

From top, clockwise:

**Meriem Bennani**

*"Siham & Hafida"*

Installation view at

*The Kitchen,*

New York (2017)

Courtesy The Kitchen, New York

Photography by Jason Mandella

**Senga Nengudi**

Ceremony for Freeway Fets

Performance at Pico Blvd.,

Los Angeles (1978)

© Senga Nengudi

**John Ahearn**

Ismael (Tire Shop) (2017)

Courtesy of Alexander

and Bonin, New York

Photography by Joerg Lohse





# Meriem Bennani

The Kitchen / New York

"Aita is a Moroccan art of revolution specific to the city of Safi," a girl explains in Meriem Bennani's six-channel video installation *Siham & Hafida* (2017). A vernacular music from Morocco's Atlantic coast, Aita operated as a vehicle for messages of political resistance under French colonial rule. Historically ephemeral, Aita performances now circulate on the internet. The two eponymous subjects of Bennani's videos are *chikhas* (female Aita practitioners) positioned on either side of Aita's digital mediation.

Projected on two large-scale flat surfaces and a landscape of sculptural and geometric forms in the gallery, the video constructs a rivalry between Hafida, a traditionalist, and Siham, an autodidact millennial. Skeptically, Hafida watches a YouTube video of Siham performing; she criticizes her methodology without prompting. "She calls herself a *chikha* but she doesn't know Aita well yet," she says. "You must learn from the artists from previous generations. Understand from them how Aita functions." Other evidence of Aita's digital reproduction recur through the video's thirty minutes: Hafida sings along to an iPhone video of herself performing, which she holds to face the camera. Siham and Hafida act as metonyms for their generation's use of these technologies: Bennani shows Hafida standing stiffly for a photo at the site of the world's largest tagine, while Siham poses with practiced mediagenic angles, phone in hand.

All the while, Bennani intervenes in the video's diegetic thread with digital manipulations: faces pixelate, glow, deconstruct; bodies and objects are distended, exaggerated, made magical; animated crabs and butterflies flood the frame. Cartoonish sound effects add slapstick to the video's affective register. An extended scene shows a *chikha* dancing; Bennani shapes the moving image into unnatural motion, no less beautiful. These distortions mirror the changing social texture of a cultural form, as the archive moves from the body to the digital network.

by Tess Edmonson

# John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres

Alexander and Bonin / New York

Let me do the honors. Here's *Mr. Richard Hall (Tuskegee Airman)* (2017) — his uniform tells the story of the first African-American wing of the Air Force. That's *Justin* (2009). You've probably seen him around the neighborhood. Can you believe he's here? *Peter John Ramos (7'4" Caguas High School)* (2005–17) is a bit of a local celebrity. The guy holding the drill is the one I told you to see about your car: *Ismael (Tire Shop)* (2017). No one's quite sure why *James Fuentes* (2015), the art dealer, was invited, but he showed up. At the far end of the room is *Michael Weathers greeting his father* (1993). I'd like to point out beautiful *Juanita* (2010) — yes, she's due next month. There's *Big Chief* (2005), the wise one, *Taneesha* (2000), the shy one, and *Mad Crystal* (2005).

All of these characters take the form of either fiberglass or plaster casts in John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres's exhibition. For the last few decades, the artists have gathered their models from their immediate neighborhood — or wherever they happen to be working — and cultivated a dialog with these sitters to produce very familiar-seeming portraits. For some, the experience is creepy or startling; I saw the show with my girlfriend, and she shivered and hastened to the door. They are uncanny not because they present a truthful likeness — their flaws and imprecision are glaring. The slapdash mold-making is only capable of reproducing one or two big gestures, and, like a school portrait, this tends to mean that an awkward posture or facial expression gives rise to an outsize sense of embarrassment.

On the other hand, the work also concerns pride, and Ahearn and Torres have an old-school politics that puts art at the service of community. In recent years, art historians have challenged the problematic narrative of classical purity, proving that Greek and Roman statues were likely painted. These sculptures share the same principles of form and balance. It's precisely what lends the amputee in *Henry Manns Descending Stairs* (1999/2009) an honest dignity.

by Sam Korman

# Senga Nengudi

DePaul Museum / Chicago

Since the 1970s, Senga Nengudi has tested the properties and physical limits of the found materials that she assembles into sculptural installations, the most recurrent being women's nylon hosiery. "Improvisational Gestures" surveys not only these iconic works, but also revisits studio photographs, documentation of early site-responsive performance works, and explorations in video, metal, handmade paper and poetry.

Photographs of antecedent versions of Nengudi's installations and performances, such as *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* (1978), staged beneath a Los Angeles freeway overpass, serve as reminders that the spaces in which Nengudi's works are situated are among the materials under her consideration. Most of Nengudi's installations are iterated in response to the white gallery walls on which they appear. Frequently "legs" weighted with sandbags extend into the space as hydras of snaking limbs.

Manipulations of found materials like nylon stockings not only stretch, distort and transform the springy fabric of which they are made, but likewise confront the categorical assumptions that direct the design and manufacture of such objects. The range of skin tones in which the nylons are produced, the oblong pads sewn into the crotches and the wide bands of elastic that have been split and pulled across walls demonstrate how socially upheld codes of gender, race and embodiment are carried into Nengudi's work to be dissected and reinterpreted.

In *Mesh Mirage*, Adam Avila's 1978 photograph of Nengudi in her studio, the artist is masked and costumed in layers of the same materials that she employs in her sculptures. As in the periodic activations of her gallery works by dancers and musicians, this image of the artist layers signifiers of mass production and repurposing onto the compounded politics of bodies in all their particular nuances. In so doing, she tests the veracity of identificatory signs while also modeling experimental means for reworking their determinations.

by Matt Morris