

# GARAGE



*Pink Trash*, 1982, an installation and performance in three New York City Parks on the defiling of nature. Photo: Horace Brockington Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC and Tiwani Contemporary, London

Maren Hassinger is a multidisciplinary artist whose sculptures, performances, and site-specific installations have for decades subversively played with the conventions of minimalism to speak of social issues and politicize gentle interventions into the everyday. In 1981, Hassinger was the first African-American artist to have a solo exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), and one of her most recent shows, "The Spirit of Things," was presented last year at Art + Practice in Los Angeles in partnership with the Baltimore Museum of Art. She is based in New York, and for her first solo exhibition outside the U.S., opening on October 2 at Tiwani Contemporary in London, we spoke with the artist about the history of her practice, some of the works that will be on view, and the equality and unity needed between people in our times.

**It's fascinating how you take very specific materials, including printed newspapers, plastic bags, and really turn them into your own instruments through weaving, scattering, or twisting them together, similar to how your frequent collaborator, Senga Nengudi, used stretched women's tights in her work. What attracts you to the materials you use, and what holds your interest in them over decades, as with the wire rope you've been using since 1972?**

Materials carry their own message. For example, when I use newspapers and I make pieces that have titles like *As One*, or *Mandala*, these works are all inclusive of huge populations because within newspapers are stories that connect us as people together. All of our stories are represented there, so that's why I started using them. And in *On Dangerous Ground*, when I un-ply the wire rope, it has a very prickly presence. If I want you to feel some of that danger I'm talking about, then why not use a material that you have to be careful walking amongst?

**How did you first come to using the wire rope? Where did you first pick that up?**

I was in a graduate program [at UCLA] called Fiber Structure, and one day I was out and about in Los Angeles searching for different kinds of fibers, and I went to a junkyard on Alameda Street in downtown LA, where there were all of these salvage yards. I was just looking around, and I picked up this piece of wire rope. It was rusty, but I realized that it had the capacity to have everything that you ever do to metal done to it, but you could also treat it like fiber. If you un-plyed it, or unwound it, and you kept going deeper and deeper into each ply, it's lines of metal. I realized I could do very sculptural things with this.

**The materials that you use, like the newsprint or plastic bags, are associated with temporary uses. What is the relation between that and your dance training, that kind of sensitivity to space, and how your materials appear in or take up space?**

The way that I use space is totally inspired from looking at where my work is supposed to be exhibited. I made a piece last year that was part of an outdoor arts festival just for one evening, and it had to incorporate light. I decided to make this canopy that everybody would walk under, and which would

Bradley, Paige Katherine. "Maren Hassinger Wants to Bring People Together," *Garage Magazine*, 13 October 2019.

create a very bright pink light so that anyone that walked under it became pink regardless of what your race or skin tone was. That related to an idea about equality, that we should all begin to think of ourselves as people who need to work together to help one another, to save our planet, to get justice for all.



"On Dangerous Ground," 1981, Wire rope. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC and Tiwani Contemporary, London

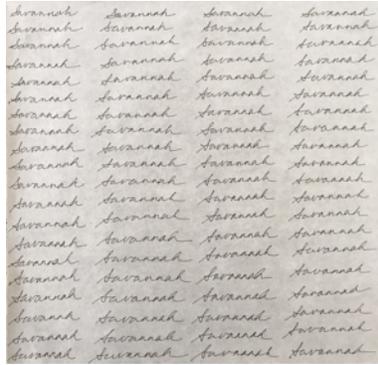
**Pink is a color that you've used very consistently, even going back to the 1982 performance *Pink Trash*, and then your recent re-staging of it in 2017 for the Brooklyn Museum show "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85." The use of this specific color seems to also lead one towards the way you use language in your work.**

If you put complementary colors next to one another, both of those hues pop and become stronger. For this piece, which was originally an outdoor installation in Central Park, Van Cortlandt Park, and Prospect Park in New York, I first picked up all the existing trash, and then I put down all of this pink trash that I had either bought or painted, or pink paper from the stationery store. I'd crumple these things up and spread them around next to where I removed the original trash from the grass, and that's what made *Pink Trash*. The first time I ever did something like that was for a piece called *Pink Paths* in 1982 in an abandoned neighborhood in Lynnwood, California. They were building the highway, and they had started, but it wasn't finished then and it never would be. I painted the paths that led to abandoned houses, and what used to be roadways, pink. And I noticed how pink the hue looked when it got next to a patch of grass.

**Writing appears in this show on some previously un-exhibited works on paper, spanning at least several years. In *Savannah*, from 2007, that word is repeated over and over again as the drawing, so that the word itself becomes abstract and multi-faceted in its implications, like your sculptures, through the repetition of a particular element.**

I came along at the time of "Primary Structures" [a major exhibition of new art, later called Minimalism, curated by Kynaston McShine at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1966] and that's where I get a lot of my ideas on repetition from. That was the culture of art when I was a student, and becoming a practicing artist. What I do with words does stem from the repetition that I saw in minimal art, but it's also about meditating on the land and nature. So if I write "Savannah" 150 times on a piece of paper, I really thought about the savannah. And I really daydreamed about it: What it would be like to be there, what it was like in the very beginning when there were many savannahs, what it was like when the original people lived there. It's meditation.

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"Savannah," 2007, Ink on paper. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC and Tiwani Contemporary, London

**Do you write regularly as part of your practice?**

I do, I have notebooks and I write there, although with all of this recent interest in my work, and the constant talking that I'm doing about it, I feel less inclined to have the conversations with myself that I used to have there.

**It's now becoming extroverted, in interviews like this, or through other venues?**

Yes, because that was the only place that I had for expressing myself, really.

**Does that shift change how you think about your work?**

It does. When something becomes public that was only private, it will change. I thought I was in a cage making work, but now it seems like there's a lot of people who know about it, and want to know more about it, and I'm happy to talk about it so that even more people know about it. It's not a solitary practice anymore.



"Sit Upons," 2010, New York Times newspapers. Photo: Joshua White, Los Angeles, CA. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC and Tiwani Contemporary, London

**For another sculpture in the show, the *Sit Upons* from 2010 and 2015 consist of 300 copies of the *New York Times* woven together as thirty pieces of plaited strips of newspaper displayed in ten distinct piles. Is it important to you that a viewer have a sense of how your work is made, that they can see an evident method of construction, and your intent through that?**

Part of the reason why they are made that way is that the technique was something that I used to do when I was a Campfire Girl. During day camp we might make these sit-upons, which are a simple grid of folded newspapers woven together, and then at the end of the day we would take these and sit on them and have what we would call a powwow. Campfire Girls was based on Native American lore, and so the idea is that you come together and you talk about what you did during the day, and sing together, and talk

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about what's going to come tomorrow or the next day. To me it represented a very simple craft that was all bound up with the idea of equality, unity, and participation in one's society. It has sacred aspects of people coming together and sharing their experience. You usually sit on one but I stacked the sit-upons in my piece so they became little stools, like African stools. It's about using art as a reason to have a conversation about who we are and what we're doing, and to bring people together in equality. We are so, so divided now. Young and old, black and white—we just have this thing about dividing ourselves, constantly. The *New York Times* is still the paper of record for the United States, so it remains an important way of getting information. And what I love about the *Times* is that it may use all the rhetoric that we all use, mistakenly, but all of it is there. This thing, like the sit-upon, is useful. We can make something from this. We can sit on this and we can all come together. And in coming together, maybe we can begin to see each other in a different light. In Native America at the end of a powwow, I learned this from my friend the artist Edgar Heap of Birds, everyone says, "We are all related." And isn't it the truth?