perreault is a very famous art critic, and he died—he was the art critic for the *Village Voice*, and he wrote a review of my work at Linda's, and it's the best review I've ever [had], I mean, even to this day. And that was like the first review of substance I received. I have it somewhere, and it might be good to put it in there. So yeah—hm?

04-00:10:28  
Cooks:

You had a show at JAM [Just Above Midtown] in 1977, and we have the invitation for that.

04-00:10:40  
Nengudi:

I'm trying to think if it was '77, there was an anti—it was either the Whitney [Museum of American Art] or MoMA [Museum of Modern Art] show—I think it was probably the Whitney [Counterweight]. It was a really huge situation. You know how they have those anti shows at the Whitney? Well, it was one of those, but it was really quite a big deal. I think that was in '77. God, what was the name of that show?

04-00:11:23  
Cooks:

Was the show being protested, or the show itself was a kind of protest?

04-00:11:26  
Nengudi:

The show I was in was a kind of a protest to the selections they had made, which they always—but this was a big one. I'm pretty sure it was called—I'll have to ask Linda. Linda has a better memory than mine. Let's see, I'm going to talk to her and I'll ask her.

04-00:11:53  
Cooks:

But you were showing at JAM, and you're saying it was at the same time as this important show at the Whitney?

04-00:12:00  
Nengudi:

Yes.

04-00:12:01  
Cooks:

Okay. Well, we can look that up and put that in.

04-00:12:06  
Nengudi:

Yeah, yeah.

04-00:12:10  
Cooks:

So—no, go ahead, please.

04-00:12:13  
Nengudi:

Let's see, *R.S.V.P. X*, which is X, I developed that at that same time. I did not ultimately do that performance there, but that was my intention.

04-00:12:40

Cooks:

There's the *R.S.V.P.* sculpture, but then you're saying—it seems like the performances also become part of the naming of the different installations. Is that right, with *R.S.V.P. X*, you're thinking of that as an activation?

04-00:13:00

Nengudi:

You know, that's kind of how I do it, as most—well, I don't know if most artists do it, but a lot of artists do series. I had the *Water Composition Series*, and there were no real names to that. And then *R.S.V.P.*, I just numbered them. And then as I did certain pieces, I gave them a name, as well, but they were under the *R.S.V.P. Series*.

04-00:13:28

Cooks:

Okay.

04-00:13:29

Nengudi:

And then later on, once I revisited all of this, it was impossible to redo a lot of them, which I had mentioned before, so I just put the *R.S.V.P. Reverie*, because it's kind of like this reflection on that.

04-00:13:51

Cooks:

Okay. So you were showing at JAM. You were in this exhibition *California Black Artists* at the Studio Museum.

04-00:14:01

Nengudi:

Mm-hm.

04-00:14:02

Cooks:

And did you show *R.S.V.P.* work in that exhibition?

04-00:14:06

Nengudi:

Yeah.

04-00:14:07

Cooks:

What did you show?

04-00:14:08

Nengudi:

I have no idea.

04-00:14:10

Cooks:

[laughs] Okay.

04-00:14:11

Nengudi:

It's so bad. It's a good thing you're getting me now! [laughs] I do not remember at all.

04-00:14:18

Cooks:

Senga, you have so much work, you've made so much work. There's no expectation that you would remember everything.

04-00:14:29

Nengudi:

Well, thank you. [laughs] It's very nice of you.

04-00:14:35

Cooks:

Well, it's true. I mean, doing research just to be able to talk to you, you're in book after book after book after book, things online, other artists are talking about your influence in their work.

04-00:14:49

Nengudi:

And that means the most to me, really.

04-00:14:50

Cooks:

It's incredible!

04-00:14:52

Nengudi:

Yeah, it really means the most to me.

04-00:14:57

Cooks:

So do you remember—or could you just tell us about how Brockman Gallery kind of figured into your career?

04-00:15:05

Nengudi:

Actually, it really didn't. Well, it did in terms of that CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] Program.

04-00:15:12

Cooks:

Right.

04-00:15:13

Nengudi:

But I was not a part of Alonzo's [Davis's]—what would you call it—stable? [laughs] And you know, there were a number of people, but I just I didn't feel, to be honest, as though my work *fit* there. And we never really had any major conversations. You know, Alonzo and Dale [Davis] went to Dorsey [High School], we all went to Dorsey. Dale was certainly behind us some years. And before Greg Pitts's [Pearl C.] Woods Gallery, I really felt a kinship, of course, with Suzanne Jackson and her being able to have this extraordinary gallery. Are you doing Suzanne?

04-00:16:21

Cooks:

We would love to. We haven't talked to her yet, but she's definitely in the front of our list. Yeah.

04-00:16:30

Nengudi:

Yeah. Well, she's all about style. And oh my goodness, she is amazing. Her house in Savannah is amazing, and her house in LA was amazing. She had this Afghan dog and—I mean, she's a lady of style, I must tell you. So anyway, I felt akin to that. I felt akin to Greg—do you know Greg Pitts?

04-00:17:03

Cooks:

Yes, yes.

04-00:17:05

Nengudi:

You know, we all kind of felt akin. We had common thoughts about music and other ways of approaching work, so I just felt more comfortable being able to do what I do there.

04-00:17:26

Cooks:

So, Senga, did you feel like part of the kinship you felt with other artists was a rejection of this—like a critical idea of what Black artists should be doing?

04-00:17:45

Nengudi:

Yeah.

04-00:17:46

Cooks:

Or how did you feel about these ideas from the mainstream art world: this is Black art, this is Black art, this is what they should be doing? Because it seems like you and the people that you felt really connected with are really considered avant-garde. Did you feel avant-garde at the time? Were you concerned about making Black art? Or how did you think about those things?

04-00:18:15

Nengudi:

I didn't like the tight limitation of this idea of Black art, I really did not like that at all. It was restrictive, and I think maybe we talked about this before, so let me know and I'll change it. It was later on down the line, but with my *Personas*, that kind of came into play, this issue of what you, quote, you *should do*. And that's not only with the mainstream, that's with our community, as well. And that's true of any artist of color. You know, they're fighting one thing, and then this other thing is as restrictive.

04-00:19:18

And there's this wonderful Langston Hughes—did I tell you about that—oh, Langston Hughes poem about—eee, what's it called? It's going higher. He says, basically—obviously more poetically—you can like what we do or you can not like what we do, but that can't be restrictive. We have to go as high as we can. That had to do with the Renaissance, Harlem Renaissance, and so it's all the way back then. I think he was probably talking about—oh, what's the—*Invisible Man*. A lot of people in that era did not like it, because it threw a negative light, they thought, on the Black culture. So there's that fighting. There's the fighting of the mainstream trying to keep you in a little ball, and then there's the fighting of your own community saying, "You have to do it this way. The world is looking at us," and so it puts a lot of restrictions on you. So we just didn't want it to go further, and still explore Blackness, but in a very different way.

04-00:20:55

Cooks:

One of the things that's so incredible about your work is that it has almost become more and more relevant as the decades have gone on. Looking at your work in catalogs, so many of your pieces have two dates: the original 1977 and then 2014; 1977 and 2003. So I would love to hear you talk about remaking the works, and if you think about the original works differently now

than you did then. Do you think the art world sees them differently now than they did then? Are we still struggling with this is Black art/this isn't Black art. Is the reception different? Anything you want to tell us about those ideas would be great.

04-00:21:53  
Nengudi:

It's sort of like, you know, the political atmosphere of today, Black Lives Matter and all that kind of stuff. This has been going on since probably the beginning, so those issues have not changed, they've almost intensified. So yeah, some of the thoughts, some of the things I was dealing with are still in place, even more intensely. I was thinking the other day, they were talking about #Say [Her] Name and stuff, and I thought, Oh you know, I should do something where people—just the average person, the average Black person, or maybe even the average person—I could ask them, "What killing do you remember," and see what they would come up with. Because my husband said the other day—Elliott [Fitz] said the other day when all of this is going on, he says, "You know what? I remember that guy," which I do, too, which you're probably too young to remember. There was an African fellow, [Amadou Diallo], in New York, and the police shot him forty times.

04-00:23:19

So these are things that we—this extraordinary piece—I wish I had it, but it's in a lot of museums—Lorna Simpson's piece [*Easy to Remember*]. It's a grid of mouths, and what they're humming is, "It's Easy to Remember (And So Hard to Forget)." This is kind of in our memory, but we kind of squash it down, because you can't function otherwise, but it's not forgotten. So if you ask any given person, they'll say, "Oh yeah, George Floyd." But then there was Emmett Till or—you know? So yeah, it's the same.

04-00:24:12  
Cooks:

When you look at your work in some of the more recent exhibitions—*Soul of a Nation*; Kellie Jones's *Now Dig This!*, which has influenced a whole series of exhibitions because of that work; *Blues for Smoke*—do you see the work the way you did then? Do you see it differently? I mean, how does it feel, I suppose, to see it have this second life?

04-00:24:47  
Nengudi:

Well, it feels good. And I must tell you about Kellie. We were all at a residency together. This woman named [Marion] "Kippy" [Boulton Stroud], and she was the founder of Fabric Workshop and Museum. Well obviously, now they couldn't do it, but she had this very famous summertime situation called ASAP [Acadia Summer Arts Program] camp, and just the most illustrious people were there. She invited myself and Maren [Hassinger], and so Kellie was there, too. We all had to give presentations on an evening, and Kellie said, "Oh, I want to do this book." I was like, "Oh yeah." Maren and I looked at each other, "Okay, yeah, right," [laughs] and we didn't think much about it. And sure to her word, some years later, she whipped out not one book but many. So that was really quite special.

04-00:25:55

Cooks: Yeah, she's incredible, and she—the work she's doing.

04-00:26:00

Nengudi: [phone rings] I don't know how to do this. It's a scam. I guess I should—let me turn off my phone, period. Okay, I'm sorry. Go ahead.

04-00:26:16

Cooks: No, that's fine. Yeah, the work she's doing. She's a visionary—

04-00:26:20

Nengudi: Yes.

04-00:26:22

Cooks: —when it comes to what needs to be done. And yeah, I think that's why she's so influential for so many of us.

04-00:26:31

So I wanted to also ask you: I was reading something that the curator Zoé Whitley wrote about one of your *Internal* works.

04-00:26:43

Nengudi: Is that the one from the Tate [Modern]?

04-00:26:47

Cooks: Yeah, she was at the Tate. So she was one of the co-curators of *Soul of a Nation*, and she compared—well, that's not the right word, compared—but she talked about the *Internal II* work that was in *Soul of a Nation* at the Tate [in relation] to some other works by white artists like Mary Kelly's—her *Post-Partum Document* from 1975, and she was talking about your work in relationship to the women's movement and artists that were making work about gender, women, and motherhood. I wondered if you, at the time, thought of your work in relationship to what other artists were doing in terms of work around those issues?

04-00:27:43

Nengudi: It's another thing about grouping. I just did my work and it seemed to fall into that, so that was convenient for some people to say, "Okay yeah, this is what it is." Americans, I guess in a way, like to be tidy when it comes to stuff like that. Let's tidily put it in this—mm, mm, mm—let's put it here, so it's nice and tidy. We know what it is, we can figure this out, this is great. So yeah, I'm that. Obviously, it falls into that realm, but when I was doing the work, I didn't consciously do that. It was coming from, for want of a better word, my center. So if it fell into that, then that's fine, but yeah.

04-00:28:51

And to be honest, I was not aware of some of the artists, because of, I don't know, time or rhythm of time, things happen, and so whether you're familiar with them or not, they kind of come together. I don't know quite how to say it, but it's sort of like a—if you look at clouds and you—and they're idea clouds,

and you pull down an idea and somebody else pulls down an idea from that same cloud, it's just—there's something in the air that creates particular works. Yeah.

04-00:29:39

Cooks: That's right.

04-00:29:40

Nengudi: I did work periodically with The Woman's Building and with women's projects, but what's that term? I ain't mad. [laughs] I would have to go there with that, that I didn't feel like I was totally part of it. I felt like the bean-counting situation and I—there were people that I felt good about and honest about, like Nancy Buchanan, that we were working on the same level, as opposed to somebody telling me what to do or wanting me to agree with certain things. So it was a little bit different for women of color in the feminist movement.

04-00:30:47

Cooks: [laughs] Yes, I think history has certainly shown us that, and it seems that you just always maintained your own independent practice and didn't feel concerned about needing, necessarily, to connect with different themes that were popular or visible at the moment. No.

04-00:31:12

Nengudi: And they did fall into that, obviously. I mean, it couldn't help but. I didn't approach it in that way.

04-00:31:21

Cooks: Okay, that makes sense. Yeah. So I wanted to look at some other work from 1977, the *Inside/Outside*, which—

04-00:31:35

Nengudi: Uh-oh, I have to turn my phone back on.

04-00:31:37

Cooks: Yeah, I have a picture of it that I sent to you. It's the color work, and it's that blue rubber tube, looks like an inner tube? The photographs of you with it are so compelling. It has the pantyhose in different colors, and then working with different materials. And we'd just love to hear you talk about that work and maybe some directions that you were thinking of, from the other kind of work that was just nylon by itself.

04-00:32:19

Nengudi: Well you know, I just like gathering stuff, and I love the tubes. Now they don't even have tubes, tire tubes. They were very flexible. I think I even did a few prints from them, like woodblock prints; I used rubber instead. Let me see here. Maybe that's where I felt compelled to be a part of my pieces. That was one thing there, that I just fit myself right into it, and yeah.

- 04-00:33:16  
Cooks: Yeah, the photos of you with your head in that opening in the tube are just the best, because you look so comfortable.
- 04-00:33:23  
Nengudi: [laughs] Yeah, right, right. Yeah. Though as you can tell, that skirt got a lot of wear, because I used it in the performance of—wait, let me see, where is it. [looks at images on phone] I don't see it here. I don't think you have a picture of me—oh, yes you do.
- 04-00:33:46  
Cooks: It's a little farther in, yeah.
- 04-00:33:47  
Nengudi: I see, okay. So that what I'm wearing is actually the skirt that I also wore for the first *R.S.V.P. X*, the first image that you have there. You know, I put it over my head, and so I did a lot with it.
- 04-00:34:13  
Cooks: Okay, and—
- 04-00:34:13  
Nengudi: So they're one and the same.
- 04-00:34:15  
Cooks: Did you perform with music?
- 04-00:34:19  
Nengudi: No.
- 04-00:34:20  
Cooks: Okay, I was wondering.
- 04-00:34:23  
Nengudi: These are studio performances and—
- 04-00:34:26  
Cooks: So in your studio.
- 04-00:34:27  
Nengudi: Uh-huh, yeah.
- 04-00:34:28  
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-00:34:29  
Nengudi: You know, I'm so glad that I did it. I'm just a stickler for documentation, because—we've talked about that before.
- 04-00:34:44  
Cooks: Yeah.



04-00:34:45  
Nengudi:

The whole issue that it doesn't exist if there's no documentation of it, so I always—even if it was just me—I always had a photographer involved. And I'm glad I did, because I thought, I'm too shy to do this in front of an audience, and how do I capture this moment? How do I capture this concept that I'm trying to deal with? I'm glad I did, instead of just saying, "Oh well, I'll just do this by myself and—" yeah, so I'm glad I took that additional step and had it documented.

04-00:35:23  
Cooks:

Well, we are, too, because we would be having a different conversation maybe if we didn't have the documentation of the work that you were doing. Yeah, I wanted to also ask you about—there's a few sketches on pink paper [from 1979], [*Sketch of Figure on Pink Paper*]—

04-00:35:46  
Nengudi:

Yes.

04-00:35:47  
Cooks:

—that are in the collection at the Archives of American Art. They're a little farther in that—

04-00:35:56  
Nengudi:

Yes, I know the ones.

04-00:35:56  
Cooks:

Okay. Could you tell us anything about that? Did you sketch all the time? Do you still sketch, or were these—

04-00:36:06  
Nengudi:

Yeah, these are really—they continue to be about images, body images, and my angst, you might say. [laughs] So these are angst drawings. These are drawings how out of frustration, how I saw myself. So that's what it is. The pink is intentional, you know, the colors are intentional, all of that.

04-00:36:47  
Cooks:

Yeah. So other things that were going on—moving forward in time just a year to 1978—we talked a little bit on the Studio Z Collective and how you became involved with that, where you met so many of the people involved, because of CETA and because those people were brought together because of the Brockman Gallery project.

04-00:37:14  
Nengudi:

Yeah.

04-00:37:16  
Cooks:

Speaking of documentation, we have photographs and some video from the *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, and we haven't had a chance to hear you talk about your involvement with that: the sculptures, the costumes, the roles of

the different people. So we'd love to hear you tell us anything you want to about that project.

