

Senga Nengudi: Performance Works 1972-1982

1 April – 14 June 2026

Free

Whitechapel Gallery presents a rare archival exhibition of the work of pioneering artist and educator **Senga Nengudi** (b.1943, Chicago, USA). Featuring photographic works, archival materials and films of key performance pieces, the exhibition offers audiences unique insights into Nengudi's work and practice.

Born in Chicago, and raised in Los Angeles, Nengudi was a key figure in the avant-garde Black art scenes both in Los Angeles and New York during the 1960s and 1970s that were characterised by their radical experimentation, collective practices and social commentary. Nengudi's influential and groundbreaking works sit at the intersection of sculpture, choreography and performance and draw on a range of African, Asian and Native American art forms.

The presentation focuses on a selection of Nengudi's most iconic works made between 1972 and 1982 – a pivotal moment in her artistic development. During this period, Nengudi refined both her approach and creative forms, building on a background in dance and art. She was also influenced by avant-garde collectives and practices including Fluxus, the Gutai group, Yoruba mythology, Japanese Noh theatre and jazz improvisation. Her distinctive and evocative sculptural forms were assembled from a variety of found objects and materials such as hosiery, sand, rocks, seed pods, masking tape and paper, and designed to be animated by spontaneous or choreographed interactions, creating powerful participatory works.

Works on display include original photographs of Nengudi's seminal work, *R.S.V.P.* (1976), as well as a film of a later performance of the piece. *R.S.V.P.* comprises an evolving series of works combining sculptural forms with performance activations; it was her first that used nylon tights as the primary material. After the birth of her first child, Nengudi became intrigued by the changes in her own body and the societal impact on women's body image following childbirth. Her use of hosiery is significant, referencing gender constructs, but also, through the elasticity and flexibility of the material, operating as a potent symbol of resilience and subversion. The tights were pulled, twisted, knotted and filled with sand, tethered to gallery walls or stretched across the space evoking cavernous womb-like structures or body parts such as breasts or bellies. *R.S.V.P.* provided an immersive and sensual arena for physical interaction and Nengudi invited frequent collaborator – dancer and choreographer Maren Hassinger – to activate the work through movement.

R.S.V.P. is shown alongside photographic documentation of other performance works including *Performance Piece* (1977) and *Performance with Inside Outside* (1978), to further illuminate the development of Nengudi's engagement with flexibility and tension. The presentation also includes a triptych of photographs from Nengudi's *Spirit Flags* series, an important body of work created in New York in the early 1970s, that paved the way for the later performance works. The flag-like forms, hung outdoors in alleyways and across fire escapes, were animated and set in motion by the wind, rain and other environmental factors, igniting the artist's interest in how external forces affect the movement and form of objects.

Also on display is a film capturing the collaborative work *Air Propo* (1982), an improvised performance by Nengudi with dancer, vocalist and performer Cheryl Banks Smith and musician Lawrence D. "Butch" Morris. Alongside the performances of Banks Smith and Morris, Nengudi practices circular breathing techniques, transforming her own body into an instrument. The work was made for the pioneering gallery Just Above Midtown (JAM) in New York. A dedicated and significant space for African American artists and artists of colour to present their work, JAM demonstrated the ethos of improvisation and collaboration vital for performance-makers at this moment. Nengudi was also part of a close-knit community of Black artists in Los Angeles, including Maren Hassinger and David Hammons, collectively known as Studio Z. A key part of their work was to facilitate communal spaces for African American artists to experiment with forms and practices outside the mainstream art world.

This exhibition marks the first solo presentation of Senga Nengudi in a public gallery in London, following her 2018 survey exhibition at Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, and Fruitmarket, Edinburgh. It is shown alongside a major survey of Veronica Ryan at Whitechapel Gallery, putting the two artists in dialogue and highlighting Nengudi's influence on Ryan's work.

Press Contacts:

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Notes to Editors

- **Senga Nengudi: Performance Works 1972–1982** runs 1 April – 14 June 2026.
- 2026 marks Whitechapel Gallery's 125th anniversary.
- Anniversary highlights include: **Backyard Biennial** (Summer 2026) – a new arts festival; a special 125-anniversary **Summer Party**; **Art Futures** (throughout 2026) – a major new talks series; **Whitechapel Gallery Young Associates** (launches Spring 2026) – a new initiative for 18-to-30-year-olds; a **new visual identity** for

Whitechapel Gallery's 125th year designed by leading creative agency Bartle Bogle Hegarty (BBH).

- *Senga Nengudi: Performance Works 1972-1982* is curated by Leila Hasham and Hannah Woods.

Listings information

Senga Nengudi: Performance Works 1972-1982

1 April – 14 June 2026

Gallery 5

Free

Visitor Information

General Gallery admission: Free

Ticketed shows: £15 (Standard ticket) / £9.50 (Concessions)

Opening times: Tuesday – Sunday, 11am – 6pm; Thursdays, 11am – 9pm

Whitechapel Gallery, 77 – 82 Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7QX

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About Senga Nengudi

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

About Whitechapel Gallery

2026 marks Whitechapel Gallery's 125th Anniversary, providing a unique opportunity to celebrate the Gallery's groundbreaking history and set a bold agenda for the future.

Founded in 1901 with the aim to bring 'the finest art of the world to the people of East London', the Gallery has been responsible for bringing some of the most radical, innovative and influential artists to its East End home.

From the outset it pushed the boundaries of what a locally-focused cultural institution could do: giving voice and platform to local, national and international artists at all

stages of their careers; presenting diverse practices, forms and ideas; exemplifying sector-leading learning and community outreach programmes; and being at the forefront of the global cultural scene.

From ground-breaking solo shows from artists as diverse as **Barbara Hepworth** (1954), **Jackson Pollock** (1958), **Helio Oiticica** (1969), **Gilbert & George** (1971), **Eva Hesse** (1979), **Frida Kahlo** (1982), **Sonia Boyce DBE RA** (1988), **Sophie Calle** (2010), **Zarina Bhimji** (2012), **Emily Jacir** (2015), **William Kentridge** (2016), **Theaster Gates** (2021), **Nicole Eisenman** (2023), **Zineb Sedira** (2024), **Gavin Jantjes** (2024), **Peter Kennard** (2024), **Lygia Clark** (2024), **Sonia Boyce** (2024), **Donald Rodney** (2025), **Hamad Butt** (2025) and **Joy Gregory** (2025) to thought-provoking group and thematic exhibitions that reflect key artistic and cultural concerns, the Gallery's focus on bringing artists, ideas, and audiences together, remains as important today as it did over a century ago and has helped to cement the East End, as one of the world's most exciting and diverse cultural quarters.

We are proud to be a Gallery that is locally embedded and globally connected. Our vision is to ensure Whitechapel Gallery continues to claim a distinctive and radical position in the wider social and cultural landscape, building on its pioneering history while translating and animating it for our time.

www.whitechapelgallery.org



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