



INSPIRED BY:

A.C.Q. 1 BY SENGA NENGUDI

TOPIC:

Senga Nengudi talks about the connection between culture and identity, as well as the limitations they pose, in performance art and in using nontraditional art materials.

RATIONALE:

Identifying with art goes beyond representation. Not only do various cultures need to be reflected, but viewers also need to be able to expand on ideas of identity. Art nurtures the spirit and provides ways of rethinking that allow students to develop their own sense of self.

RESOURCES INCLUDE:

FOR FACILITATORS:

- How-to facilitation guide (includes information on theme and individual artworks, links for background research, and video demonstrating the art project)
- Links to high-resolution images of the artwork
- Teaching slides with condensed information and discussion questions (provided for multiple age groups)

FOR KIDS:

- Instruction sheet for the artmaking project
- Printable brainstorming organizer
- Printable storyboard planner



Senga Nengudi, *A.C.Q. 1*, 2016–17. Refrigerator and air conditioner parts, fan, nylon pantyhose, and sand. Denver Art Museum: Purchased with funds from the Contemporary Collectors' Circle with additional support from Vicki and Kent Logan, Catherine Dews Edwards and Philip Edwards, Craig Ponzio, and Ellen and Morris Susman, 2020.566.1-3. © Senga Nengudi. Image shown: Installation photography at Sprüth Magers London by Stephen White. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers, Thomas Erben Gallery, and Lévy Gorvy.



THE BALANCING ACT OF PERSONAL AND UNIVERSAL

Art sometimes originates in personal experiences. Everyone has unique personal and cultural experiences. However, art also can address universal artistic, political, and/or social ideas. Artists often draw on personal stories, experiences, and feelings when creating art. And this art, when presented to a larger audience, often invites or challenges the viewer to connect with those stories, experiences, and feelings. Viewers will also interpret those stories, experiences, and feelings with their own unique perspective. Both as viewers and as makers or artists, we must ask ourselves—how do we look inward and outward simultaneously?

Visual art communicates with people in a way that seems to speak to the human heart, spirit, soul, and emotions—connecting in ways that cannot always be articulated by another form of communication. This process of meaning-making with art is both personal and universal.

Watch this video featuring artist Senga Nengudi and consider the ways she taps into her personal identity and ways she connects universally in the lesson below.

SENGA NENGUDI VIDEO

Conversation Questions:

- What resonated for you in Nengudi's words?
- What informs Nengudi's artistic decisions?
- Why does Nengudi use pantyhose in her work?
- What role does culture/identity play in Nengudi's work?
- In what ways are her works personal?
- What ideas in Nengudi's work connect universally?

“Simply by being, that’s a political statement. So whatever comes out of me has all these elements of me in it: I’m Black, I’m a woman, and at this point I’m a woman of a certain age. So simply by being, I am those things.” -Senga Nengudi

- Consider this statement by Nengudi while looking at her work. Can you identify any visual clues that mark the artist’s presence?
- Look at these other artworks.



James Luna (Luiseño, Diegueno, Mexican, 1950-2018), *Half Indian Half Mexican*, 1991. Inkjet print; 30 1/16 x 72 2/16 in. © James Luna. Denver Art Museum: William Sr. and Dorothy Harmsen Collection at the Denver Art Museum, by exchange, 2009.773A-C.



Bently Spang (Northern Cheyenne, b. 1960), *Modern Warrior Series: War Shirt #4 - National Sacrifice*, 2010. Glass beads, velvet, silk plant leaves, rubber figures, color photographs, Ethernet cord, SD card, plastic packaging, and hemp cord; 45 1/2 x 55 x 12 in. © Bently Spang. Denver Art Museum: William Sr. and Dorothy Harmsen Collection at the Denver Art Museum, by exchange, 2010.491A-B.






Valentina Gonzalez Wohlers, *Prickly Pair Chair, Gentleman Style*, 2009. Banak wood, medium-density fiberboard, paint, and upholstery; 71 x 47 x 20 x 20 in. Denver Art Museum, acquired by exchange, 2016.2. © Valentina Gonzalez Wohlers

- What aspects of the artist’s personal identity are communicated?
- What aspects of your identity become fingerprints on works of art you make?

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Artists' identities are all unique and complex. Black art, like Black people, is not a monolith. It is diverse, expressive, and resists simple categorization. Sometimes artists do not wish their work to be connected to constructs of their identity, such as race or gender.


(helpful links)

-  Video with artist Kerry James Marshall's thoughts about identifying as a Black artist
-  *New York Times* article, "Nine Black Artists and Cultural Leaders on Seeing and Being Seen"
-  *Washington Post* article, "They're Women, They're Black and They Don't Make Art About That"

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It's important to think about the history of Black art in America in relation to Senga Nengudi's work. Here are a few helpful resources to learn more. While historically Black creativity is indisputable, the American art world has often upheld racist beliefs, excluding Black artists. Here is a collection of books, articles, and slide shows.

(helpful links)

-  New York Public Library, "On Black Aesthetics: The Black Arts Movement"
-  Digital Exhibition – Ready for the Revolution: Education, Arts, and Aesthetics of the Black Power Movement
-  Black Arts Movement overview video
-  Children's books that illuminate the lives of 10 Black artists in America

ABOUT THE ARTIST



Born in Chicago in 1943, Senga Nengudi grew up in California and earned a master's degree in sculpture from California State University at Los Angeles. Her interest in Gutai, a Japanese avant-garde arts movement, then drew her to study in Tokyo for a year. She returned to California for graduate studies before establishing studios in Los Angeles and New York. From 1998 to 2008, she taught at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs.