04-00:37:40

Nengudi:

Okay. Have I spoken about it before?

04-00:37:45

Cooks:

I think you've spoken about it a lot in other places, but not for us.

04-00:37:48

Nengudi:

Not for you. Okay, all right. So originally, I was going to do this project someplace else. We all had to pick a place in LA where we wanted to put these pieces up. The original places were kind of rejected, so I kept looking around. And I did see this place that was under the freeway off of Pico Blvd, and I was so taken with it, because it had columns and it was dirt and it had little tiny palm trees. It just kind of reminded me of an African kind of setup.

04-00:38:40

The reason I wanted that particular part of the neighborhood is because it was very rich in diversity. A lot of Native Americans that came from the Rez settled there, that was their kind of entry into the city. So you had that energy, you had Latino energy, you had Black energy, and not too far away you had Koreatown and all that kind of stuff. So it was just really rich in diverse cultures, so that was a plus. And then when I looked at it and kind of canvassed the area, there was a shelf between the freeway itself and the columns and so on. It was clear that homeless people lived up there. It was very safe, because it was above the ground and below the freeway, so it was very, very safe. And so all of these elements really attracted me, and so I really planned everything and then had my cohorts come in.

04-00:40:03

But around the columns, I wrote the names of people that had passed. And then around another column, I wrote the names of our children and so on and so forth. So one column was supposed to be very—represent very masculine situations, and the other column was supposed to represent very female situations. And one column had these extended nylon pieces, so that when the wind blew, it kind of shifted, sort of like a Hawaiian skirt, just a gentle shifting. You know, it was great, because I had a—what do they call it—a cherry picker, and I was able to go up myself and do all this up top. And as you well know, I got Maren [Hassinger] to be the female spirit, David [Hammons] to be the male spirit, and I was kind of this in-between person—spirit, actually—that was wanting to bring these two elements together to find some kind of harmonizing way of dealing with each other. Because at that point, even with all the mess in the world politically, there were still issues with Black men and women being kind to themselves and to each other in relationships, so that was a thing.

04-00:41:52

And because I wanted the ground to be christened in some way, this piece that I put up, public piece, I wanted there to be a ceremony for it. That's kind of how that developed, that this was a ceremony to christen the space and to bless the piece. Everybody was willing. And thank goodness Kwaku-[Roderick Young] was there to take photos, because Barbara [McCullough] was supposed to film the whole thing, and something happened with the video after it was all over. So if he hadn't done that, she would not have been able to make the film out of the photos.

04-00:42:45

You know, and I designed everybody's piece. The only thing I didn't design was the staff that David had, and that staff was something he had made a while ago. So you know, he helped me get dressed. I got everybody else dressed; he helped me get dressed. I created a mask for the occasion, and it was—I had never had that experience before, because they were playing music and everything, and really genuinely, I had the experience of just being a conduit that—I was taken over by whatever, and that allowed me to do the movement and everything else involved. So it was quite a deep and full experience.

04-00:43:55

Cooks:

And did you give them instructions ahead of time? Like did you practice, or it was all impromptu and in the moment?

04-00:44:05

Nengudi:

Mm-hm, [I gave the concept for the piece, along with minimal instructions].

04-00:44:06

Cooks:

And you invited people.

04-00:44:08

Nengudi:

Yeah. It was during the day. It was in the morning, but I must—this sounds funny, but again, you're probably too young for this. But way back—and I was too young for it, actually—but I would watch these movies on TV. Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, they had these series of movies that they did, and they'd say, "Let's do a show!" And they'd get together, "Let's do a show!" And that's kind of how I was looking at it. Let's do this, let's get going! And so we just got together and did it.

04-00:44:56

Cooks:

Yeah no, I love it, because it seems like that energy, that spirit, has to come through. It's important that it comes through in your work.

04-00:45:08

Nengudi:

And they were all artists, so none of them were professional musicians, so they just let it rip. [laughs]

04-00:45:24

Cooks:

That is great. So you have this ceremony in the morning, and you have these sculptures that you tied around the columns. How long did it stay up, or did you have to take it down immediately?

04-00:45:39

Nengudi:

I did not have to take it down. I do not know how long it stayed up. I really have kind of an issue with certain things, that I just do it and then I go on to the next thing, and I just kind of leave it. I did not take it down. I have no idea how long it stayed up. Obviously, it had its time limit. It was under the freeway and exposed to the elements and so on. I went by there some years later, and they had paved over all the wonderful dirt and put a fence up and all that kind of stuff.

04-00:46:27

Cooks:

Okay. So another thing that I wanted to ask about: there was this flyer that I found for the *Alive Performance* that you did a couple of years later at UCLA in 1980, so it says July—

04-00:46:42

Nengudi:

I don't think it was at UCLA. It might have been at Cal State. Let me see.

04-00:46:48

Cooks:

It was at Cal State LA, you're right, you're right. It's Cal State LA, and it says so right on the flyer, so I misspoke.

04-00:46:57

Nengudi:

Right.

04-00:46:57

Cooks:

But it's you and Maren Hassinger and "Frank" [Franklin] Parker. Could you talk about, I guess, just collaboration, how it's a part of your work at this time, from '78 with the bigger group, and then continuing with this smaller group. Anything you want to share with us about this performance or collaboration at this moment in your career?

04-00:47:23

Nengudi:

Yeah, this photo actually was taken at, oh, the Greek Theatre. And actually, one of those people is, I think, Houston, Houston Conwill. And you know, the consistent group, consistent trio were myself, Parker, and Maren. And at points Houston, before he moved to New York, we worked together. And then after that, Ulysses [Jenkins] came in. But it was the three of us that would do these things. And so actually, I believe that—you have further down here where we were experimenting. You see Maren, Parker, and Houston and myself down all—the last photo.

04-00:48:33

Cooks:

Yeah, so these are photos—just for the record—these are photos that show you, Franklin, Maren, and Houston Conwill performing *Art Activity* in Los

Feliz, and this is in 1981. Yeah, and happy to hear whatever you want to tell us about this, too.

04-00:48:53  
Nengudi:

Well you know, these dates are kind of iffy. Because as I recall, on that same day we went to the Greek Theatre, and it was empty, of course, and we frolicked in there for a while. I think that all kind of maybe happened around that same day. If not, we did that one day, and came back and we were able to get into the theatre and onstage.

04-00:49:29  
Cooks:

So you think that was 1980 and not 1981? This says 1981, and it could be wrong, but the *Alive Performance*—yeah, that doesn't have a year either. I found it—

04-00:49:45  
Nengudi:

And you know, that's really annoying, because we really—I don't know what we were thinking at the time, but we never put a year on anything. [Cooks laughs] We always thought, Oh well, everybody knows it's 1980, why would we need to put that on? So yeah.

04-00:50:01  
Cooks:

They don't all have one. Yeah, everyone has that problem, it's not just you.

04-00:50:07  
Nengudi:

And it says UCLA, but it's actually UCCS—

04-00:50:11  
Cooks:

Yes.

04-00:50:13  
Nengudi:

I mean, not UCCS, Cal State LA.

04-00:50:15  
Cooks:

Cal State LA. Yeah, we can fix that.

04-00:50:21  
Nengudi:

Why am I thinking that Ulysses was there, too? I'm not sure, hm.

04-00:50:29  
Cooks:

Well, what was this performance? What was the *Alive Performance*?

04-00:50:33  
Nengudi:

Each one of us did something. Maren did something, Parker did something, and I did something. And then we did a piece together. And that piece, which there's a video of—I don't know if you've seen the video—it's called *Kiss*. No? Oh, you should. It's fun. Do you have a copy of *Side by Side*, which is kind of a video that Maren and I did, kind of a compilation of different things that we've done?

- 04-00:51:22  
Cooks: I haven't seen this, Senga. I'm sorry. So *Side by Side* and *Kiss*, these are important videos from around the same time, in 1980?
- 04-00:51:31  
Nengudi: Yeah. I can send it to you, and then you can make a copy of it maybe?
- 04-00:51:41  
Cooks: That would be great. And if the Getty doesn't have it, it would be great for the Getty to have this for their archives.
- 04-00:51:44  
Nengudi: Yes, okay. Right, okay. Well, I can get that to you.
- 04-00:51:50  
Cooks: Terrific. That would be great.
- 04-00:51:52  
Nengudi: Yeah. And then you can see *Kiss*, and that was part of the *Alive Performance*.
- 04-00:52:04  
Cooks: Okay, so *Kiss*. And then *Side by Side*, you said is a compilation of different performances?
- 04-00:52:08  
Nengudi: Over the last forty years.
- 04-00:52:12  
Cooks: Did the *Alive Performance* take place outside at Cal State LA?
- 04-00:52:17  
Nengudi: Uh-uh.
- 04-00:52:17  
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-00:52:18  
Nengudi: It was in the gallery area there.
- 04-00:52:23  
Cooks: Okay, okay. A couple more pieces I wanted to ask about: there's a picture in the stack here of *Rapunzel*, [1980], and is that in Los Angeles?
- 04-00:52:40  
Nengudi: Mm-hm.
- 04-00:52:40  
Cooks: Okay. It seems like maybe you came across a place that was being demolished, or what's the story?
- 04-00:52:49  
Nengudi: Yeah, and please let me know if I've said this, again, because I've been interviewed a lot, and so I don't know—

04-00:52:54

Cooks: I know. You're {inaudible}.

04-00:52:56

Nengudi: —who I said what to, yeah. Are you familiar with Arlington Ave.?

04-00:53:08

Cooks: Yeah, like around West Adams/Arlington? Yes.

04-00:53:11

Nengudi: Pico, yeah. Okay, so I was headed home one day, because I lived off of Arlington. There was a wonderful Catholic school there that had been there forever, I mean *ever*. And it was one of the prouder points of the neighborhood, because it was like those classic kind of Yale kind of looking buildings, like a Catholic school would be brick and stone. So they were demolishing it, and I could not believe my eyes. I called Barbara [McCullough] and I said, "Barbara, you won't believe this, but they're demolishing the Catholic school." And Barbara lived—we both lived between Adams and, I think, Washington, off of Western. She was on the east side and I was on the west side of Western. Okay. So I said, "Barbara, oh my God, do you have time? We have got to deal with this stuff." She said okay, so I grabbed the kids and we went to the space.

04-00:54:41

And so they were going to town. This particular building was important, because early on, when we were doing all these other explorations, Maren, and Parker and myself—I can't remember if Houston was there—you know, they had a swimming pool. We went in there, it was empty, all that kind of stuff. So it had multiple layers of significance. There was one kind of column left that looked like a little tower, and so I grabbed something to put on my head, which I had made, and then I went inside of this place. And I mean, literally they were demol[ishing]—they didn't pause—they were demolishing this place with all the machinery and everything. So I did a little something, something, something, and Barbara, you know, took photos of it. [laughs] So that is how it happened. And then afterwards she took a picture of me in all the rubble with my two sons.

04-00:55:58

Cooks: Oh, I would love to see that picture.

04-00:56:00

Nengudi: Well, that's actually in the exhibit, which is called *Urban Study*.

04-00:56:07

Cooks: Okay.

04-00:56:08

Nengudi: Actually, do you have the book *Topologies*?

- 04-00:56:13  
Cooks: I do have that book. It's in there?
- 04-00:56:13  
Nengudi: Okay, it's in there, it's in there.
- 04-00:56:17  
Cooks: So in this photograph, is that—we're looking at the corner of a building. We see the pantyhose coming out. Is your head in the window?
- 04-00:56:28  
Nengudi: Mm-hm, mm-hm.
- 04-00:56:28  
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-00:56:30  
Nengudi: And obviously, it spoke to the Rapunzel fairytale. And that, too, is kind of feminist. [laughs] Yeah.
- 04-00:56:41  
Cooks: And yeah, and then they tore down the building.
- 04-00:56:44  
Nengudi: Boom, done. That's the LA way.
- 04-00:56:51  
Cooks: I know.
- 04-00:56:50  
Tewes: I'm actually really curious about that, Senga, because it feels like with a lot of your pantyhose work, as well, there's some ephemerality to that. Was that something that you were drawn to in this specific case, to bring both of those {inaudible}—
- 04-00:57:05  
Nengudi: Yes, and it continues to be that way. This bumping up against the hard and the soft, the feminine and the masculine. The rigid and the flexible. Yeah.
- 04-00:57:23  
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-00:57:28  
Tewes: Oops, Bridget, you're on mute.
- 04-00:57:29  
Nengudi: You're not on.
- 04-00:57:31  
Cooks: Thank you. That's something we don't have to worry about when we're in person. [laughs]



04-00:57:38  
Nengudi:

Right, that's true.

04-00:57:40  
Cooks:

All right. So also around this time you're in a show at PS1, with a legendary curator, April Kingsley, who did this very influential show, *Afro-American Abstractions* [in 1980]. Could you tell us what you remember about? Was it a big deal having a show at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art]? What was it like being in this group of other artists? Did you know them already or did you meet new people?

04-00:58:12  
Nengudi:

I knew most of them already. It was an extremely big deal. And to be honest, there was still that little issue—well, she's white. She's able to get this thing on, and why can't a Black curator be able to do this, because there were plenty around? But it was significant for all of us. I mean, it was a really big deal, pulling everybody together. Oh, what's his name—I think Martin Puryear was in that show, too, and I really was enamored with his work. So yeah, it was a really seriously big deal, and it traveled a lot. Yeah, yeah.

04-00:59:13  
Cooks:

We also have, around this time, in 1981, documentation of you performing with Cheryl Banks and Butch Morris for the *Air Propo* piece that was at JAM [Just Above Midtown]. And could you tell us about—these are new names, so far, for our conversation. Could you tell us about them and this collaboration?

04-00:59:39  
Nengudi:

Well, I met Cheryl when I was in New York in the seventies. She was a dancer with Sun Ra, and Butch is a world-renowned musician. I'm trying to think of when I met Butch. I think it was when I was in New York. Anyway so, I was really excited to work with the both of them. And Linda [Goode Bryant] was able—she's amazing when it comes to getting people together and developing collaborations. This was a piece that was done at her gallery when she shifted it from Midtown to the Tribeca area, and it was a nice, big space; it was much bigger than the other space, which was small. Butch was kind enough—this brilliant man was kind enough to do this piece with us. And movement and music and art are part of me, so to have a collaboration like this was really very special. Butch was kind enough a while back to do something with me and Barbara McCullough. We sponsored kind of like a—oh, it was like a loft kind of solo exhibit—not exhibit, but performance, solo performance of his music when he was in LA. And he's originally from LA. I think he's maybe part of—was he, I've forgotten—Barbara did a film on this guy. That's terrible. Are you familiar with musicians, history of musicians in LA?

04-01:02:08  
Cooks:

I am. You know, Barbara, she made a film about a jazz musician.

- 04-01:02:14  
Nengudi: Yeah, and Butch, maybe at some point early on before he moved to New York may have been a part of—God, what's his name. This is terrible. Anyway so, he had an LA history. Barbara and I, I don't know how we convinced him, because he really didn't like doing solo work, he preferred being a conductor as opposed to his own music.
- 04-01:02:42  
Cooks: I see. Yeah, Barbara made a film about Horace Tapscott.
- 04-01:02:48  
Nengudi: Horace Tapscott and his [Pan-Afrikan Peoples] Arkestra. All of these people, you know, where I lived—let's see, I think it was 2158 W. Twenty-Fourth St., and that area was kind of called Sugar Hill. Did I tell you this? Okay. It was called Sugar Hill, and I lived on Twenty-Fourth St. off of Western. I think she lived on Twenty-Fourth St., but it was just down the—it was like two blocks away. And ironically, I had lived in that area as a child. And fantastic. There was a little theater, a little cinema house, and we would go there for fifty cents on Saturday and see all the matinees and all that kind of stuff. So I wasn't that far. It was all kind of sort of in the USC [University of Southern California] kind of area. Anyway, back in the day, artists of color like Nat King Cole, people like that, there was a covenant in Beverly Hills, so no matter how much money they made, they could not be in those areas, so they wound up being in this area. Oh, a lot of old people, you know, like in the forties, that was when this happened. I can't think of their names right now. I think Eric Dolphy lived in that area.
- 04-01:04:36  
Cooks: Miles Davis lived over there for a while. Muhammad Ali, yeah—
- 04-01:04:38  
Nengudi: Really?
- 04-01:04:39  
Cooks: —lived in that area, too.
- 04-01:04:39  
Nengudi: No kidding! I didn't know that.
- 04-01:04:42  
Cooks: Was your studio in your house? Was that the same—because those are big spaces over there.
- 04-01:04:49  
Nengudi: No. I had a small studio off of Adams.
- 04-01:04:55  
Cooks: Okay.

