

# ARTFORUM

## GRAVITY AND GRACE

Rachel Churner on the art of Maren Hassinger

FOR MAREN HASSINGER, uncertainty is both the origin and the destination of artmaking. "I don't know where I come from and I don't know where I'm going," she wrote for the exhibition catalogue accompanying "Maren Hassinger . . . Dreaming," her 2015 retrospective at Atlanta's Spelman College Museum of Fine Art. But while some artists burrow into mystery's solitudes, Hassinger is inspired by solidarity. "This is the life I share with everyone. We are equal in this predicament. We are all passing through. From this untenable place, I make things."



Maren Hassinger installing *Twelve Trees #1*, 1978, Los Angeles, 1978. Photo: Adam Avila.

Her modesty echoes the restraint of her elegantly minimal sculptures and installations, as well as the humbleness of her materials: dead branches and fallen leaves; woven paper; torn and twisted pages of the *New York Times*; partially unraveled lengths of wire rope; inflated pink plastic shopping bags. In their emphasis on contingency and community, Hassinger's works assert the fundamental notion that position determines power, and articulate themes of love and loss, womanhood, race, nature, and empathy. For more than five decades, the artist has reinforced the idea of "passing through" by creating sculptures and performances that foreground movement and interaction through the simplest of gestures. The artist remade and re-presented several of her key works in two recent exhibitions: "Maren Hassinger: The Spirit of Things," currently on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art; and as part of "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women" at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, in 2017. In addition, this past summer, Hassinger installed eight site-specific sculptures in New York's Marcus Garvey Park for "Maren Hassinger: Monuments," organized by the Studio Museum in Harlem. Made from branches gathered by the

artist and a team of teenage volunteers, the new works, which will remain on view until June 2019, hearken back to Hassinger's interventions in urban landscapes in the late 1970s and early '80s. Together, these exhibitions offer an occasion to reflect on Hassinger's singular career, and to consider in particular how she mobilizes the common experiences of loss and grief to inspire a sense of connection.



Maren Hassinger, *Pink Paths*, 1982, paint. Installation view, Lynwood, CA.

Born in Los Angeles in 1947, Hassinger enrolled at Vermont's Bennington College in 1965. By her own account, she intended to major in dance, but was told her technique wasn't strong enough, so she wound up studying studio art with a focus on sculpture. She returned to California in 1970, wanting to get an MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, but was told her sculpture, also, wasn't strong enough, so she joined the newly formed fiber-arts department instead. From these fortuitous failures, one senses that her path was unexpected and uneasy, but also one she embraced. While at UCLA, she began working with steel-wire rope—a material that could evoke natural forms such as trees, bushes, and bundles of hay—and frequently mounted her projects in public settings. *Twelve Trees #1*, 1978, installed just off the southbound Hollywood Freeway, was a straight row of wire posts, thick as telephone poles, whose tops had been unraveled and contorted to mimic branches reaching for the sky. Their nonindigeneity was no greater than that of the palm trees that line the city's streets, but by installing them on the unkempt margins of highways, Hassinger drew attention to overlooked public spaces that define how we move around cities. The

work's placement emphasized sites of transition, and it, too, was somewhat transitory: *Twelve Trees #1* was demolished shortly after its installation to make way for a hotel, while *Twelve Trees #2*, also 1979,



Maren Hassinger with *Twelve Trees #2*, 1979, Los Angeles, 1979. Photo: Adam Avila.

Churner, Rachel. "Gravity and Grace," *Artforum*, November 2018, pp. 162-169.

stood for more than thirty years at the intersection of Mulholland Drive and Interstate 405 before it was removed so that a bridge might be built.

