

Art Now L.A.  
September 13, 2020

Senga Nengudi  
Where the Poetic and Didactic Come Together  
Sprüeth Magers  
August 18 - October 2, 2020

by Jody Zellen



Two intriguing installation pieces by Senga Nengudi occupy Sprüeth Magers' vast Los Angeles first floor gallery. These pieces bookend and in some ways play off each other as opposites. *Sandmining B*, 2020 invites entry, but can only be observed from afar, whereas *Bulemia*, 1988/2018 is an immersive experience— an intimate room filled floor to ceiling with newspapers. Facing the entryway is *Sandmining B*, a large white wall extending from floor to ceiling, splattered and rubbed with swishes of multi-colored pigments. Perpendicular to the wall is a similar-sized rectangle of sand on the floor, criss-crossed by myriad foot prints, dotted with breast-shaped mounds and a few car parts. Situated behind the wall of *Sandmining B* in the other half of the space, one comes upon *Bulemia*, which is presented inside a separate self-contained square room with an unadorned framed sheetrock exterior. A subtle sound piece also permeates the gallery occasionally as part of *Sandmining B*.

Nengudi has a long history of creating works that engage with the body as well as with political topics. She became active in the 60s and 70s making performances and sculptures that explored issues of race and engaged with feminist concerns, as well as the more formal principals of abstraction. She is perhaps best known for sculptures comprised of nylon stockings filled with sand that were suspended and stretched across walls and corners and also used as props in her performances. The sand, a substance contained within her sculptural works, now spills out across the floor. Sand mining causes unnecessary erosion and refers to the extraction of sand through open pits. In Nengudi's installation, the protruding pyramid-shaped mounds with brightly colored apexes scattered across the sand also recall land mines— something dangerous hidden beneath the surface. In either case, Nengudi is calling attention to the mechanization of our world and the destruction of the natural landscape. In one corner, a twisted pipe emerges from the sand appearing like a snake slowly making its way towards a second assemblage of car parts installed vertically on the wall and adorned with twisted pieces of nylon. In the past, Nengudi's use of nylon was clearly a reference to women's bodies, but in this installation, the car parts combined with the nylon feel more masculine than feminine. *Sandmining B* also references an empty stage, filled with the relics and remains of a performance. The performative aspect of the work is echoed by the sound track that cycles on every ten minutes filling the space with fragments of spoken text and music.

Although *Sandmining B* can only be observed from the perimeter, *Bulemia* is an enclosed space that can be entered. Within this room, Nengudi has wallpapered the upper half of the walls with grids of newspapers culled from a wide range of sources, spanning many years. The work was

first presented in 1988 and many of the newspapers date from that time, as well as from 2018 when it was first recreated. While the tenor of the articles is specific to the events of their time, Nengudi carefully curates a point of view that references and notates historical events that touch on race and civil rights, as well as reviews of art shows and dance performances by African-Americans. Many of the pages have been spray-painted gold, masking everything but a few specific words or images Nengudi wants to draw attention to. Choice words remain, in some ways becoming found or concrete poetry. More often than not she emphasizes the positive rather than negative aspects of the news. Halfway down the walls the gridded newspapers become less structured, presented as an array of draped, overlapping folded pages that flutter as they reach the floor. On the floor, Nengudi has crumpled the newsprint into balls, many of which are also spray-painted a metallic gold. Across one wall, Nengudi has scrawled the piece's title: *Bulemia*. While bulimia is an eating disorder, Nengudi wants her installation to reframe the notion of disease becoming instead "*a metaphor for exploring the nature of creativity.*" Taking in, transforming and spewing this now altered material back out.

Nengudi's exhibition presents two distinct installations that, when seen in juxtaposition, become contemplative spaces where the poetic and didactic come together to say something profound about the past and the current state of the world.

<https://artnowla.com/2020/09/13/senga-nengudi/>