04-01:04:58  
Nengudi:

Yeah, I had a small little studio. It was an amazing space. I think her name was Esther—there was a famous 1940s female pianist—what was her name? [Mary Lou Williams.] The Mills Brothers lived over there. You know, it was quite a thing back in the day. And then, what's his face, not Sam Cooke, but Marvin Gaye's parents lived—I told you this? Oh. Marvin Gaye's parents lived, oh, maybe, not even three blocks down. So I remember the day when his dad shot him. It was the sunniest, most beautiful day, unfortunately.

04-01:06:00

So there was all this Black history going on in this area. It was very rich historically, very, very rich. And in fact, David—you know how they had all the mansions on Adams? Well, there was a mansion on Adams and Arlington, actually. It had been abandoned for a while, and I remember David spent the night there one night, and that was a big deal that he spent the night in this abandoned place. So yeah, it was rich. James Baldwin was—they would have these teas for authors, like a women's [tea], kind of like a tea club and book club, and so he spoke there. All this was happening on Adams Blvd. The churches, everything. It was really rich. So yeah, we spent a lot of time there actually up until the point I came to move to Colorado. We lived there from '70—let's see, Elliouitt and I got married in '76. We lived there from, well actually, like '77 up until 1989.

04-01:07:40

Cooks: Wow.

04-01:07:39

Nengudi: Yeah.

04-01:07:41

Cooks: Yeah, it's a very rich area, and Golden State Mutual [Life Insurance Co. building] is there.

04-01:07:47

Nengudi: Yes, exactly. It was right there, right down the street.

04-01:07:49

Cooks: {inaudible} cemeteries. Yeah.

04-01:07:51

Nengudi: Right down the street.

04-01:07:52

Cooks: Right.

04-01:07:54

Nengudi: And then Pearl C. Woods [Gallery] was on Western right at the freeway there.

04-01:08:02

Cooks: Okay. So we're going to switch gears a little bit, because we wanted to talk to you about a couple of things. One is activism. From what you've said, it seems

like you, as I said before, have been very centered and tuned into yourself. Of course, there's a larger social context, and sometimes your work falls into one category or another. Did you ever think of your work as political, or always about yourself and your story and your life? Or did those things overlap for you?

04-01:08:45  
Nengudi:

Yeah, I think this whole issue of universality fits in there. If you do what is true to yourself, then it's true to other people, as far as I'm concerned. So this sense of universality, yes, crosses all of that. There's no way I can do an artwork that isn't composed of everything that I am. Cross off: [makes check marks in the air] hey, I'm Black; I'm a woman; I'm a mother; I'm, at points, a caregiver; I'm a wife; I'm all of these things. There's no way that that is not going to be reflected in my work.

04-01:09:50  
Cooks:

You know, that makes sense. I think that speaks to some of the questions that we had about, yeah, how you think about yourself as an artist and your art in the world. And maybe that's also why it seems so relevant decade after decade. There are themes in your work that connect with people in each generation and each decade.

04-01:10:17  
Nengudi:

Yeah, I have to tell you this funny thing.

04-01:10:19  
Cooks:

Yeah, please do.

04-01:10:22  
Nengudi:

The other night they had *Saturday Night Live*, and usually I'm asleep for it, so I never see it. But they had, what's her name, Wilma—not Wilma, Maya—what's her name?

04-01:10:39  
Cooks:

Maya Rudolph.

04-01:10:41  
Nengudi:

Yeah. And so Dave Chappelle is saying, "Well, there's two people that are now out of work. There's so many Black people that are out of work, but there's two people that are now out of work, and we don't think they'll ever get their jobs back." They go to the skit, so it's Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben. [laughs] And they said, "But why are you doing this to us?" She's saying, "I make the best pancake ever! How can you—I even use my own breast milk in this—" and so that reminds me, you know, because that's what I was thinking about in the beginning. It's universal, but it's also very specific, that I can't forget the wet nurses that nursed baby after baby when their own children were starving. It's really layered about all of this stuff. It's layered in Black history, but it's also layered in the female body and how we think about our

bodies, and so on and so forth. So I can't do one without the other. I mean, it's all combined.

04-01:12:10

Cooks:

We wanted to also hear you talk about how involved you were in managing your career, the kind of nuts and bolts of promoting yourself. Or were you trying to get into shows? Were you trying to, yeah, sort of navigate your place in the art world on a really practical level? Well, we know that you taught at many times throughout your career. But yeah, thinking about that aspect of supporting yourself as an artist, but also just as a person. Teaching, making art, being in shows, how did all of that come together for you?

04-01:13:06

Nengudi:

I guess I have to say I did a lot of dreaming. I spent a lot of time dreaming, a lot of time. I could even call it visualizing. I was just dreaming about things, and using songs that triggered what I was fantasizing, just stabilizing my fantasies through certain music, and so on and so forth. That took its own life, I guess you might say. And originally, I could not fathom giving half of my money over to a gallery or something like that, I could not fathom certain things. So we fumbled along—and when I say we, I mean me and my partners, my amigas or amigos—we fumbled along just doing—the work was the important thing. The work was *it*, and so getting it out there was important.

04-01:14:36

Again, there's this frame that you're supposed to fit in. And artists are supposed to teach, because that's the only way they can get money, and that's the only way they can have money to make their artwork. And so therefore, there's this route that you take. And so you know, I like teaching very much, but I just wasn't, the material—I really didn't want to be on a track. What do you call it, what do you call it?

04-01:15:23

Cooks:

Like a schedule or nine to five?

04-01:15:27

Nengudi:

A track to—

04-01:15:29

Cooks:

Tenure track?

04-01:15:29

Nengudi:

Tenure.

04-01:15:31

Cooks:

Yes.

04-01:15:31

Nengudi:

Yeah, I just wasn't up to a tenure [track], being in that mindset, because people that I knew that were doing that, they were a nervous wreck: "Oh, I'm

going to get tenure. I have to do this, I have to do that. Oh, oh, oh, oh." Okay, fine. That's just not who I am—unfortunately or fortunately. I don't know. But it wasn't something that I could aspire to. I love teaching, but I didn't want that other thing.

04-01:16:07

My husband has always been very supportive, extremely supportive. And he would put me on the plane with a hundred dollars to New York, and that's all I had to sustain me, for however long I was going to be there. You know, I'd stay with friends or whatever. So I was fortunate in that way. We never really had much, but what we had he would, you know, give to me. [laughs] And sometimes, he would send me on the plane and my son would say, "Ma, Dad is crying." And you know, he would cry, he would cry, he would cry, every time I would leave he would cry. I'd come back, obviously, but it was quite a—it was really emotionally and financially something for him to get me on this plane to New York to do what I had to do. And I want to give him full credit. All along the way, he's been there.

04-01:17:24

So yeah, I believed early on, as I saw how things seem to work, that—I call it a triangle. [makes triangle with hands] That at the apex, there's the artist; and then on this side there are the galleries and the museums and so on; and then on the other side, there's the academics, there are the critics. And one has to write about you enough, so that these people over here decide to look at you and do shows with you. And so they're building this pyramid for you, so that then you can be seen at the top and people will kind of get the whole picture of who you are. But they're instrumental in creating you, in a sense. Have I gone off subject?

04-01:18:35

Cooks: Well no, I mean, you're kind of telling a love story as part of your business plan.

04-01:18:40

Nengudi: Yes, yes.

04-01:18:43

Cooks: It wasn't a plan from the beginning, but sort of how you were able to have success has a lot to do with your home life and the people that supported you. I mean, that's real, and not everyone has that. I think—

04-01:18:56

Nengudi: Yes, it's true, it's true.

04-01:18:58

Cooks: —it's a bit more rare.

04-01:19:01

Nengudi: And so Elliouitt and I, we met because this house that I rented, which was on Twenty-Eighth St. off of Western, was owned by a friend. When I rented it, of

course, my first thought was I needed a studio space. So he brought Elliouitt by to help him clear out the space, the garage space, for a studio space. I always at that point always had kind of like an empty room, and so when he came in, I had a lot of David's pieces up, and he was the only person that came in and asked me, "Oh, what's that? What's going on?" Because everybody else would go, "What the *hell*?" He's the only one that asked really intelligent questions, and really, even though he wasn't an artist, asked these probing questions about artwork. And so that's kind of how we got together.

04-01:20:15

About six months later, which was very interesting, Elliouitt, my son, David, and Cheryl, we all got in a car and went to Las Vegas, and we eloped in Las Vegas. [laughs] Redd Foxx was in line at the time to get a, yes, to get a license, and he was marrying one of his wives, who was Asian. And we were in line, and Elliouitt was holding my son, Sanza, who was about a year old. We were just so excited, we were saying, "Redd Foxx!" We said, "Oh, we're getting married, too." And he looked at my son and he goes, "Well, it's about time." [laughs] So we were so excited. The church was really classic. It was like those little wedding chapels that they have in Las Vegas, and it had glitter on the outside. The woman that married us had a big beehive hairdo, and her husband played the organ. And you know, we did it.

04-01:21:50

Cooks: That's a terrific story.

04-01:21:52

Nengudi: Yeah, it was fun.

04-01:21:55

Cooks: And then you had another son, right? You have two sons.

04-01:21:57

Nengudi: Yes. Yeah, two sons. Oji, yeah.

04-01:21:59

Cooks: And when was he born? What year was he born?

04-01:22:02

Nengudi: Seventy-nine.

04-01:22:05

Cooks: Okay.

04-01:22:07

Nengudi: Yeah, so—

04-01:22:08

Cooks: That's a terrific story.

04-01:22:08  
Nengudi:

Yeah, it was. And you know, I just wasn't the kind that just the thought of having a big wedding and having to plan this and plan that, you know, I just wasn't up to it. Elliouitt reluctantly dressed up. I had an African outfit for him, and then I was dressed in a kimono. It was fun, I mean, we just had fun.

04-01:22:41  
Cooks:

It sounds like fun. You've got such good stories, but I wanted to just get back, for the record, if you could talk a little bit more about teaching. So we have in our notes that you taught at Watts Towers Art Center.

04-01:23:02  
Nengudi:

Mm-hm.

04-01:23:03  
Cooks:

Could you tell us: when did you start doing that work, and what were you doing there?

04-01:23:10  
Nengudi:

It was in 1960—I'm trying to think.

04-01:23:19  
Tewes:

I think the first time was right after the uprisings in '65, but there you are coming back a decade later.

04-01:23:27  
Nengudi:

Yeah, yeah, it was right after that. And I guess the absolute joy that I had as a student—well, I was going to UCC—

04-01:23:42  
Cooks:

Cal State LA.

04-01:23:42  
Nengudi:

Cal State LA. UCCS is out here, and I taught here, that's why I keep mixing them up. But Cal State LA, I had a dance teacher that told me about a possibility of being an assistant at the Pasadena Art Museum, and her name was Hilda Mullin—that was at the Pasadena Art Museum. She was a psychologist that taught dance. And so then Debbie Brewer, who taught art at Pasadena Art Museum, I was also an assistant to her. She's the one that told me about the possibility of working at the Watts Towers Art Center. And so I don't think I could have had a better education than that. Did I tell you that?

04-01:24:41  
Cooks:

Well, you did tell us about working there in the sixties. I thought that then you worked there later, again, in the seventies you came back.

04-01:24:50  
Nengudi:

I did, I did.



- 04-01:24:51  
Cooks: Okay. And Debbie was involved with the Watts Towers Art Center and Noah Purifoy?
- 04-01:24:59  
Nengudi: Yeah.
- 04-01:25:00  
Cooks: Yes. I don't know if we've talked about Noah yet.
- 04-01:25:06  
Nengudi: I'm telling you, I have been so blessed to be around the most brilliant people in the world. Noah, besides being brilliant, I mean, talk about walk this walk. He's the ultimate, he's the ultimate committed artist in every single way. And I just am in awe, still, related to him and his power, his personal power and his personal convictions. You know, it's just amazing. He was a wonderful administrator, because he was the director at the time.
- 04-01:26:02  
Cooks: But then to take that giant leap, that gargantuan leap and just leave everything behind in LA—and he was a full part of LA—to go in the desert, I mean, a desert's bad enough, but it was an all-white community. And even to this day, when we went there, they still didn't even know who he was. They go, "Oh yeah, that thing out there in the desert." And this was at the information center when we were trying to find it. And his brilliance and then the commitment, when he had that show in LA—I think it was LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art], wasn't it?
- 04-01:26:58  
Cooks: Yeah, LACMA had a retrospective, the [*Noah Purifoy:*] *Junk Dada* show.
- 04-01:27:02  
Nengudi: Yeah, and it's really hard, because he really believed that whatever, whatever. He sort of put the stuff up, and if it erodes in time, then that's okay: "I'm not particular about you wanting to save it and salvage it, and all that kind of stuff. I'm making it, it's for everybody, and that's it." When I went there, which was—maybe it feels about three or four years ago—people were kind of stealing stuff from it, and some of it was eroding and everything. But even at that, there's no way a viewer could have the total experience, unless they went out there. I think that's part of it, too. To know that he was in hundred-degree heat, many days, you know? He just kept working and "if you build it, they will come." I've forgotten, who's the artist that gave him that land?
- 04-01:28:23  
Cooks: Ed Ruscha was involved.
- 04-01:28:25  
Nengudi: Yes, yes. Ed Ruscha [gave him the land]. Okay. [Noah] made his own shelter. And the important thing was doing the work. So I look to him always.

- 04-01:28:41  
Cooks: Did you work together directly when you were at Watts Towers, when you were teaching, he was at Watts Towers in that role? Because I know he worked also for the California Arts Commission. He was involved in different areas, but he was there at the same time that you were at the art center?
- 04-01:29:04  
Nengudi: Yeah.
- 04-01:29:06  
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-01:29:06  
Nengudi: Oh, you mean in the seventies? No, this is in the sixties.
- 04-01:29:09  
Cooks: Okay, in the sixties, the first time. That's when you saw—okay, that makes sense to me. Okay. And so what did he think of your work? Or did you have a chance to really—
- 04-01:29:19  
Nengudi: I was a young artist then.
- 04-01:29:21  
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-01:29:22  
Nengudi: I hadn't developed or evolved in any way. Between he and John Outterbridge, I was just excited to sit at their knees. [laughs] John Outterbridge always was like a fountain of wisdom and poetry, and all this kind of stuff. So yeah, I just was enamored with both of them and their power as [artists], their personal power and commitment.
- 04-01:29:58  
Cooks: I think people would look at your work together as peers, and it's just wonderful to hear you talk about their influence and their model by example, as artists and people.
- 04-01:30:17  
Nengudi: Mm-hm, just amazing.
- 04-01:30:22  
Cooks: So we also have noted that you worked at Cal State Northridge in 1980.
- 04-01:30:30  
Nengudi: I didn't work there. I probably did maybe a workshop/classes or something like that, but I wasn't part of the faculty.
- 04-01:30:42  
Cooks: Okay. Did you teach printmaking? Do you know where you taught that in the eighties?

- Nengudi: Ooh.
- 04-01:30:51  
Cooks: Yeah, we thought it was Cal State, we thought it was CSUN, we thought it was Cal State Northridge, but—
- 04-01:30:58  
Nengudi: Well, if I did, you know somehow. Hm.
- 04-01:31:05  
Cooks: Maybe it was Cal State LA?
- 04-01:31:06  
Nengudi: It's vaguely coming back to me. Why am I thinking about Houston?
- 04-01:31:16  
Cooks: Oh, okay.
- 04-01:31:17  
Nengudi: Maybe I did, I don't know, some substitute work or something? Whatever it was, it was limited.
- 04-01:31:27  
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-01:31:28  
Nengudi: Yeah, it might have been for a workshop or maybe even a semester, but it wasn't long term.
- 04-01:31:35  
Cooks: Okay. We also have noted that you worked as the assistant slide curator at USC?
- 04-01:31:45  
Nengudi: Yes.
- 04-01:31:45  
Cooks: So tell us about that. You're smiling now, so I'm thinking that must be a good story.
- 04-01:31:49  
Nengudi: Oh, it was a wonderful experience, [Cooks laughs] it really was. You know, the friends I made there I still have as friends. And I really enjoyed [it]. I mean, that's the best education you can have, is a slide library, because you're looking at every form of art there is and the history behind it all. So yeah, it doesn't sound like the best—it doesn't sound like *that* kind of job, but it meant everything to me, and it was a joy every day going in there.
- 04-01:32:33  
Cooks: Well, were you organizing their slides? Were you making new slides from books or working with transfers?