For *Pink Paths*, 1982, Hassinger painted trails in Lynwood, California, on land vacated by eminent domain for a highway that was never constructed. Describing the piece later, she stressed "how the pink popped against the brownish green as I was putting down the paint. . . . It wasn't political, it was more about color theory." But while color theory may have motivated the work, the political ramifications of painting a barren landscape a highly gendered hue would not have been lost on the artist, or the viewer. In New York a few months later, Hassinger produced *Pink Trash*, 1982, for which she gathered bits of paper and cigarette butts from public parks, painted them bubble-gum pink, and then scattered them across the parks' lawns while wearing an outfit made from pink trash bags. As if in response to Mierle Laderman Ukeles's famously pointed question of 1969—"After the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?"—Hassinger's action highlighted the gendered and racialized perceptions of maintenance work and demanded visibility for the overlooked, all with a sense of humor.



Maren Hassinger, *Pink Trash*, 1982. Performance view, Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY, July 23, 2017. Maren Hassinger. Photo: Kolin Mendez.



Still from Maren Hassinger's *Birthright*, 2005, video, color, sound, 12 minutes 12 seconds.

During her time in Los Angeles, Hassinger also worked with Senga Nengudi, Ulysses Jenkins, David Hammons, and other artists as part of the Studio Z collective, creating performances at construction sites and in derelict buildings as well as in galleries. Their collaborations offered Hassinger a way to incorporate dance and movement into her practice and to participate in the communal development of a radical new aesthetic. In 1983, she and Nengudi made *The Spooks Who Sat by the Door*, a performance protesting the Long Beach Museum of Art's inclusion of only one black artist (Hassinger) in the exhibition "At Home: Roles, Relationships, and Reality." Taking the title of their piece from Sam Greenlee's 1969 spy novel about black resistance and revolution (the 1973 movie adaptation was deemed so controversial that the FBI pulled it from

theaters), the artists wore white sheets—in a clear reference to both ghosts and the Ku Klux Klan—and stood silently at the entrance like gatekeepers, embodying the contradictions of what it means to be present when one has been rendered invisible.

In 1984, Hassinger moved to New York to do a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where she continued making sculptures from wire rope and branches, realizing public commissions at local schools and on city land. She further developed her understanding of sculpture "as space and movement and interaction" rather than mere object by installing her work on ceilings and floors so that the viewer had to move under and around it. After relocating to East Hampton, New York, she began working with video, in part because of time and studio-space constraints (she was by then a mother of two), learning the medium at the local television station. In the mid-'90s, Hassinger became head of the Rinehart School of Sculpture at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, where she still teaches.



View of "Maren Hassinger: The Spirit of Things," 2018, Baltimore Museum of Art. Wall: *Embrace*, 2008/2018. Video: *Birthright*, 2005. Photo: Mitro Hood.

HASSINGER'S WORK is necessarily born from her life as a woman of color, a mother, and a teacher—and she doesn't pretend that it could be otherwise: "What I cannot do is compare that experience to being a white man," she notes in "Rock Steady Baby," a 2013 essay she published in *[B.A.R.] written*, a collective publication emerging in the wake of the Black Artists Retreat in Chicago that year. When she says that she doesn't know where she comes from, she isn't engaging in mere philosophical posturing. There are very real limits to what she, a descendant of slaves, can know about her family's history. In *Birthright*, 2005, one of her most powerful projects, she documents her attempt to learn about her origins and reflects on



Maren Hassinger, *Sit Upens* (detail), 2010/2018, *New York Times* newspapers, dimensions variable. Photo: Joshua White.

what she calls her “legacy to feel unloved.” In this roughly twelve-minute video, shot and edited by filmmaker Donna Conlon, the artist meets her paternal uncle James for the first time. As he explains their complicated family tree, we watch her struggle to keep track of what he’s telling her. Hassinger’s confusion exasperates him: “Write down Thomas Wells!” he demands. Her pen hovers over the page as he explains that her paternal grandmother was the child of an incestuous relationship, one for which her great-grandfather (the son of a plantation owner and a Native American servant) was hanged. Hassinger also learns that her grandmother was taken from her great-grandmother, who was white, and given to an ex-slave who lived on the plantation; this woman, in turn, sent away her own children, one of whom was Hassinger’s father. “It is interesting to think about how that legacy [to feel unloved] came down to me,” the artist says in a moment