Nengudi's sculptures became associated with the Black Arts Movement, which gave artistic shape to the rising political activism and Black nationalism of the era. Nengudi's work is also in conversation with the Feminist art movement. And yet, for decades she and other Black artists were excluded because of racism. In addition, Nengudi's process and artworks were difficult to categorize.

"She was a sculptor, but one who used cheap or found materials. She was a dancer, but at the heart of her performances were these strange creations. Her work was too conceptual to be embraced by the mainstream art world as 'Black art,' which expected a strictly figurative and sociological view of Black life in America, but it was also too distinctly personal to be celebrated alongside the mostly white men who defined the conceptual art of the era. She was uncategorizable in an age that, for all its experimentation, still treasured systems of organization."

(Lovia Gyarkye, 2020)

Over the following decades, white-owned galleries and museums in the United States remained largely uninterested in Black artists. During this time Nengudi and other Black artists exhibited outside the United States and, within the United States, in Black-run gallery spaces, public libraries, and community centers. They even created their own ways to share their art. Thanks to their perseverance, Nengudi was able to continually show her artwork and mature as an artist.

Gyarkye, Lovia. "An Artist's Continuing Exploration of the Human Form," *New York Times*, November 9, 2020. Accessed December 17, 2020.

SENGA NENGUDI ARTICLE

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 Learn more about the artist in this text, which is great for high school students

 Video of Senga Nengudi on interaction, culture, materials

 Denver Public Library resources

ABOUT A.C.Q.1

In this mixed-media installation, Nengudi combines hard, rigid, found industrial objects with the soft, elastic properties of nylon. Nengudi works with nylon mesh because it relates to the elasticity of the human body. It is similar to the body because it is tight like skin in the beginning of its life, and after the passage of time and use it begins to sag, never returning to its original shape. The mixture of tension and movement suggest that resilience and fragility can coexist. The work also has qualities of being temporary, as the corroded materials attest to the passing of time while the moving fan activates the sculpture in the way a performer might in some of Nengudi's other works. While long-term preservation of her artworks may not have been a consideration when she first made them, the passing of time has accepted the sculptures. They have become metaphors for bodies in transformation—acting and being acted upon, doing their best to exist in the world.

Consider this quote about A.C.Q. –“I liked the idea of the fragility of the body [nylons] up against something that's solid and hard, and unyielding.”

- What does Nengudi's quote mean to you?
- What might the quote help us understand about this artwork?
- If you were to create an installation/artwork that suggests resilience and fragility can coexist in your life, what kind of materials might you use?

ACTIVITY EXTENSION

Pass around a pair of nylons or ask kids to collect a pair of nylons/stockings from someone in their home. Experiment with stretching and moving the nylons and filling them with weight.

- What does it feel like?
- What does it remind you of?
- How does it make you feel to manipulate this material?
- What kind of message might be communicated about the body by using this material?

"I am working with nylon mesh because it relates to the elasticity of the human body. From tender tight beginnings to sagging end . . . The body can only stand so much push and pull before it gives way, never to resume its original shape . . . My works are abstracted recreations of used bodies—visual images that serve my aesthetic decisions as well as my ideas." – Senga Nengudi

- What does this quote by Nengudi mean to you?
- Does it help you understand the artwork in a different way?

🕒-🕒-🕒-🕒 **YOUR TURN**

Inspired by Nengudi's process and how artists connect personal identities and universal experience, we challenge you to do the same by creating a short, three-minute, performance artwork using at least one ready-made object (an ordinary article from your life used in your art).

Create a performance artwork that explores an aspect of your identity using your everyday object as a tool in the artwork. Transform the function of the object you selected and give it new meaning.

1. Look inward: What personal experiences are fruitful to explore through artmaking? What might transcend your personal realm and connect to others universally? Use this Brainstorming organizer to choose the topic or topics that feel most interesting to explore.

BRAINSTORMING ORGANIZER

2. Gather everyday objects that connect to your topic in some way

a. What is the object? Why might it connect to your topic?

b. Experiment with your objects. Place them in bizarre or unfamiliar locations to view them from another perspective or point of view. How do they move? How can they be combined in unusual ways? What other experiments can you come up with?

3. Engage in self-reflection. Write about your initial ideas and plans for executing the work. This could take the form of a storyboard or an outline of your plan.

4. Clarify and refine your process or approach as you prepare for your performance.

5. Conduct your three-minute performance for an audience.

6. Reflect by describing what actually happened, record viewers' responses, and analyze the process as a whole. Make note of possible new directions to explore.

Reflection Questions:




- In what ways did you explore a personal topic in your work?
- How do you think your personal exploration might relate or resonate with others, therefore becoming universal?
- How did your performance go? What actually happened? How did your audience react? What might you do differently next time?

WHAT IS PERFORMANCE ART?

Performance art is an act of doing—it is not recounting, re-enacting, or representing. The distinguishing difference between performance art and performance in the theatre is that performance art is real, a direct action, whereas theatrical performances recreate a written narrative. Performance art often incorporates four elements: temporality or duration, space, bodily action including stillness, and often the presence of the artist. Performance art can be enacted outdoors or in a studio or gallery context. Performance art is often about an experiment by the artist rather than about entertaining an audience. Frequently a performance artist has created a challenge for themselves and, driven by curiosity, they perform to discover.

Performance art is about using your body and being present in the moment and often embraces playfulness in its creation. Many performances rely on interaction or reactions from an audience, but not always. We are using performance art to explore how personal can be universal. Because this mode of artmaking is about the personal and the political, it's figurative and conceptual, sometimes simple and sometimes complicated.

DIG DEEPER

-  Get warmed up into a performance mode by trying out some of these improv games
-  Here are some practical tips for teaching about performance art
-  Videos to help students define performance art
 - o Tate Shots: History of Performance Art
 - o MOMA, Maria Abramović defines Performance Art