04-01:32:39  
Nengudi:

All of that, all of that, all of that. You know, this probably sounds a bit strange, but I don't know if I had another lifetime in this area? I mean, when I think about LA and my time there, it really goes from Vermont and Adams, over to Adams and La Brea. A lot of my life as a child was spent over—I went to Vermont Avenue Elementary School, Foshay Junior High—the worst junior high in America—[Cooks laughs] and all of it was around that USC area. As a child, students at USC used to take us around and do projects with us. So this relationship I have with USC and that area—Vermont and Adams, Western and Adams—you know, all of this was highly significant.

04-01:34:04

I guess were we on Twenty-Fourth St. or Twenty-Eighth St.? I can't remember. But when I was newly married, and I felt very shy about doing meditation and all that kind of stuff, I would go very early in the morning to—I think it's St. Vincent. Do you know the name of the church on Adams and Vermont? And they house immigrants, too. They house people, oh gosh, when they're illegal immigrants.

04-01:34:55  
Cooks:

Refugees or political—okay.

04-01:34:57  
Nengudi:

Yes. Political—yeah. Maybe St. Vincent de Paul. It's been there forever. Adams and Figueroa.

04-01:35:18  
Cooks:

We'll look it up.

04-01:35:20  
Nengudi:

Okay. Anyway, I would go there very early in the morning and I'd sit in the back pew just to meditate, and there'd be this little group, maybe, say, about three people, at most four. One fellow would have a guitar, and they would sing in Spanish to the dearly departed every morning. It was the most beautiful thing to hear this Spanish guitar. I can't overemphasize how significant this area is and was in my development.

04-01:36:10  
Cooks:

And then in 1989, you move.

04-01:36:14  
Nengudi:

Mm-hm.

04-01:36:15  
Cooks:

Tell us what that transition was. Why did you have to leave to go to Colorado?

04-01:36:23  
Nengudi:

Well, it wasn't I have to. I'm trying to think. There was a Proposition 13, the infamous Proposition 13. And when it passed, everybody said, "Oh you know, it won't be a problem. We don't need that money," because they were

defunding all of this stuff. They were defunding youth programs, they were defunding everything. And I knew it would take a while, but it took about two years. Was it '88, '87? Anyway, that's when the gangs really took hold. I mean, *really* took hold. Well, Elliouitt had always said, "LA is too big. Let's move to a smaller place." I said, "Unh-uh, no way. Not this girl." But then after a while I started listening to what he had to say. In my art, it just felt like I had hit a brick wall and that I wasn't developing as much as I wanted to. And then this whole gang thing came in, and they were stealing the kids' bikes and telling them they were going to kill us if—you know, kill us, the parents, if they didn't do this or that, so we thought, Maybe it's time to get out of Dodge.

04-01:37:55

That's when we started traveling around. It wasn't for a job, it wasn't for the military, it wasn't for anything, we just felt like we had to move. And so we roamed around New Mexico; well, only for a minute in Utah; but Arizona and all these places. When we finally got to Colorado, I had a cousin who just moved here, and he and his wife had a beautiful home. You know how it is, you see things through other people's eyes. And because they had had such a great experience here, we started thinking about this place. We didn't want to go to Denver, because the point was to be in a smaller community. And so we all agreed. Because before that, one person would say Arizona was good, another person would say New Mexico, and this and that, but this was a place we all agreed on.

04-01:39:09

This was a place where you could fashion yourself to whoever you wanted to be. I was able to get on a lot of boards. I was able to create things very easily, and I felt like I could create without somebody looking over my shoulder all the time, which is kind of how it was in LA. They always want to know what you're doing, and this and that. I could be kind of anonymous here. And so I did a lot of community work here.

04-01:39:51

Cooks:

So were they boards like for a school, since your kids were in school, or were they art related?

04-01:39:57

Nengudi:

Art boards, art related.

04-01:39:58

Cooks:

Okay.

04-01:40:00

Nengudi:

Culturally related.

04-01:40:04

Cooks:

And did you enjoy that kind of work, that kind of more administrative side of the arts?

04-01:40:11  
Nengudi:

I loved it. But it was more than that. There wasn't much diversity when we got here, and it was kind of a culture shock for my kids, to say the least. [laughs] Oddly enough, a lot of people moved here at the same time. It was really quite curious. And so I got together with these other people that—other women, Black women, and we said, "Well, we have to school these people. We have to give them some cultural literacy." We said, "We want to show—give them a sense of what Black culture looks like, so that they have a point of reference," because they didn't have a point of reference. So we did a lot of workshops. I brought people down from Denver—African dancers, choreographers—just trying to flesh this culture with the city, with our culture. And all aspects of it; not just African, but African American. We put on stuff for Black History Month related to Black inventors, you know, just trying to give a sense of who we are. Yeah, that was exciting. And the people lapped it up. Yeah, it was good. I have another story.

04-01:41:52  
Cooks:

Yeah, go ahead and tell it, please.

04-01:41:53  
Nengudi:

I had this friend, and she was white—well actually, a couple of friends—and they were white, and they were saying, "Oh you know, you should meet Pam." I said, "Well, who's Pam?" They said, "Well you know, she has dreadlocks, and she's this and she's that." And you know, everybody had to tell me, every white person had to tell me about Pam. So I was walking down the street one day—I mean, really—I was walking down the street one day and I saw this woman who had to be Pam. And I said, "Pam!" She said, "What?" I said, "I know you already." We talked and we, you know, we found that we had these things in common. And we, again, gathered Black women to really do stuff. Well, Pam is Grace Jones's sister, Pam Jones. [laughs] So that was funny, too. And yeah, so we coupled with doing a lot of community work. She did community theater, she did a whole bunch of stuff.

04-01:43:16  
Cooks:

Oh my goodness, what a small world!

04-01:43:20  
Nengudi:

I'm telling you, I'm telling you.

04-01:43:21  
Cooks:

So at this point in your career, you're in a different place, you're meeting different people, you don't feel like people are all in your business—

04-01:43:30  
Nengudi:

Right.

04-01:43:30  
Cooks:

—you're making art on your own. Did you feel like you needed a community of artists, or were you happy to be on your own? Or did you create a community of artists in Colorado Springs?

04-01:43:46  
Nengudi:

Well yeah, I needed that support. I mean, it was difficult. It was more difficult for my younger son than my older son. Yeah, I need community, and so it kind of just happened. I genuinely tell you that we all somehow got here at the same time, except Pam had been here for a while. There are a number of us—and I don't know why—but we arrived here, and it wasn't military related, because this is a military community. It wasn't related to the military, but somehow we, as women artists, got together. When I say artists, I mean singers, dancers, this and that. It was, again, nourishing and nurturing to be with people of like minds and like vision. That's really important: like vision in the most positive way possible. So yeah, it was important.

04-01:45:10  
Cooks:

I know we're almost out of time. There was a list of projects that you've been involved in, and some of these I think you're probably still involved in. So the Performing Arts for Youth Organization [PAYO].

04-01:45:29  
Nengudi:

I was the first Black—first and only, still—Black president, co-president of that organization.

04-01:45:37  
Cooks:

Okay.

04-01:45:39  
Nengudi:

And what we would do is we would bring artists into the schools. I was particularly interested in bringing artists in as residents, have a residency program with them right there in the school.

04-01:45:57  
Cooks:

Okay. The Kennedy Center Imagination Celebration community liaison. That's a mouthful, but that sounds very prestigious. This is '91 to '93.

04-01:46:09  
Nengudi:

Yeah, and then I must say, I really don't know how I did all of that, because I'm trying to think if it was '92. I should remember this until the day I die, but I think my mom had a stroke in '91, '92, and we ultimately had to bring her here. And so I did a lot of caregiving. It was a total stroke, so I could not leave her for any time but about two hours a day. And I really don't know how I got through it, but a lot of my work was cerebral. I had to visualize performances and stuff in my head, I had to make it so that it was doable for me. And performances, or at least projecting concepts of performances, obviously was easier than physically doing stuff at the time.

04-01:47:16  
Cooks:

And then later on in your career, were you able to fulfill those dreams of those performances?

04-01:47:26  
Nengudi:

Mm-hm.

04-01:47:25

Cooks: Oh, okay.

04-01:47:26

Nengudi: But you know, Maren [Hassinger] and I—one time Maren came out here, and it was such fun, and we just thought up performances all day long. We had a little notebook and we would put, for a month, a performance per day. And just because she was—I was caring for my mom—let me see. Okay, my mom passed in 2004, and I cared for her for twelve years.

04-01:47:58

Cooks: Wow.

04-01:47:57

Nengudi: What is that?

04-01:47:59

Cooks: That's a long time.

04-01:48:01

Nengudi: I'm trying to think of the year though.

04-01:48:04

Cooks: Well, eight years, 2012—

04-01:48:05

Nengudi: Twelve years, it was twelve years.

04-01:48:07

Cooks: Oh yeah, sorry.

04-01:48:08

Nengudi: What would that be—is that 1991? Let's see—

04-01:48:14

Cooks: Are you trying to figure out what year she passed?

04-01:48:16

Nengudi: No, I'm trying to figure out when I started, when she had her stroke. Let's see, okay. Yeah, so it was 1992. Anyway—

04-01:48:30

Cooks: So Maren came to visit and you had a notebook? Were you doing performances or you were writing them down?

04-01:48:37

Nengudi: Oh, we were doing them in my backyard and stuff. We have this thing where like—she had her mom after I had my mom, she had to care for her mom. So she had a divorce and all that kind of stuff, so we were both going through things. And so the one thing we were committed to was our art. We said, "Okay, well, let's do something for a month, one day a month, and then send it to each other. And we'll just do it back and forth that way." So we did that.



Even if it was just an x on a piece of paper before we went to sleep, we would do that for each day, and that kept us focused and committed.

04-01:49:39

Cooks: Do you remember what year that was that she came to visit?

04-01:49:43

Nengudi: No.

04-01:49:42

Cooks: Somewhere in that twelve-year period.

04-01:49:44

Nengudi: Yeah, it was 2000-something.

04-01:49:47

Cooks: Okay, all right. Yeah, that helps.

04-01:49:51

Nengudi: You could ask her, but she probably doesn't remember, either. [laughs]

04-01:49:54

Cooks: Yeah, but it sounds so important.

04-01:49:57

Nengudi: It was. It was really significant, it was really significant. And you know, like when I would head her way, I would stay with her, and vice versa. And these times with each other—and the same thing with David when I was—I needed a studio space in New York when I was there, that was available. So these exchanges of places, it's really important.

04-01:50:31

Cooks: Do we have time maybe for one more piece of this, Amanda?

04-01:50:37

Tewes: Sure, as long as everybody has a little bit more time on their hands.

04-01:50:43

Cooks: Okay, I was thinking about some of the other things on our list. You were an artist-in-residence at Mitchell High School?

04-01:50:50

Nengudi: Yeah.

04-01:50:51

Cooks: Was one of your sons at that high school at the time, or this was separate?

04-01:50:55

Nengudi: He was not there at the time, but he was there after that. And that's another thing. When I was there, we were able to bring in a wonderful exhibit called *Songs of Our People*, which was through the Smithsonian Institu[tion], and

they chose that place as a place where the community could experience that exhibit.

04-01:51:26

I had a community art gallery. I created a community art gallery called ARTSpace, and it was in [Hillside] Community Center. I had a room, and that was really significant and important to me, because I really wanted a place where artists could show their work, where they could—because there was no place in the gallery system that they would be accepted as an artist. So I really wanted them to have the total experience, not just the artwork, but really what it takes to have an art exhibit: the preparation of the artwork, the deciding what you're going to show, and all this other kind of stuff. It was really, really important, because not only was it important for the artists, but the community could come in and see the artwork. It was right there for them. They weren't going to go to the Fine Arts Center, they weren't going to go to a gallery downtown, and wouldn't even think about it, really. So this was a way for them to have that experience and to question and maybe feel, at some point, that they wanted to see more work. And I must tell you, that if I do nothing else in life, I was always scouting artists.

04-01:53:19

Cooks:

Really!

04-01:53:20

Nengudi:

I went to this art exhibit, actually, and it was a *whatever* kind of art exhibit. And I saw this woman's work, and I was just blown away. I asked her if she would show at the gallery, and so she says okay. She says that I was instrumental in starting her journey, and I will take credit, because I'm so excited about this, but her work was so outstanding. Her story was she—I don't even want to tell her story, it's so bad—but she was extremely, brutally sexually abused by her family, and so these paintings were an expression of that. I mean, they were incredible. And so through these paintings we gave talks, and she would explain this whole thing.

04-01:54:22

So once she finished with that, she decided that she would start this program called Finding Our Voices, and it's for women—now men—that were sexually abused and who would express this through their art, have this as a means of expression, of releasing some of this. I mean, so fabulous, so fabulous that she was able to do this. If I had any part of it, giving her, encouraging her to take that next step to do this—I mean, if you knew her story, it would chill you, absolutely chill you. But she was able to take it and make this thing happen. And oh my God, that's art.

04-01:55:20

Cooks:

Senga, tell us her name, and tell us the name of the gallery for the record.

04-01:55:24  
Nengudi:

Okay, her name is Joyce Aubrey, A-u-b-r-e-y, and she's written an incredible book. It's about this thick. [indicates a couple of inches] So now she has this foundation. And then the name of my gallery was ARTSpace, and you spell it capital A-R-T and then [capital] S, and then pace, p-a-c-e. ARTSpace.

04-01:56:12

You know, when I could no longer do it, I got quite ill, I was looking for someone, but I really specifically wanted a person of color. And I looked and I looked and I looked, and then finally this wonderful person came about who is Vietnamese. She's been here for a while, and she works with veterans. I guess we met, because I wanted some of her veterans to show work in the gallery. She was one of those people that escaped in a boat, and all that kind of stuff. So she had, I guess you might call it, the juice to work with these veterans, because she knew what the deal was. And they, too, came—had just exceptional work, exceptional work. So I was really proud of my time there and that I could hand it over to someone who had somewhat of a similar vision to my own, so that every type of person would have an opportunity to show their work.

04-01:57:28  
Cooks:

So a couple more questions just around this before we end. Were you teaching, also, at the same time at the University of Colorado [at Colorado Springs]?

04-01:57:40  
Nengudi:

Mm-hm.

04-01:57:41  
Cooks:

It looks like you were teaching everything: art history, ethnic studies, women's studies, studio, sculpture, installation. Can you tell us—just describe that job, or what you wanted to do with that job?

04-01:57:57  
Nengudi:

Yeah. What's his last name—Louis Cicotello—his last name was really peculiar. He was the director of the Art Department at that time, and he pursued me to come in and work. And the reason I accepted it—because prior to that I really pretty much basically worked with children, and I loved working with them, because they always had something different going on. Nothing you could figure out. They always had their own angle to stuff, and that really excited me. But the reason I did it was kind of the reason I did a lot of stuff here, is I really wanted people to be culturally literate. And they didn't have any Black person in the Department. In fact, they probably still don't, as sad as it is.

04-01:59:08

I started out with African American art history, and then went on to women of color, and this and that. So I was filling a void. They just did not have any idea of anything. I mean, it was really sad. And actually, the students that took

my classes, at least those kind of classes, were pretty much people of color. Or if they were white, they had a relationship with someone of color. And they would tell me about how abused they felt in some of their classes, how they were disrespected, and so on. They really didn't feel validated in their classes. And so it was really helpful to hear their stories, to give them information that they had never even heard of, to be honest, and they were not covered in their general art history classes.

04-02:00:34

Cooks:

So, Senga, just to close for today, thinking more about all of this work you're doing: you're on boards, you're co-president of this organization, you're a negro first over here and over there, [Nengudi laughs] you've got this gallery that you're starting, you're teaching. If you could reflect a bit on your own experiences: how did you learn to become a mentor? What inspired you to take on this other kind of role? Because we haven't been talking about you making art for a few minutes.

04-02:01:10

Nengudi:

I know.

04-02:01:09

Cooks:

You've been really passionate about this whole other side. Where does that come from?

04-02:01:17

Nengudi:

I just had a lot of energy at the time, [Cooks laughs] and I was working it! I was on these boards—hot dog, I'm on a board, and you know how difficult that would be in LA, right? You know, I worked it, basically. I was really interested in—I don't know. My mind was just going there. I would read the newspaper and see a chance for a possibility to get a grant to do this or that, or I don't know. I was in the flow of it, and I just was really, really, really excited about being able to push culture in this community.

04-02:02:05

Cooks:

And were you able to make work at that time, at the same time? Or it just wasn't as important as that focus on the community?