of profound understatement, as the camera lingers on her hands twisting strips of newspaper into thick strands. Hearing *Birthright*’s painful stories, the viewer understands that this legacy is much more than “interesting”; it is harrowing, heartbreaking. In her performance *Women’s Work*, which debuted in Paris in 2006, the artist and four female assistants twisted newspaper pages into strands that were then knotted into ropes. For this viewer, the continuous wringing of paper—the means by which Hassinger has created sculptures such as *The Veil Between Us*, 2007/2018, and *Wrenching News*, 2008/2018—calls to mind the repetitive actions that can release anxiety and thereby allow the mind to meditate on the unthinkable.



Maren Hassinger, *The Dream* (detail), 2001, preserved redbud leaves, thread, dimensions variable. Photo: Progressive Images.

**“We are equal in this predicament. We are all passing through. From this untenable place, I make things.” —Maren Hassinger**

*Birthright* plays on a small monitor that rests on a steel utility cart at the Baltimore Museum of Art as part of “The Spirit of Things,” which debuted last spring at Art + Practice in Los Angeles. A sense of precariousness pervades the work, since viewers know that her family’s stories might have been lost without her uncle and that so many of the details still remain unknown. There is also a cold pragmatism to the video’s portability; the wheeled cart suggests that, having shared her story, Hassinger retains the right to remove it at any time. In Baltimore, *Birthright* is surrounded by *Embrace*, 2008/2018, which is composed of hundreds of pink plastic bags installed like a frieze across all four of the gallery’s walls. Each bag is filled with breath and a scrap of paper on

which is printed the word LOVE. The juxtaposition is a powerful one: The pink bags infuse the room with a rose-colored hue that sheds a warm light on the artist’s familial tale of abandonment and estrangement. Hassinger doesn’t offer viewers a simplistic balm, but we recognize her love and kindness in the face of a painful past. At the end of the video, a smile lighting up her face, she tells her daughter, “I was thinking of calling myself Maren Louise Jenkins Hassinger Wolfe”—which is to say that she was thinking, albeit jokingly, of adding the name of her paternal grandfather to her own. Rather than reject this legacy, she could claim it and add another layer to her personal history.

Much of Hassinger’s work ponders the spaces of loss and love. While at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, in 2001, she created *The Dream*, for which she gathered hundreds of redbud leaves just as they started to turn yellow and bronze and sewed each of them to a thread. Hung together to create a thick canopy over her bed, they were intended to elicit the feeling of being in nature. The piece also materialized a connection between bodies and the natural world because, as she told conservator Andrea Barnwell Brownlee, “after preserving the leaves in glycerin and water, the leaves also felt like skin.”

Churner, Rachel. "Gravity and Grace," *Artforum*, November 2018, pp. 162-169.

But *The Dream* quickly transformed into something more—an homage to the fragility of the body, a memorial to the desire to hold onto someone after they're gone. Weeks later, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Hassinger installed the piece for a solo show at David Allen Gallery in Brooklyn, where the leaves became an emblem of remembrance. When Hassinger's friend Arlene Raven, the feminist art historian, became ill with cancer, the artist installed the piece near her bed, where it remains today, years after Raven's passing in 2006. Hassinger intended to soothe Raven, to provide solace in the face of death, though the work's frailty also seems to acknowledge mortality, the way a life falls like leaves.



Maren Hassinger, *The Dream*, 2001, preserved redbud leaves, thread. Installation view, Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta, 2015. Photo: Progressive Images.

## Her art does not fetishize pain, nor does it demand sympathy. And she certainly does not make art as a salve, or as therapy.



View of "Maren Hassinger: The Spirit of Things," 2018, Baltimore Museum of Art. Wall: *The Veil Between Us*, 2007/2018. Floor: *Whirling*, 1978. Photo: Mitro Hood.