04-02:02:14

Nengudi:

Actually, it wasn't. Yeah. My focus was the community at that point. I did do work, but yeah, it was pretty much that. And it's odd, because I honestly, like I said, with my mom and everything, it was quite a complicated situation.

04-02:02:43

Cooks:

Well, maybe that's a good place to end for today. That was fabulous.

04-02:02:48

Nengudi:

Oh great.

04-02:02:49

Cooks:

We got through so much!

04-02:02:50  
Nengudi:

We did, we did.

04-02:02:52  
Tewes:

Thank you both. I'm going to end this right now.

04-02:02:55  
Nengudi:

Okay, good.

## Interview 5: December 15, 2020

05-00:00:00

Tewes:

This is a fifth interview with Senga Nengudi for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. This interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes on December 15, 2020. Ms. Nengudi joins us in this remote interview from Colorado Springs, Colorado; Dr. Cooks is in Irvine, California; and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thank you everybody for joining today. Bridget, why don't you take us from here?

05-00:00:35

Cooks:

Yes, so this is our last session, and there's so much more to talk about. One of the things that we discussed at the end of our previous session was that there were people who you wanted, Senga, to say more about for the record. So I'd like to start there, and I have a list of people who have been significant in your life and career and want to give you a chance to say more. Ulysses Jenkins is at the top of my list. He's someone we just did an oral history with, and of course he mentioned you, and we wanted to give you an opportunity to say more about his role in your career and your life.

05-00:01:23

Nengudi:

You know, it's always difficult to remember, for me to remember how I met someone. Even if there really is an important relationship, I just—you know, that moment, it's really hard. Again, can't remember how we met. But Maren [Hassinger] and myself and Frank[lin] Parker and Ulysses did a lot of work. I think somehow we called him in when Houston Conwill decided to move to New York, and that kind of left a void in our little foursome. So I think we kind of called him in then to kind of take his place with performance ideas, and so on.

05-00:02:16

It was kind of interesting, because Ulysses has this ability—and oddly enough, I'm supposed to do another interview for Ulysses, related to the exhibit that he's going to do in Philadelphia [at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania], so it's good for me to stimulate my memory for that one, too. He's always been able to organize things, these *elaborate* things with *tons* of people. And I guess the most—and I'll bounce back and forth—the most interesting thing we did with him—because we were kind of like [laughs] the equivalent of, Maren and I, the equivalent of backup singers or performers, because we would be backing him up with what he's doing, in one way or another.

05-00:03:20

And Ulysses—I think I've mentioned this maybe—Ulysses and I have a birthday one day apart. His is on the nineteenth [of September] and mine is on the eighteenth, so we always get together. Did I tell you this? Okay. We always get together. So one year, he decided—do you know who Rachel

Rosenthal was? Okay, Rachel Rosenthal had a performance space, I think it was on the west side, and she was most generous with allowing people to use it. So Ulysses decided he was going to do this twenty-four hour performance, [*Dream City*]. laughs] So Ulysses, myself, and Maren were the only three that were there for the entire twenty-four hours, *entire* twenty-four hours. He called in people like Nobuko Miyamoto and a number of people to do performances throughout that twenty-four hours. We were the constant, but then they would come in.

05-00:04:37

[laughs] I don't know why he said [it], just before [we start] he says, "I found this black cat, this dead black cat. It's in a bag, and I'm going to do something with it." And I just had a fit. Every possible thought came to me about a black cat—a *dead* black cat at that. [laughs] But oh, and pee-yew, you know, when he opened it. Uck, what a mess. But anyway, that was a part of the performance. And it was really exciting, because at first you think, Oh, it's twenty-four hours, my God! But it was transformative, because anytime you're awake for twenty-four hours, you're in a different consciousness. So that was it. And I can't quite remember—did he tell you when that was? It was in the eighties. Anyway—

05-00:05:36

Cooks:

Yeah, he did say it was in the eighties, and he said that it was wonderful to have everyone together, and it was a community collaboration.

05-00:05:48

Nengudi:

Yes, and it was significant in that—it had a lot of significance, but partly it was because it was multicultural, and that's kind of what we all believed in. We all believed that every culture had something to offer, and we weren't being paid attention to by the mainstream. And so it was validating for ourselves, as people of color, to be able to do what we wanted to do—fully, with no restraints.

05-00:06:22

And then we did a lot of other things together. *Dance Card*, which was in Santa Barbara. Maren had a show that was opening in Santa Barbara, and so we took that opportunity to do a performance. It was my concept, and Maren, Parker, and Ulysses were the performers.

05-00:06:54

Cooks:

So, Senga, this was one of my questions: in the *Side by Side* video, which is a compilation that Maren put together of work that you both did, there was that performance with Maren and Ulysses and another man—so that's Frank Parker?

05-00:07:13

Nengudi:

Mm-hm.

- 05-00:07:15  
Cooks: And it's *Dance Card*.
- 05-00:07:15  
Nengudi: Yes.
- 05-00:07:16  
Cooks: Okay, that was on my list of questions, because it's such a—it's a really powerful performance, and I was just wondering what that was about. So that was at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art?
- 05-00:07:31  
Nengudi: I don't know, I don't know.
- 05-00:07:34  
Cooks: Okay, we'll figure it out. [The Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, now the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara.]
- 05-00:07:36  
Nengudi: I know it was pretty small, I mean, if you think about museums. But of course, Santa Barbara is not the biggest place, so it could have been their museum.
- 05-00:07:45  
Cooks: Okay.
- 05-00:07:46  
Nengudi: And that would easily be on Maren's résumé, because it was her show.
- 05-00:07:57  
Cooks: And I wanted—
- 05-00:07:59  
Nengudi: Okay, so we went along like that. Ulysses always had this ability to create community, and so he had a space—I'm trying to remember the name of the space. Do you recall? It was on Adams, [Othervisions Studio].
- 05-00:08:18  
Cooks: He talked about his space in Venice.
- 05-00:08:20  
Nengudi: No, no. This was—no, uh-uh.
- 05-00:08:21  
Cooks: Later.
- 05-00:08:23  
Nengudi: It was Adams and—oh shoot. It was very important, because he had a lot of events. Just like what's her name—
- 05-00:08:32  
Cooks: Suzanne [Jackson]?



- 05-00:08:34  
Nengudi: No, no. Rachel, yeah, just like Rachel. He opened that space up for people, and we did dance classes there with Rudy Perez. And you know, we were all artists that he was working with in terms of performance and movement. That was fun and wonderful, and a lot of good things happened up there, a lot of other performances up to—let me think. I'm trying to remember what year that was. It wasn't that long ago that he did a performance at [California] Afro-Am[erican Museum]. I'm seeing you, not me, Amanda.
- 05-00:09:23  
Tewes: Oh! Oh, sorry. No, I was just wondering if you meant Othervisions Studio, the other—
- 05-00:09:28  
Nengudi: Yes, absolutely. That was it.
- 05-00:09:29  
Tewes: Okay.
- 05-00:09:31  
Nengudi: That was Othervisions Studio. Oh yes, so it was sort of like a Brazilian kind of performance. I'm seeing you and not myself, and it's really hard. I'm seeing you full screen. How do we work that?
- 05-00:09:54  
Cooks: Maybe you can push the view button at the top of your screen? It should give you some options of how to see us. Gallery view?
- 05-00:10:01  
Nengudi: Oh, I see, I see. Okay. [reads] "Show," "manage," "participate."
- 05-00:10:06  
Tewes: Let's stop for a sec. [break in audio] Okay, we are back from a break. And, Senga, you were in the middle of telling us a story about Othervisions and your connections with Ulysses.
- 05-00:10:20  
Nengudi: Yeah, I'm going to kind of bounce back and forth. I was talking about the most recent one that I participated in with Ulysses. It was kind of like a Brazilian night, and he had just gotten back from Brazil. Do you recall that?
- 05-00:10:40  
Cooks: Yes, because he was on sabbatical and we worked together.
- 05-00:10:44  
Nengudi: Oh, okay!
- 05-00:10:45  
Cooks: So I do remember when that happened. It may be about six or seven years ago.

05-00:10:49

Nengudi:

That sounds right. That sounds absolutely right. And once again, he was able to amass this huge amount of people to perform, and so on. It had this very festive spirited feel to it. But the most important thing is that it continued this line of him being able to, you know, just gather people and gather energies, and it's really something special. And actually, he did it also—let me think—even after that. This has been a couple years now, too. Where was that? It was for—

05-00:11:35

Cooks:

At the Hammer [Museum] I know you worked—

05-00:11:38

Nengudi:

The Hammer, yes.

05-00:11:39

Cooks:

Yeah, for Kellie Jones's *Now Dig This!*: [Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980] show.

05-00:11:40

Nengudi:

Kellie Jones, yeah. It was at the Hammer. So again, he was able to gather some folks, and we did *Kiss* again, which you saw part of in *Side by Side*. But that *Kiss* was myself and Parker and Maren. Ulysses kind of took Parker's place, and we've done that a couple of times, we've done that *Kiss* performance a couple of times. Yeah, it's been an ongoing, pretty fun thing when we all get together. It's pretty nice.

05-00:12:20

Cooks:

When you first started working together, did you think about it as independent collaborations, or was it part of Studio Z?

05-00:12:31

Nengudi:

No, it wasn't part of Studio Z. And let me mention some names that I wrote down that—I don't know if I still have those notes. One is VinZula [Kara], which is a musician that he's worked with a lot; and the other one was—oh shoot. He died fairly young. Krono. And you might ask him about Krono. It's K-R-O-N-O. And he was part of our little crew. He kind of did a little bit of everything, movement and that sort of thing.

05-00:13:08

Yeah. Ulysses always has had this thing about singing. I've never asked him why. [laughs] Oh my God, should I say this? I used to say, "Ulysses, can you keep your clothes on?" He always [laughs], *always*, you know, had this little shock thing going for the audience [with nudity]. But you know, he had a body to do it. [laughs] So yeah, you know, great times.

05-00:13:54

There was another time where he did a performance, and May Sun and Maren and myself. And I think Krono might have been in that. Kind of it was downtown, I guess around

Third or Fourth. It was on one of those—oh, you know, where trucks come in?

05-00:14:18

Cooks: A loading dock, [Art Dock]. Yes.

05-00:14:19

Nengudi: Yes, it was a loading-dock piece, and that was great, too.

05-00:14:25

Cooks: Right. Yeah, he has a lot of fondness, of course, for you. But the whole—all these moments that you were together, you know, as part of a group of people.

05-00:14:34

Nengudi: Yes, yes, yes. That's true. We all kind of were there for each other, basically. And also, I sent it late, but I can send you a copy of it. I sent it to Amanda. It was something that I did through Sprüth Magers, and it was the *Bulemia* tape. You guys didn't get a chance to see it, but amazing—I mean, she did an amazing job. Her name is Claire [de Dobay Rifelj], and she's at the gallery. Well, she found, amazingly, slides of all of us who participated in the tape *Bulemia*, the audiotape *Bulemia*. She was able to—oh my gosh, amazing—was able to sync photos with the audio. And she has some wonderful things with John Outterbridge, so I think that would behoove you to get that.

05-00:15:50

Cooks: You know, I went to see your show at Sprüth Magers, and it just closed—or it's just closing this week, I think—and I talked to Claire, and she was amazing, lovely.

05-00:16:07

Nengudi: Amazing.

05-00:16:08

Cooks: And we talked about the audio that you can hear as part of that work. But I didn't see a video that went with the audio, so I can follow up with her.

05-00:16:19

Nengudi: Yeah, because we did a panel discussion. And I sent at the last moment you all link to it. It was myself, Barbara [McCullough], and Naima [J. Keith]. She played the audiotape with the visuals, and then we had the panel discussion afterwards. So you can have both of them, and I think they would be very significant to put in—

05-00:16:49

Cooks: The archive.

05-00:16:49

Nengudi: In my files or something.

05-00:16:51

Cooks: Yeah, okay.

- 05-00:16:52  
Nengudi: Given it's a commercial gallery, I've never seen anything so lovingly done. And you know, she put a lot of effort into it.
- 05-00:17:02  
Cooks: Yeah, she was lovely to talk to. I think I talked to her for forty-five minutes there.
- 05-00:17:06  
Nengudi: Whoa!
- 05-00:17:08  
Cooks: Yeah, because I had an appointment to see your show, and then she asked me—we just started talking. Yeah, and that was great. Okay.
- 05-00:17:19  
Nengudi: Yeah, so you have her information?
- 05-00:17:20  
Cooks: Yes, and I made a note of it. Yes. We've been in email contact since then.
- 05-00:17:24  
Nengudi: Okay, great.
- 05-00:17:25  
Cooks: But that would be great to have as part of your archive. Okay.
- 05-00:17:28  
Nengudi: Oh, it will be, totally important. Totally important, yeah.
- 05-00:17:32  
Cooks: So another person I wanted to hear you say more about is Houston Conwill, and his name has come up more than once. And even just now, knowing when he moved away, that that's when Ulysses stepped in.
- 05-00:17:47  
Nengudi: Mm-hm.
- 05-00:17:47  
Cooks: But can you talk more about Houston?
- 05-00:17:50  
Nengudi: Okay, once again, I really can't remember when we exactly met. [laughs] But Houston and Kinshasha [Holman Conwill] lived on the West Side, pretty much, and I needed an address for my son to go to a particular elementary school, so they were kind enough to give me their address to use. And let's see, Maren, myself, Houston, and Parker, we did performances together, and each one of us would try and hook up something. Houston had a connection with printmaking, so one of our performances was through the [Los Angeles] Printmaking Society. And each performance we did, we had to find a sponsor, so to speak. So it was either the show that was going up or whatever, we

would find someone that would sponsor it. So we did a wonderful performance there at the Printmak[ing] Society spot.

05-00:19:03

I think you mentioned, maybe, that I had taught at some place like Northridge or something like that? The truth is, is that I substituted for Houston—wherever he was teaching—and that's how that came about, that printmaking workshop that I did. And so he and Kinshasha, at one point, had the amazing experience of living in Frank Lloyd Wright's [Hollyhock] House that he built on the property of Barnsdall [Art Park]. Have you been in there?

05-00:19:42

Cooks: Yes. They lived in there?

05-00:19:45

Nengudi: They lived in there. You didn't know that?

05-00:19:48

Cooks: And they had parties. I think maybe somebody has—either you mentioned it or Ulysses mentioned it, but that that was incredible.

05-00:19:55

Nengudi: Did he? Yeah. And you know, it was a two-edged sword. They really liked it, obviously, but people—there are plenty of looky-loos; they were in the middle of the night looking in the windows. Well, you know what I mean, it's an amazing building! So yeah, so they lived there.

05-00:20:14

Houston and I keep—I know you're tired of these names—but Houston, Maren, myself, and Parker, we went around to different places—Griffith Park and the Greek Theatre—when it was empty, you know, we would just kind of do it!

05-00:20:43

Cooks: That's incredible. And but when you're talking about printmaking, I mean, I think about Houston Conwill's work as—I think about maps on the floors.

05-00:20:55

Nengudi: Right.

05-00:20:56

Cooks: Cosmologies.

05-00:20:57

Nengudi: Right.

05-00:20:59

Cooks: A piece he has at the Schomburg [Center for Research in Black Culture] in particular.

- 05-00:21:01  
Nengudi: Yes, exactly. It's a beautiful piece.
- 05-00:21:04  
Cooks: And so was that part of the collaboration that you all did together?
- 05-00:21:10  
Nengudi: No.
- 05-00:21:09  
Cooks: No, it was totally separate.
- 05-00:21:12  
Nengudi: Totally separate.
- 05-00:21:13  
Cooks: And he had this performance aspect.
- 05-00:21:14  
Nengudi: Yeah. When we were all kind of hanging out, Houston was doing the latex, you know, again, mapping, in a sense. And he gave me this drum, which I not too long ago donated to the Studio Museum in Harlem. And lord, what's her name? This is terrible. Thelma [Golden] said that it's one of the most complete pieces they have, because a lot of his pieces, because it was latex, I guess, and we were *all* experimenting with materials, so some made it and some didn't. This [drum] is in the best shape of those latex pieces.
- 05-00:22:09  
Cooks: That's amazing.
- 05-00:22:09  
Nengudi: Yeah.
- 05-00:22:11  
Cooks: Okay. Oh, that's great to know. Yeah. So I also have noted Maren Hassinger, and I know you've talked about her probably—in every session you've mentioned her name. And so I don't know if there's more that you want to say, but if you do, feel free. If not, I wanted to ask you about Blondell Cummings and then Clifford Owens.
- 05-00:22:41  
Nengudi: Well, I don't recall what I said about Maren. I'm sure I must have said how we met and stuff like that. Did I?
- 05-00:22:47  
Cooks: I think you said that you met through the [Brockman] Gallery in Leimert Park, right, with Dale and Alonzo [Davis] and their project. And then there was some kind of synergy, and you realized that you could work together. You've also mentioned her, because some people think because there are so many pictures of her with your work, that *she's* Senga.

- 05-00:23:14  
Nengudi: I know! It is such a mess. It really is such a mess, I must say.
- 05-00:23:21  
Cooks: Yeah, this should help to clarify this. This oral history, and so you know—
- 05-00:23:26  
Nengudi: Really good.
- 05-00:23:27  
Cooks: —we'll make it correct in the record.
- 05-00:23:28  
Nengudi: Yeah, because I started out doing the performances, and then we did them together. And then slowly, [laughs] as she stayed more flexible and I was not, she kind of took over the activation situation. But we've worked so close together. And you know, one thing I *would* like to make clear, which I think I've probably said it, because if I'm given the chance, I say it, is that our collaboration lasted for forty years. Now her career and my career, we're so busy that we haven't had time to really do anything. But I don't think there's a man, woman, or child—especially two Black women—that have had a sustaining working relationship for that long.
- 05-00:24:31  
Cooks: Wow.
- 05-00:24:33  
Nengudi: That's really significant, and people don't—I think there's a couple of white guys—Bob and Bob or John and John—there's two groups. There's two performance people with—what are their names? Do you know who I'm talking about?
- 05-00:24:54  
Cooks: I think I know who you're talking about, but I can't call it [up] right now. Sorry. [Gilbert & George, Gilbert Prousch and George Passmore.]
- 05-00:24:57  
Nengudi: Yeah, and they're the only ones. And even with Joyce Scott [and Kay Lawal-Muhammad], you know, for a minute or two they had *Thunder Thigh [Revue]* or something like that. But it didn't last that long. So yeah, it's us.
- 05-00:25:10  
Cooks: So why, Senga, why is there this magic that lasts for decades? I mean, what's the secret? Because that's what people are going to look for.
- 05-00:25:18  
Nengudi: Ah, yes.
- 05-00:25:20  
Cooks: Because we believe so much in collaboration. We believe in unity. We believe in bringing the best out in each other.

05-00:25:28  
Nengudi:

Yeah.

05-00:25:28  
Cooks:

But how do you do it across the miles even? You know, last time—

05-00:25:33  
Nengudi:

Yeah, across the miles. Even though our background is different, our interests are the same. It's always been dance, performance, sculpture, movement, and this commitment to our art. And when we had some really funky times and we were 2,000 miles apart, the thing that held us together was this commitment to art. And so that kind of carried us through the most difficult things. I was caregiving for my mom; she was going through a divorce. She had to find her own job, which Leslie [King-Hammond] made happen, which was fabulous. And then she had to care for her mom, you know? So all these life events were going on, but the constant was our ability to connect and think and make happen.

05-00:26:44  
Cooks:

So here's a question that might be just too basic. But you know, when you say you have this commitment to the art, I mean, I would love to hear you say more about that, because it's also in the same breath you're saying all these things about major life changes. How does the art—*why* is the art central when your mother is transitioning, when a relationship is breaking up? You're having children, your children are going to school, everyone's in a different point in their lives. Why is it the art? What does that mean, that it's a commitment to the art that brings you back together?

05-00:27:28  
Nengudi:

You know, I don't know. As you were asking me that, I had this visual of a boat in a storm, and you're holding onto that pole—it's like a flag pole, whatever kind of pole they have on a ship—and you're holding on with all your might, and then you just keep holding on. And then you kind of get to smoother waters and that sort of thing, and you can kind of loosen your grip. And the ship takes you—that's the visual I have right now, I don't know, but I just—you know, I don't know. We just believed in this expression, being able to express ourselves in as many ways as we could. And so we would mail each other stuff any given month.

05-00:28:34

We did one that was really good. It was for Black History Month. Each day we did some little something-something, and then we mailed it to each other after the month was over. We would just commit to writing something, having a pad by the side of our beds. And even if we had a terrible day, just doing a line on a piece of paper or a word on a piece of paper, that would then trigger something else at another point. So I don't know! That's how it is.



05-00:29:10

Cooks: And when you did that—because now everyone who hears you say this wants to see all of the drawings—was this in the eighties or the nineties or in the last twenty years?

05-00:29:19

Nengudi: Nineties.

05-00:29:20

Cooks: Nineties, okay. And do you talk to each other on the phone? Or is it—all of it! The phone and the performance and—you really communicate. Yeah.

05-00:29:32

Nengudi: What do you mean? *Now*, you mean?

05-00:29:34

Cooks: Mm-hm.

05-00:29:36

Nengudi: Yeah, now we talk to each other. Oh, we haven't had as much time to talk, but we're still sharing special things. Well, she's able to get to a lot more stuff. She has assistants and stuff, but you know, when we talk, it's just wonderful, it's like home, I guess. And so yeah, we still talk. It's still there. And we haven't had any creative thoughts recently, [laughs] but yeah, it's still a warm and fuzzy feeling [laughs] to talk, yeah.

05-00:30:34

Cooks: I'm just going to turn my window [blinds]. I'm getting blinded by the light.

05-00:30:38

Nengudi: I understand. That's what happens to me downstairs. All of a sudden, given the time of day, the sun just blasts and then you can hardly see me. Yeah, okay.

05-00:30:48

Cooks: Right, okay. Now, one of the people that I mentioned briefly when we were talking about your first trip to—or moving to New York, I asked about Blondell Cummings. And the Getty is doing some work—some research and a presentation on Blondell. I wanted to hear what the story was, or what is the story you'd like to tell about her? I know you didn't meet her when you first went to New York; you said that she came into your life later. But we'd love to, for the record, hear what you'd like to share about that.

05-00:31:29

Nengudi: Well, I was a great admirer of her work. And in the eighties, as I said, Linda Goode Bryant, through Just Above Midtown [JAM], set up these collaborations. I think Blondell may have had a Japanese connection, I'm not sure. But Yasunao Tone was a musician who had worked with John Cage, and I was very excited about that. I'm quite the John Cage person/admirer, and his ways of doing, so I was really excited about that. Plus, the Japanese

connection with me working in Japan, and so on, I think Blondell must have—it felt like we had something in common, the three of us. And so that was when I met her, and like I said, I was quite an admirer of her work.

05-00:32:33

And then hopefully you can get that video from—I might have a copy of it, too, of *Blind Dates*, the collaboration that we did together. You know, I was looking for different things to create an environment, an installation, and I came across this *incredible* dress. And when you see the video, you'll see what I mean. It was like a Pilgrim dress or something. The fabric was very thick and brown. Fortunately, it fit her, and so she used it throughout the performance in amazing ways, amazing ways. So that was pretty much my relationship. We never had a friendship-friendship, outside of that particular thing, but we got along well.

05-00:33:46

Cooks:

Okay. And that was a performance that was part of a series that Linda Goode Bryant did at JAM. So yeah, I'll see how we can locate that.

05-00:33:57

Nengudi:

Yeah.

05-00:33:58

Cooks:

Okay.

05-00:33:59

Nengudi:

It'll be worth it. Like I said, David [Hammons] was with Bill T. Jones, as I recall.

05-00:34:08

Cooks:

As one of those—

05-00:34:08

Nengudi:

Yes, collaborations. I want to say there might have been five collaborations, and Linda would probably know of the others.

05-00:34:16

Cooks:

Okay.

05-00:34:19

Nengudi:

In fact, I'll ask her.

05-00:34:22

Cooks:

And you know there's going to be a Just Above Midtown exhibition at MoMA, so all will be revealed, hopefully.

05-00:34:29

Nengudi:

Yes, yes.

- 05-00:34:32  
Cooks: So another person that I wanted to ask you about is Clifford Owens, who had this really wonderful project in which he was, basically, given instructions for performances by other artists—
- 05-00:34:45  
Nengudi: Right.
- 05-00:34:46  
Cooks: —and then performed them. He performed a work from you called *Sweep*. And I wanted to know if this was a new work or a work that you had done that he remade, and how this project came about.
- 05-00:35:01  
Nengudi: Yeah, it's a work that I had done that he asked to remake. And I was there for that. I'm trying to remember. I think it was PS1.
- 05-00:35:15  
Cooks: I think it was PS1, too. Yeah.
- 05-00:35:19  
Nengudi: And he—
- 05-00:35:21  
Cooks: [shows a book] The *Anthology* project.
- 05-00:35:24  
Nengudi: [laughs] Right, right.
- 05-00:35:24  
Cooks: I love this, and I love that you were in it.
- 05-00:35:27  
Nengudi: I do, too. Maren was in it, as well. Yeah, so he approached me. And I don't know if I was familiar with his work at the time, but right after he approached me, I looked up his work, and it was amazing and very confrontational. Yeah.
- 05-00:35:55  
Cooks: And so this was a work that you had done that he had seen you do, and then asked you specifically to do that performance?
- 05-00:36:03  
Nengudi: I don't know that he saw me—
- 05-00:36:05  
Cooks: Okay.
- 05-00:36:07  
Nengudi: —do it. I'm trying to remember what it was.
- 05-00:36:12  
Cooks: The *Sweep* performance. I have it here. I can read you part of it.

- 05-00:36:16  
Nengudi: Yeah, I remember it, but I don't remember the specifics of it.
- 05-00:36:21  
Cooks: Okay. So you say, "This performance works best on a concrete or cement floor, fifty-pound bag of regular all-purpose sand."
- 05-00:36:30  
Nengudi: Ah! Yes.
- 05-00:36:31  
Cooks: Okay. And then, "Play sand is okay, usually whiter and a finer grain. Two regular brooms." And then you're painting: "Paint the brooms two tones, and then using the dark blue powdered tempura—" or "tempera—"
- 05-00:36:54  
Nengudi: You must be hungry. [laughs]
- 05-00:37:02  
Cooks: You're hilarious. And then what we get in the book is just different pictures documenting what he had done.
- 05-00:37:12  
Nengudi: Yeah, and we stay connected for a little bit. But you know, it wasn't—yes.
- 05-00:37:19  
Cooks: The pictures, yeah.
- 05-00:37:20  
Nengudi: Yeah, it wasn't a long-term thing. But I was really thrilled, absolutely thrilled that he thought enough of me to include that. It was really special.
- 05-00:37:31  
Cooks: Okay.
- 05-00:37:33  
Nengudi: And that's how this stuff works. You know, we kind of put each other's names out there. And so the—I won't say the legend—but so the history continues on, and people can build on that history.
- 05-00:37:55  
Cooks: Yeah, I really love that. I wanted to continue thinking about more art that you're making in your career. I have noted in the mid-1990s—I have 1996 in particular—that you started making new work with clear plastic and spray paint, harkening back to the *Water Compositions* of the 1960s. And I wanted to ask if you remember what you were thinking about in that time, what you were trying to express? If you saw it as a continuation of what was happening in your work in the sixties, or if this was something totally new?

- 05-00:38:44  
Nengudi: It was totally different. And again, it had to do with availability of materials. I've always, I guess, been drawn to materials that are light and can be found easily and folded easily. I think that was—was that *Wet Night—Early Dawn* [*—Scat Chant—Pilgrim's Song*]? I set up a relationship with Thomas Erben, and I was introduced to him by—this is one thing I do remember— [laughs] I was introduced to him by—I have Blondell Cummings on the mind now.
- 05-00:39:39  
Cooks: Oh yeah.
- 05-00:39:40  
Nengudi: Lorraine O'Grady.
- 05-00:39:40  
Cooks: Oh! Okay.
- 05-00:39:41  
Nengudi: Yeah, she suggested me for a show. You know, it was one of those shows where an artist could suggest another artist for a show, and so she did that. And then Thomas, I think—yeah, he was her gallerist at the time, and so she told him about me and everything. He came out to the Springs, and we went over all my work and everything. And you know, it was really good. I've just been so satisfied with him, because I feel as though I can trust him. And if he says—whether I agree with him or not—but if he says, "Oh look, this is something else—" I mean, he gives me good feedback, and it's honest feedback. That's kind of hard sometimes in the world, the gallerist world really. He kind of tells it like it is, and so we developed this relationship. So that was my first, I think that was my first—
- 05-00:41:04  
Cooks: Was that your first gallerist, working with Thomas Erben?
- 05-00:41:05  
Nengudi: Oh absolutely, yeah.
- 05-00:41:08  
Cooks: Okay, and so it happened around this time, in the late—okay—1990s?
- 05-00:41:11  
Nengudi: Yes.
- 05-00:41:14  
Cooks: What did that mean for you, if you could remember that moment? It's coming through already. He was someone you got good feedback from, he put time and energy into traveling and seeing your work. Had you been looking for a gallery? Or what did it mean to have representation?

05-00:41:35  
Nengudi:

Yeah, it's a very complicated thing. I really wasn't looking-looking, but that's the thing that all artists think about, Oh, I need a gallery, or something like that. And for me it was an abstract notion, because I didn't particularly think I would get one, you know? My work is really strange, and I didn't think anybody would consider my aesthetics, particularly, because upon looking at it, it's not commercial, you know, it's not a product. So I was really surprised that he showed such great interest. And that's another thing: he has a good eye. It's not just me, some of the other artists he shows are special. So that meant a lot, too. But this whole thing about a gallery has been a sticking point for a lot of people, because you know, you have to basically give them half your money. And you know, that concept, I thought [makes a dismissive noise and waves hands] when I was younger, *No*. But now I see the value of it, because there's *no* way I'm going to run into these people that they deal with—*no way*.

05-00:43:00

And plus, it's interesting that he just pulled out things. You know, like I showed him my slides, and he goes, "Oh, well if we do this with this photo, and we do this with that—" stuff I had never thought about. So I mean, he kind of massages you, you know? And I don't mean just him, I mean, they work hard. They really work hard to make you known and all that kind of stuff. So I had to shift my philosophy and my thinking about galleries, and then I took it on with him.

05-00:43:45  
Cooks:

And so was the first work that you showed with him with these lighter materials that you were returning to in the 1990s?

05-00:43:56  
Nengudi:

Mm-hm.

05-00:43:57  
Cooks:

Okay. Oh, that's great.

05-00:43:58  
Nengudi:

I'm trying to think if it was *Wet Night*.

05-00:44:04  
Cooks:

I don't have *Wet Night* written down, so I'm not sure.

05-00:44:08  
Nengudi:

The name of the installation was Wet Night—Early Dawn—Scat Chant—Pilgrim's Song.

05-00:44:18  
Cooks:

Okay.

05-00:44:20  
Nengudi:

And I wanted it to be kind of poetic.

05-00:44:24

Cooks: That is poetic, yeah. Okay.

05-00:44:28

Nengudi: And the point of that show—yeah, I had plastic [dry] cleaner bags, and within the plastic cleaner bags I did kind of spray paint, I did—it was paper, and I spray-painted a painting onto it. And then instead of a frame, I put it inside the cleaning bag like a sleeve. If you go on his site, I'm sure you can see them. And then I had bubble wrap plastic on the floor, like a rug. The general thinking of that was these were kind of like—okay, they were kind of like [Stations] of the Cross, you know, like you have the twelve—you know, you go in a Catholic church and [makes a circular motion]? It was sort of like that, because there's—I guess I started thinking around that time about how cultures see spirit, and how many connecting links are there from culture to culture with that? And so even though the Catholic Church has the [Stations] of the Cross, there's also—in Indian culture, when you go down the road to a pilgrimage, there are these spots that you can find along the road. And so I was thinking about that. Also, the bubble wrap on the floor—which, by the way, kids loved [laughs] and rolled around in it, and adults did, too—I wanted that sound, because it was like firecrackers, like Chinese firecrackers, like, you know, the celebration of spirit, basically. I wanted to kind of incorporate a number of cultures and how they practice. Yeah. And then I had some drawings on the wall and stuff like that. So yeah, around that time, it really was kind of about that, it was kind of about forms of spirit.

05-00:47:18

Cooks: So I want to think about, with you, another exhibition that's a little bit earlier, and we talked about this a bit offline: Leslie King-Hammond and how incredible she is in so many ways. But a really important exhibition that she did, that you were in, called *Art is a Verb*—and I'll read the subtitle—*The Evolving Continuum: Installations, Performances, and Videos by 13 Afro-American Artists*. So 1989, and this was at MICA, the Maryland Institute College of Art, and it traveled to the Studio Museum. But you know, thinking about—

05-00:48:05

Nengudi: And that's where *Bulemia* first was shown.