Thinking about the balance between the delicacy—of materials, concepts, legacies—and the solidity of her work, I recall my recent experience of watching a dear friend die. At first, I wanted to give her some proof that she was loved. Later, I wanted to fill her lungs, like so many pink plastic bags, so that I could continue to hold on to her. But the cloying desire of the grieving to say *Look at me, I feel too!* is what Hassinger's work refuses to gratify. Her art does not fetishize pain, nor does it demand sympathy. And she certainly does not make art as a salve, or as therapy. Filling bag after bag with breath, twisting and tearing sheets of newspaper, unraveling wire: I understand all of these gestures, in part, as ways to "maintain momentum," as Joan Didion called it in *Blue Nights* (2011), her memoir about the death of her daughter. The repetition of Hassinger's gestures may help to bind sadness, but the final product doesn't necessarily sublimate distress. For her mandala-like *Wrenching News*, she bundled and knotted together thousands of twisted pages of the *New York Times* to form a bushy circle measuring six feet

across. In this piece, the relentless succession of information, the horrors and tragedies that we read about daily, creates an object of contemplation. Originally presented on the floor, the work has been installed over the past several years as a wall sculpture, in which headlines and images are partially visible, albeit time worn and yellowing. When you stand before *Wrenching News*, it's possible to see lines from articles—about Hurricane Katrina in Hassinger's first iteration of the piece, or about data hacking by Cambridge Analytica in her 2018 version. Rather than transforming dark and disturbing news into something transcendent, she seems to suggest with this work that we must weave the life we create from profound violence, anxiety, and sadness.



Maren Hassinger, *Wrenching News*, 2008/2018, *New York Times* newspapers, 84 × 84 × 12".

Hassinger also offers her art as a resting place. "It is ok to gently touch or sit upon these works," the Baltimore Museum's wall labels for *Sit Upons*, 2010/2018, reassure us. A staple of arts-and-crafts classes, "sit-upons" are made from folded sheets of newspaper that are plaited one-over, one-under in a basic basket-weave pattern. Sometimes the paper is encased in a water-resistant pouch, the better to protect the sitter from damp ground, but Hassinger leaves hers bare so that bits of pictures and articles remain legible. Like the steel cart in *Birthright's* Baltimore installation, the *Sit Upons* are offered with a certain ambivalence. Hassinger's generous act of sharing is contingent on respect, for these portable and impermanent resting places may be removed at any time. The *Sit Upons*, like so many of her artworks, do not propose a leveling of experience, as if by merely sitting together we could fully understand one another; rather, they point to the ways in which we are simultaneously individuals and part of a broader collective. Sara Ahmed, author of *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, has described such empathetic

Churner, Rachel. "Gravity and Grace," *Artforum*, November 2018, pp. 162-169.

sharing as being averse to the idea of ownership: "Your" loss is not the same as "our" loss. While the quest to find common ground can seem ill-fated, even impossible, Hassinger insists that we look at the means of connection, be it a place to sit or a newspaper to twist or a story to tell, keeping in mind that experience is a singular thing, never to be presupposed or presumed. Yet as she tenderly opens communal spaces to express love and grief, she allows us to recognize the untenable but inescapable experience we all share: that of "just passing through."

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#### NOTES

1. Maren Hassinger, "Maren Hassinger by Mary Jones," interview, *Bomb*, February 23, 2015, [bombmagazine.org/articles/maren-hassinger](http://bombmagazine.org/articles/maren-hassinger).
2. Uri McMillan has insightfully analyzed Hassinger and Nengudi's collaborations, particularly with regard to the notion of "gesture" as used by queer theorists José Esteban Muñoz and Juana María Rodríguez, in "Sand, Nylon, and Dirt: Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger in Southern California," in *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85; New Perspectives*, exh. cat. (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2018). Kellie Jones's *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017) is an invaluable resource on the history of African American artists in Los Angeles during the '60s and '70s.
3. LeRonn Phillips Brooks, "Nature's a Good Place to Begin a Story About Maren Hassinger," in *Maren Hassinger . . . Dreaming*, exh. cat. (Atlanta: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, 2016), 69.
4. Andrea Barnwell Brownlee, "Refrain," in *Maren Hassinger . . . Dreaming*, 40.
5. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 161.