05-00:48:07

Cooks: Yes, that's where *Bul[emia]* was first shown], and then that's also where—and then you had another version of that up in LA.

05-00:48:14

Nengudi: Yes.

05-00:48:15

Cooks: Yeah, at Sprüth Magers. But thinking about your description of your relationship with Thomas Erben and how important it is to have a feeling of trust with your gallerist or any collaborator—

05-00:48:32  
Nengudi:

Yes.

05-00:48:33  
Cooks:

—I would love if you could talk about that experience of working with Leslie, really in general, but also specifically for this exhibition. What resonates with you now, looking back on that?

05-00:48:50  
Nengudi:

Well, I guess enthusiasm. Leslie and Lowery [Stokes Sims] worked on that together. And you know, they're quite a pair, not only in terms of scholarship and being—writing amazing books on artists. Oh, I think Lowery—of course, this isn't that long ago—did an amazing book on [Wilfredo] Lam, who was a Cuban artist of African descent, [*Wilfredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982*]. And so they both, yeah, were incredible scholars. And Leslie is an amazing artist, *amazing* artist. She kind of keeps that in the background, but on occasion she'll show some pieces, and you know. And we did—it felt like family again. It just felt like we were all there, and for the same reason, just showing ourselves. Okay, Charles [Abramson] died in 1988, and so I was still reeling from that. I was able to do that piece in honor of him, *Bulemia*. I keep saying this, but it's sort of like a way of giving a sense of how I feel about things, and that's: when it feels like home, you know, then that's really great. And that was just—it's comfortable, it's—

05-00:50:48  
Cooks:

Yeah.

05-00:50:48  
Nengudi:

—like a coat or something, and you're speaking the same language.

05-00:50:52  
Cooks:

Right. It's such a magical synergy when all of those things can come together. Yeah, Lowery and Leslie together is a formidable team.

05-00:51:04  
Nengudi:

Totally.

05-00:51:05  
Cooks:

But they do things with so much love and research.

05-00:51:08  
Nengudi:

Mm-hm.

05-00:51:09  
Cooks:

And I just love imagining that moment of putting that show together with you in it.

05-00:51:17  
Nengudi:

Yeah, and it's advancing the agenda, so to speak. You know, it's making those leaps that are really important. It wasn't easy, because she was at MICA for a



long time, and anybody that's in the system knows that it's not an easy thing to do what you want to do and jostle, you know, politics.

05-00:51:44

Cooks: Yeah absolutely, they're both role models.

05-00:51:49

Nengudi: Mm-hm.

05-00:51:51

Cooks: So there's a number of other works—and I'm conscious of the time—but I don't want to miss the opportunity to ask you about your personas.

05-00:52:03

Nengudi: Okay.

05-00:52:05

Cooks: So Lily Bea Moor, poet.

05-00:52:10

Nengudi: I'll tell you.

05-00:52:11

Cooks: Go ahead. [laughs]

05-00:52:12

Nengudi: Okay, so one day I was walking into this little bookstore just down the way from me, and I saw a rack of cards, greeting cards. I said, "Okay." So I see this little African greeting card and it was like a little African village or something like that, and so I flip it over and there was a white woman that was the artist. You know how they have on the back of something the author's picture or something like that? And I said, [puts hands on hips] "Mmmnh!" [laughs] I said, "What the heck?" And then I got a grip on myself and I said, "She has a right to do whatever she wants to do," you know? And then that kind of stirred me and stirred me. This whole issue of when you see a piece of work that is a kind of a work—you know, Japanese, whatever, Jewish, or Latino, you know, like a Native American girl getting water from the well—you automatically can almost visualize the artist and you make all these assumptions. So then I started thinking, Hm, this is really, really interesting. Let me play with this a little.

05-00:53:40

And that's how I got the personas: Lily Bea Moor, Propecia Leigh, Harriet Chin. When I use these personas, I don't particularly change anything. I might do Harriet Chin and do an African warrior, whatever. And then I want to play with what a person—this experience a person has. Okay, say if it's an African warrior and it says "Harriet Chin," and then they have to do a double take, they have to think. That's the main thing: think. And so that's the fun of it for me. I have a statement that says we, as Black people, have been called out of

our names so often, I wanted to have some control over that and play with it, just like Br'er Rabbit, you know? I want to play with it.

05-00:54:37

Cooks: Okay.

05-00:54:39

Nengudi: So that's how that came about. And it's still ongoing, because I think of other names, but I haven't followed through on it yet. But yeah, that's the reasoning behind it, this play on names. It's really quite serious, because if you're looking for a job and your name is Martinez, you might have a problem. So the play on names really has a lot of energy to it, and I wanted at least [get] people to think about the situation.

05-00:55:17

Cooks: And do you use the names for particular media? Like I have Propecia Leigh, photographer.

05-00:55:26

Nengudi: Yes.

05-00:55:26

Cooks: Does that allow you to also express different aspects of your talent as an artist that maybe—

05-00:55:32

Nengudi: Mm-hm.

05-00:55:33

Cooks: Okay. Yeah, people won't expect—oh, she does photography? But when you can do it as someone else—

05-00:55:40

Nengudi: Right. [phone rings] Hi, Ulysses [Jenkins]! [laughs]

05-00:55:52

Cooks: You're kidding.

05-00:55:52

Nengudi: Hi!

05-00:55:52

Jenkins: What's up?

05-00:55:57

Tewes: [break in audio] Okay, we are just coming back from a break. And, Bridget, why don't you let us know where you want to go next?

05-00:56:05

Cooks: I wanted to name some recent major exhibitions that you've been in, Senga, and then ask you—yeah—if any of them stand out for you. Or if you wanted to just reflect on this moment where it seems like you're, in some ways, being

rediscovered. But I think for new generations, they're discovering you for the first time.

05-00:56:30

Nengudi: Mm-hm.

05-00:56:30

Cooks: So I'll say some of the names: [in 2005], *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art [Since 1970]*, the great Valerie Cassel Oliver.

05-00:56:38

Nengudi: Yes.

05-00:56:40

Cooks: Did that work in Houston. She's just been so invaluable as a curator.

05-00:56:44

Nengudi: She's so bright, yeah.

05-00:56:48

Cooks: And then also *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* [from 2012 to 2013].

05-00:56:53

Nengudi: Mm-hm.

05-00:56:54

Cooks: Another major exhibition that you were in: *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*. That was at MOCA [in 2007] and traveled to PS1—MOCA in LA and traveled. More recently, the Venice Biennale [in 2017]. I mean, I'll stop there for a moment just to hear you say something about *that!*

05-00:57:17

Nengudi: Yeah. What you're talking about were all group shows. And actually, there was a show—oh shoot, I've forgotten. It was in Denmark, I think, or Copenhagen. Where is Copenhagen?

05-00:57:31

Cooks: Yeah, in Denmark.

05-00:57:32

Tewes: In Denmark.

05-00:57:33

Nengudi: Yeah, it was in Denmark, and that was a feminist show, too. Adrian Piper was in that and Lorraine O'Grady. What's the name of that? I have the book in the other room.

05-00:57:49

Cooks: We'll put it in. [*Incandescent*, part of *Now-Here* in 1996.]

- 05-00:57:49  
Nengudi: Okay. And actually, Barbara [McCullough] went with me. Well, she didn't go *with* me, but she came there while I was there, and photographed and filmed stuff, so that was pretty exciting.
- 05-00:58:04  
And yeah, all of those were group shows. Either the great theme show, either African American show or a feminist show. And especially *WACK!*, you know, that's historic, that particular show. And then April Kingsley's African American something or other. You remember? [*Afro-American Abstractions* from 1982 to 1984.]
- 05-00:58:34  
Cooks: Yeah.
- 05-00:58:36  
Nengudi: You know of that?
- 05-00:58:36  
Cooks: Yes, I do. And that was a major turning point for Lorraine O'Grady, also, and her work, to see other women who were kind of working in their own vision.
- 05-00:58:49  
Nengudi: Yeah. Lorraine I met through Linda Goode Bryant at Just Above Midtown. And Lorraine talked to me through the years, like, "Oh, you should reevaluate *R.S.V.P.*." I was always one that said, "Oh, you know, I have. Forget that. I've done that. I want to go on to something else." And she kept talking in my ear, talking in my ear. And so finally, in—that's when I was with Thomas, too. Finally, between the two of them, they said, "Oh, you know, you should do this." So I took on the Herculean task of redoing these pieces. It just seemed like people were ready for it, and it's been like that since then. And you know, it still has a value. I said, "Well, when it stops, when there's no more energy in it, that I don't feel a relationship anymore with the material, then I'm going to stop." But yeah, so 2003 was a pivotal year for me.
- 05-01:00:07  
Cooks: Okay, and because that's when you went back to the *R.S.V.P.* work and had a solo show at the [Thomas] Erben Gallery.
- 05-01:00:16  
Nengudi: Yes.
- 05-01:00:18  
Cooks: So how do you feel about—
- 05-01:00:18  
Nengudi: In what gallery?
- 05-01:00:20  
Cooks: I have Thomas Erben Gallery.

- 05-01:00:22  
Nengudi: Yes, right. Mm-hm.
- 05-01:00:22  
Cooks: Yeah, in 2003. So I'm going to say a couple of more names here, so yeah [debuting in 2017], *Soul of a Nation: [Art in the Age of Black Power]*, and *Now Dig This!*, which we've mentioned before.
- 05-01:00:35  
Nengudi: Oh, *Now Dig This!* was really critical.
- 05-01:00:39  
Cooks: And Kellie's work has inspired so many more shows.
- 05-01:00:43  
Nengudi: Oh yes!
- 05-01:00:44  
Cooks: And people are finally looking at Black Los Angeles. When you're remaking work from decades ago and seeing, witnessing all the enthusiasm and discovery for some people, do you think about the work differently? Or do you see it as the same—or do people respond to it differently?
- 05-01:01:10  
Nengudi: I see it, I see it—how shall I put it? I see different layers of it. And I see a true value, actually, right now, this fragmented self, and yeah. I saw it in one light in a variety of ways, and then it just seems like—just like politics, it's getting deeper with its meaning, and yeah, so I see new things in it. I mean, the main things are still there, but then I'm seeing how really it's reflecting the inner self.
- 05-01:02:17  
Cooks: And it's reflecting the inner self for you and for viewers?
- 05-01:02:21  
Nengudi: Yes.
- 05-01:02:22  
Cooks: Is that right? Yeah.
- 05-01:02:23  
Nengudi: Yes.
- 05-01:02:25  
Cooks: Yeah, that's incredible. You can't teach that to someone, you know, it has to come from within. And it's amazing that you can connect with people, decade after decade, in various contexts. Because some of the shows are shows of Black artists, some are shows of women artists, and then others are more expansive, in terms of those kinds of categories of identity. And still, you're able to reach an audience or create an audience with your work in multiple contexts. I think that's pretty rare.

- 05-01:03:04  
Nengudi: I think it's pretty wonderful.
- 05-01:03:07  
Cooks: Yeah.
- 05-01:03:08  
Nengudi: It's really wonderful.
- 05-01:03:11  
Cooks: So you know, I have noted—before we move on, there was one more exhibition that I wanted to hear you talk about: the *From One Source Many Rivers* at the Carnegie Museum [of Art] in Pittsburgh [in 2004]. When I looked at that work, I thought about—I wanted to know more about the inspiration for it, the performance component, and if there was a relationship to Houston Conwill's work, because of the mapping on the floor?
- 05-01:03:44  
Nengudi: No.
- 05-01:03:45  
Cooks: Okay.
- 05-01:03:46  
Nengudi: No, that didn't come into it at all, although it would be a space that he would love, I mean, it was amazing. But no, it didn't—
- 05-01:03:54  
Cooks: Okay.
- 05-01:03:56  
Nengudi: I have this thing about healing. And again, with—curiously enough—with Indian cultures, both in India and in America, sand is used as a healing kind of thing. You know, the Tibetan sand paintings. And then in Native American healing, you know, you've seen—and it's such a kitsch kind of thing now—but you've seen the sand paintings that they do, and they have little photographs of it, postcards of it. I don't know if you've ever seen it.
- 05-01:04:38  
Cooks: Mm-hm.
- 05-01:04:40  
Nengudi: And then in India, the women—and actually, they did this for Kamala Harris—the women create these prayers out of sand. It's sort of like you go to the doctor and you see like a little red box that they put all the contaminated stuff in? Okay, so with the sand, they create this pattern, they put the person in the middle of it—and oddly enough, that's kind of almost universal—they put the person in the middle of it, and they do their thing and then the person gets up. The sand itself is contaminated, because it's taken all of the pain and the problem from the person, so that it's just as contaminated as that little red box, so they have to throw it away after doing these incredibly elaborate sand

paintings. I just thought of something for Ulysses' [interview]: Thomas, Matthew Thomas. Okay. Anyway, yeah, so I really like that kind of thing, this kind of sand painting thing, and so I did my own version of that.

05-01:06:13

Cooks:

So related to that, then let's talk about the recent show at Sprüth Magers, because you have—well, I want to talk about both works, but let's talk about the *Sandmining B* work, since we're talking about sand. When I was there with Claire and we were talking about it, we were thinking about scale, or thinking about, what if you were a miniature person [indicates a few inches] and these were pyramids?

05-01:06:41

Nengudi:

[laughs] Yes, right, right.

05-01:06:43

Cooks:

We were thinking about being our size and trying to figure out what was going on. And then there was the vertical element, there was the different colors, there was the audio. Could you talk about, yeah, returning to the sand for this piece in 2020, and what inspired you?

05-01:07:04

Nengudi:

Well, all along with the *R.S.V.P.* works, and so on, I still was doing my investigations of sand pieces. In fact, at home I have kind of a tray. It's about so big, [gestures a couple of feet wide] and I put African cloth inside the tray, and there's sand inside that. And so every day, I do some kind of design with my finger. I'll wipe it out, and then I'll do another design for the day. And there's something about that, you know, just having my hand in the sand and being able to do a little—it's like a drawing. It's the energy of a drawing, and that somehow centers me or whatever. So I'm always with the sand. [laughs] I forgot my show.

05-01:08:12

Cooks:

We were talking about *Sandmining* and—

05-01:08:16

Nengudi:

Okay, yeah. So they really mean a lot to me, my sand pieces. And obviously, they're not going to sell that! But for me, you know, I really need them. I'm trying to think what my thought was related to that. You wanted to know—

05-01:08:40

Cooks:

I was just interested—there was the colors, the—

05-01:08:44

Nengudi:

Okay, so yeah, I know where I was going. All right, so with that, because of COVID[-19], we had to do that virtually, and it was something else, something else. Simone Manwarring, who is with the gallery, was the one that did that.

05-01:09:02

And so there were elements that I created here. The pole—and this is so abstract, and I didn't want people to really even think about it—but the pole, sadly, represented African men that had—the elements of it—represented African men who had been hung. And then there were some nylons there that kind of represented African women, African American women, also, who—you know, the whole police thing. Originally, they were like pyramids, the sand things, you know, the sand mounds? So it was kind of difficult to get it exactly where I wanted. But I was really happy when I looked at it, because all of a sudden it looked like breasts, you know these breast mounds. And that had a whole other thing to it, you know? And then I wanted it to be—which was kind of hard to describe—but I wanted someone that had really heavy feet that could make an impression throughout the piece, where, you know, you felt the sense of where [they were walking] around it. So that's what it was, but I didn't want to, you know, get into specifics. I think people have to come to a piece and decide what it means.

05-01:10:36

Cooks:

Could you say something—Claire was telling me a bit about the sources for the audio, and she said your son, [Sanza Pyatt Fittz], played an instrument, if I'm remembering this right?

05-01:10:45

Nengudi:

He did.

05-01:10:45

Cooks:

And I was just interested in that.

05-01:10:49

Nengudi:

Yeah, so we're beginning to kind of work together, kinda sorta. He's always on his own thing, but he's not a musician. He's an artist, but he's always been musical. So that's how that came about. Yeah.

05-01:11:08

Cooks:

And the *Bulemia* work, people will look it up, but they'll see that it's a structure lined with newspaper. I took many, many pictures, because I was so—I knew we were going to talk, and I was so interested to see the headlines and what you had kept. These are newspapers you're showing in 2020, but they're from earlier decades.

05-01:11:37

Nengudi:

Seventies, yeah, eighties.

05-01:11:40

Cooks:

Can you talk to us about collecting newspapers and how you decided what to use?

05-01:11:47

Nengudi:

Well, my mother collected them. She collected them since the forties and had all—you know, like Hiroshima and all that kind of stuff. I used those in the



first *Bulemia*, and unfortunately, they got thrown away. And so you know, I kept up her thing about collecting newspapers. I mean, it was just a habit. And then I thought, Oh okay, well, I'm doing this for my granddaughter, as well. Please! [laughs] Nobody's interested in, you know, whoever. But anyway, I kept it going, I kept it going, these newspapers. And when I started unfolding them again, it was just amazing the history that was in there, yeah.

05-01:12:51

Cooks:

Yes, because it seemed like to me it wasn't just every newspaper every day, it was specific headlines. But then I thought, Is that true?

05-01:13:01

Nengudi:

Oh yeah. You know, I was very specific about how I dealt with it, and the gold paint, you know?

05-01:13:10

Cooks:

Yes.

05-01:13:12

Nengudi:

I chose to kind of say that you can frame your own destiny, in other words, you can reshape what they're saying to you. And that's kind of why I used the gold paint. And even with the balls on the floor, they're just balled-up newspapers that I then painted gold. Because again, you can make this what you want. You can't let that stop you. You have to pull out the power of each thing, as opposed to the stuff that undermines you.

05-01:13:56

Cooks:

Yeah, I was noticing there were a number of reviews of dances and performances, and there was an article by Judith Wilson, who's my predecessor here at UC Irvine {inaudible}.

05-01:14:11

Nengudi:

Oh! Oh, is she? How is she doing?

05-01:14:15

Cooks:

She's doing okay. Yeah, she lives in San Francisco.

05-01:14:17

Nengudi:

Yeah, because she doesn't let any sand—any sand [laughs]—or grass grow under her feet, because she got married, right? And then—

05-01:14:26

Cooks:

Yes.

05-01:14:27

Nengudi:

—you know, and then MS, and then she kicked him to the curb, and now she has somebody else. And I thought, Oh okay! [laughs]

05-01:14:35

Cooks:

She's doing pretty good. I think she's happy, yes, now, which is great.

- 05-01:14:38  
Nengudi: Good, oh yeah.
- 05-01:14:39  
Cooks: But she's one of those people that is also a role model with criticism and her role in the art world.
- 05-01:14:48  
Nengudi: She was very important to me. She wrote some reviews, and actually I guess you might call them theoretical articles or something like that.
- 05-01:15:02  
Cooks: Okay.
- 05-01:15:03  
Nengudi: And that was really important. So yeah, she's an amazing person.
- 05-01:15:05  
Cooks: She's amazing, yeah, she's amazing. And so the title, *Bulemia*, does that come from one of the headlines?
- 05-01:15:14  
Nengudi: No, Charles [Abramson] and I were just talking. He's the one that coined it. And we had no idea about this other bulimia, because that was not in the Black community, you know?
- 05-01:15:25  
Cooks: Right.
- 05-01:15:27  
Nengudi: So everybody said—you know, they come and, "Oh, you shouldn't do that, because, oh." And we said, "Huh? What is it? We don't even know what you're talking about."
- 05-01:15:36  
Cooks: Well, where did it come—what did he think it meant?
- 05-01:15:37  
Nengudi: I'm trying to think—I really cannot think. I'll listen to some of the tapes we made, but I really cannot think why we came up with *Bulemia*. But it had nothing to do—and sometimes people want to stretch it into that meaning of throwing things up, and those things—
- 05-01:15:59  
Cooks: An eating disorder, yeah.
- 05-01:16:00  
Nengudi: —but it really didn't have anything to do with that.
- 05-01:16:04  
Cooks: I wasn't sure, and I thought maybe in the first iteration it was one of the headlines in the MICA show.

05-01:16:09  
Nengudi: No.

05-01:16:11  
Cooks: Okay, all right.

05-01:16:12  
Nengudi: No.

05-01:16:14  
Cooks: So we're coming towards the end of our time. And I'm going to do what I did before, which is I'm just going to list some amazing things that you've done. [laughs] Honors and awards, there are so many things; and then also appearances, where you're speaking on panels.

05-01:16:38  
Nengudi: Yeah.

05-01:16:39  
Cooks: So Distinguished Service Award, Board of Regents, University of Colorado in '94. You—

05-01:16:47  
Nengudi: And I must say that that was because I've done a lot of community work here in Colorado Springs in the arts community.

05-01:16:53  
Cooks: Right, okay. There was also a project where you were working with—oh, let me find this—someone who's really wonderful, Kira Lynn Harris, that you curated an exhibition of hers in 2009. Is that correct?

05-01:17:18  
Nengudi: Who do you mean?

05-01:17:20  
Cooks: I have the Cue Art Foundation? Does that sound familiar? No, okay. Well, let's move on. [Nengudi laughs] I have you were a pan[elist]—

05-01:17:32  
Nengudi: Oh! You mean Kira Harris.

05-01:17:36  
Cooks: Kira. I have K-i-r-a, Kira.

05-01:17:41  
Nengudi: Yeah. Oh, I thought you were saying Carolyn.

05-01:17:45  
Cooks: Sorry, her middle name is Lynn.

05-01:17:47  
Nengudi: Oh.

- 05-01:17:48  
Cooks: I was saying her name too quickly. Sorry, Senga, I wasn't trying to trip you up. Kira Harris. Lynn is [her middle name].
- 05-01:17:53  
Nengudi: Oh yes, it was such a pleasure to do that.
- 05-01:17:56  
Cooks: She's wonderful. This is part of your curating. We talked about your gallery in Colorado Springs.
- 05-01:18:04  
Nengudi: Right.
- 05-01:18:06  
Cooks: That was a little bit earlier than this moment in 2009, but how did that come about? Was she someone you knew already, or how were you connected?
- 05-01:18:20  
Nengudi: Yes, she was a good friend of Ulysses.
- 05-01:18:23  
Cooks: Yes.
- 05-01:18:24  
Nengudi: [laughs] I met her, but also she was moving to New York. And she was driving, had all of her possessions in this little car, and she was driving. So she stayed here with us for the night, and so we had a great time talking about things and everything. You know how that is. You have kind of those really interesting encounters that are quite brief but very significant. Sort of like when you're traveling and you meet a group of people, and after three days you're going, Oh no, we can't part! It's like this instant thing that happens. That was the case with her. We kind of established a good friendship at that time. And so when she moved to New York and this opportunity came up, she talked to me about it. and I was just most happy—well, I'm trying to think. Did she talk to me about it, or did *they*?
- 05-01:19:33  
Cooks: The foundation?
- 05-01:19:34  
Nengudi: Yeah. And I suggested her. Either way, I suggested her and supported the exhibit.
- 05-01:19:45  
Cooks: Okay. Some of the other things: [in 2001] you were a panelist at UC Riverside for a show called *The Black Aesthetic: [1960 to 2001]* with Kerry James Marshall, Sterling Stuckey, and Clyde R. Taylor. You received an Anonymous Was a Woman award in 2005.

- 05-01:20:13  
Nengudi: Yeah, amazing.
- 05-01:20:12  
Cooks: A Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation award in 2016. Before that, a Women's Caucus for [Art] Lifetime Achievement Award, and that was ten years ago, 2010!
- 05-01:20:24  
Nengudi: Hard to believe, ten years.
- 05-01:20:28  
Cooks: Yeah. Elected as member to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences [in 2020].
- 05-01:20:32  
Nengudi: That is amazing.
- 05-01:20:35  
Cooks: Let's talk about that, because what does all of this mean to you? These honors and awards that are going to just keep coming.
- 05-01:20:40  
Nengudi: They're incredible. You know, I'm really kind of a student of history. And when they told me that I had won, that I am now a member of the academy, and I looked at their history—and it started basically with Benjamin Franklin—and I went, Oh my gosh, this is unbelievable. And all these scholars, you know, Dr. This and Dr. That. I'm trying to think, like Jonas Salk and Nobel Peace Prize winners, and Nelson Mandela. Oh, I mean, talk about company.
- 05-01:21:33  
Cooks: That's incredible.
- 05-01:21:35  
Nengudi: It is incredible. And incredible—
- 05-01:21:36  
Cooks: Congratulations!
- 05-01:21:37  
Nengudi: Thank you. And incredible with the work they're doing. And that's one thing that's really important to me. It feels like, you know, it's about advancing—it sounds corny—but advancing democracy or finding solutions to severe problems that we have in our society right now. So being able to be on a committee or whatever—
- 05-01:22:09  
Cooks: Yeah no, it's wonderful. So my last question is: I want to know really what you're doing now, like what's in your next show. What is your next show? Where is it? What's going on?

05-01:22:26  
Nengudi:

Well, boy, it's been a few years now. Nora [Burnett] Abrams and Elissa Auther developed a program called *Improvisational Gestures*, and it was some of my *R.S.V.P.* work plus. And so they started that, and it toured around and everything. And then the next thing that happened was—I'm thinking of her name—Stephanie Weber is with Munich Lenbachhaus, [and the] museum wanted to do a show, a solo show, as well. And you know, she just—oh my gosh, she just researched it to the bone and everything about me. Yes, there you go. That's it!

05-01:23:28  
Cooks:

[holds up *Topologies* catalog] Yeah, this is fantastic, and it's dense, it's well illustrated.

05-01:23:33  
Nengudi:

It's dense.

05-01:23:34  
Cooks:

Yeah, I was really happy for you that this was published.

05-01:23:37  
Nengudi:

Oh yeah, it's almost like a bible. I mean, she was turning over rocks and everything and contacting everybody possible. The show opened in 2019, in September. And thankfully so, because it wouldn't have happened otherwise, any later. It was really wonderful to have that experience in Munich. People were so receptive to the work, so incredibly receptive. So far that's been the biggest thing.

05-01:24:20

I have, I guess you might say, an iteration of the show that just opened, *just* opened in Denver [at the Denver Art Museum] a couple of days ago. And then it'll go on to the Philadelphia Museum [of Art] after that. It closes here in April, and then it starts there somewhere in April or so. And so those are big things that have taken up a lot of energy, even though it's pretty much historic pieces.

05-01:24:54

But in the meantime, it would just be really helpful if I had some time to do my own work, which I'm slowly getting back to. You know, if I have a minute to myself, then good things happen. [laughs]

05-01:25:13  
Cooks:

We're going to leave you alone soon. I know we've taken up so much of your time over the past several months, but there are so many people that will benefit from these sessions.

05-01:25:21  
Nengudi:

And it's been a pleasure. You've made it a pleasure.

05-01:25:23

Cooks:

You know, I was going to ask you—maybe this will be my last question, and then Amanda maybe there are some things I'm overlooking—but I was wondering about: are you making work now that you don't think you could have made earlier in your career?

05-01:25:42

Nengudi:

Now that's really a good question. And what do you mean by "don't think I could have made"?

05-01:25:50

Cooks:

Well, I mean, if there's projects that you're working on now that you think, I needed all of my years and experience to do this. And I guess I'm thinking especially because some of the work you're making again, like your—but it's the same work, but it's not. I mean, the world has changed, you have changed, the viewers are not all the same. If you could just think of—or speak to us about whatever that might conjure up for you?

05-01:26:23

Nengudi:

That's a hard one, because I don't quite think in those terms. I guess I would have to reflect on something, because right now—and I'm sorry, there's a TV going on downstairs, and it's distracting me. But I think I would have to look at it and step back from it—whatever it is, a performance or a piece—and say, "Wow, you know, mm. I don't think I could've done that when I was twenty-five," or something like that. I just don't think that way. I've mentioned in the past that, you know, whatever comes out of me is who I am. And at that point, it was, you know, African American woman, mother, dadadadada. [laughs] Well now, we can add to it: a woman of a certain age or a *crone* or something like that. So whatever comes out of me is going to reflect that, without me even thinking about it. It just is, because it's part of my fabric right now.

05-01:28:10

Cooks:

No, that's great. Amanda, is there another wrap-up question? I have many questions, but I—you know.

05-01:28:23

Tewes:

One to wrap it all up with, well, no pressure. Well, Senga, as we've spent our many sessions together, and you've experimented so much in your art and in your life, I just want—would love to hear from you how you would like others to think of you, and to think of all of the output you've done over the years. How are you thinking about that as you move forward?

05-01:28:45

Nengudi:

Oh God, what a question. It's like sitting a forty-pound baby in your lap. [laughs] "Here, take care of this!" Pow! Oh my gosh. I think the main thing is that it really is about keeping going. And you know, just moving forward with who *you* are. Not who somebody else is, but to have some kind of—and I don't feel as though I'm a confident person—but have some kind of

confidence in your idea, your concept, or what you have to offer and just, you know, move forward with that. That really is the most important thing.

05-01:29:48

I was influenced very early on by—hm, hm—the Brazilian female artist in the fifties and sixties.

05-01:30:08

Cooks: Brazilian? I was thinking Ana Mendiata? But—

05-01:30:13

Nengudi: No, but she's not—

05-01:30:13

Cooks: No, she's Cuban.

05-01:30:16

Nengudi: Now, what is her name—

05-01:30:17

Cooks: We'll put it in.

05-01:30:19

Nengudi: And she's matched with this fellow that's also Brazilian. Oh, I almost had it. Anyway, I saw a photo of hers where she just had her hand out, and there was a—she had like a plastic ball that I think it had water in it. It might not have had water in it, it might have just been an inflated ball in her hand. And that's all I needed for me to say, "Oh okay. I'm not alone. I'm on the right track." It just took that one photo to urge me on, that, yes, what I was doing was valid. And so if my work can urge people on—certainly, particularly women—but also, if it can urge anybody on to use what they have with their own thinking and transform that thing—and also, transformation is really important throughout my work—that it's worth it, because we all influence each other. So if I have any influence at all for a young artist to just believe in themselves, no matter how strange, then that's a good thing. Why can I not remember that name? Well, you guys should remember it!

05-01:32:06

Tewes: We'll figure it out.

05-01:32:06

Nengudi: Okay.

05-01:32:08

Cooks: Is it Clark?

05-01:32:08

Nengudi: Yes, Lygia Clark.

05-01:32:11

Cooks: Yes, thank you—okay.



- 05-01:32:12  
Nengudi: Yeah, and thank you! [laughs]
- 05-01:32:13  
Cooks: Yes, I wanted to help you, because I know what it's like when you've got the name on the tip of your tongue.
- 05-01:32:18  
Nengudi: Yes, oh my gosh! Yeah, Lygia Clark.
- 05-01:32:22  
Tewes: That's beautiful, Senga, thank you for that.
- 05-01:32:24  
Cooks: Yeah, thank you.
- 05-01:32:24  
Tewes: Is there anything you would like to share that we haven't talked about in our time together?
- 05-01:32:30  
Nengudi: Mm, I don't know. [laughs] We covered a lot, we covered a lot. Is there anything you guys—
- 05-01:32:39  
Cooks: Yeah.
- 05-01:32:40  
Tewes: Fair enough.
- 05-01:32:41  
Nengudi: —a last question or so?
- 05-01:32:45  
Cooks: I've been very indulgent asking all the questions that I, you know—
- 05-01:32:52  
Nengudi: No more, okay.
- 05-01:32:53  
Cooks: —[that] I really did want to hear from you. And I will say, I just talked to a person who wants to go to graduate school in visual studies. I said, "Well, what would your project be?" And he goes, "Oh, I would really like to write about Senga Nengudi."
- 05-01:33:10  
Nengudi: What?
- 05-01:33:12  
Cooks: And I said, "Oh, I know her!" [laughs]
- 05-01:33:17  
Nengudi: You say, "We're like this." [holds up two fingers and laughs]

05-01:33:22

Cooks:

I said, "She's wonderful." I don't think I told him, "Oh, I'm working on this oral history with her." I didn't tell him all that, but I really wanted to hear what he had to say. And there was that sense of validation for *him*. He's a young curator, but there's something about your work that connected with him. Now, he may or may not be—I don't even think you have a target audience, but I don't know if he would have been in it—but he is responding to your work and wants to write a dissertation about it.

05-01:33:54

Nengudi:

That's such a gratifying, satisfying feeling, you know? I don't have Instagram, and someone just sent me this Instagram video from MoMA [Museum of Modern Art]. And the conservator, that is responsible for my work, [Megan Randall], and this little—it was four minutes, and she was talking about what the piece [*R.S.V.P. I*], the piece that has all the units to it, what that meant to her. She had gotten pregnant and then she lost her child—all of these things she could see in the work, from being pregnant and the positiveness of it, to the other. And you know, that's art, you know? When you can connect with the person that's looking at your work, then that's incredible.

05-01:34:57

Tewes:

I think that's a great way to end this. Thank you, both of you, for all of your time. We really appreciate it.

05-01:35:01

Cooks:

Thank you, Senga, thank you.

05-01:35:03

Nengudi:

Thank you!

[End of Interview]