

Mallinson, Constance. "Inside the Artist's Studio – Maren Hassinger," *TimesQuotidian.com*, 19 October 2011.



## Times Quotidian...an infinite number of things to speak of

By Constance Mallinson. on October 19, 2011

### Now Dig Into This -

*There are opportunities for sculpture everywhere. In a field, in a room, on a stage, in the street, on the ceiling, in front of a camera, etc. Every place inspires a different response. Some responses locate us in space and time and link us to particular people in particular places. These last offerings might be political. There are reactions to given events.....There are sculptures acting like sculptures and people acting like people and sculptures acting like people and people acting like sculptures. There's stillness and motion. There's the "littering" of space to mark it. There are pieces that last and pieces that erode. Materials are many—steel to video, plastic bags to newspapers. – Maren Hassinger*

Performance artist, dancer, and sculptor Maren Hassinger is currently represented in the Hammer Museum's contribution to the citywide Pacific Standard Time exhibitions, Now Dig This! Art & Black Los Angeles 1960-1980 opening October 2. With artists as renowned as David Hammons, Raymond Saunders and Bette Saar, to lesser known artists, the exhibition showcases 140 works by 35 artists who formed an important creative community and left a vital legacy to the arts of Los Angeles. Although Hassinger has lived in New York City and Baltimore where she is director of sculpture at Maryland Institute College of Art, for the exhibition she has recreated *River* consisting of a serpentine thirty-foot-long galvanized chain intertwined with rope that was first exhibited in her native Los Angeles in 1972. Installed near the entrance to the main galleries at the Hammer housing the major portion of the exhibit, *River* in its new incarnation and context now primarily addresses issues of black identity, specifically in its oversized use of the symbols of slavery. The title could easily refer to rivers like the Mississippi that facilitated the slave trade. Or, like a slithering venomous snake the chains of racial oppression wind their way through the landscape to leave a legacy of pain and rage. Conversely, it also suggests the river as the means to travel north to freedom and the ensuing transformative power of expression that has characterized much historical African American music, dance, and visual art.



In large thematic survey exhibitions such as this one, it is often difficult to grasp the breadth of an artist's investigations, or to not perceive the artist's work as essentialized - involving only issues related to identity. Many of the works in Now Dig This engage specific references to black experiences: John T. Riddle Jr.'s 1965 *Untitled (Fist)*, a mixed media sculpture that joins an upright shovel handle with a crumpled rake



resembling a defiant partly clenched fist, are limited to interpretations of black empowerment in the Civil Rights era. Melvin Edwards' dark, welded steel aggregates of tools and machine parts are as formally beautiful as carved African masks but in their abundant phallic references seem to harness the threatening power of black masculinity. David Hammons' 1973 *Bird* poses a black hand on an old saxophone the mouthpiece of which is a rusty work shovel: the soul of jazz sings of years of hard manual labor. For Hassinger, however, the formal and conceptual requisites that have driven her work for over 40 years reside, as a short bio in the catalog explains, in her use of industrial materials to "approximate natural forms and plant life.....bridging the divide between natural and manufactured, interior and exterior, personal and public."

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Indeed, if one had been driving along the 405 Freeway near the North Mullholland Drive exit from 1979 to this summer, one might have seen amongst the rank scrubby growth Hassinger's site specific work *Twelve Trees #2*, an orderly row of "trees" constructed from unraveled steel rope. With its curling strands like flying hair in a whirling dance, these hi-tech trees came to typify the kind of nature/culture tensions and material transformations that defined much of her work in the 80's and 90's into the present. Her outdoor installations varied from wiggly galvanized wire rope that appeared to bend and move with the wind to fields of wiry wheat sheaves. Gallery rooms of leaning, writhing snake steel cables set in concrete mimicked seaweed growing from the ocean floor set gently swaying in slow motion by the currents. Much of this earlier work explored the problematic relationship of the industrial to the organic, and by inference, of natural chaos to order.

Hassinger's roots were clearly in Post-Minimalism with its affinities to influential sculptors like Eva Hesse whose installations like those Hassinger viewed in the early 1970's at the defunct Pasadena Museum of Modern Art around the time Hassinger had received her MFA in fiber art from UCLA. Hesse's dangling strings of elongated latex sausages, suspended netted rubber spheres, supple biomorphic doughnuts, soft sacks of droopy egg/scrota forms and trailing hairy skeins were a sexy Surrealist challenge to the male dominated Minimalist art of the 60's. Artists such as Hesse emphasized expressive, spontaneous process, reintroducing a sense of pleasurable craft, embracing the multiple contradictions and polarities elicited by reinserting eroticism, natural references and disorder into the manufactured primary forms and rigid systems approach that had characterized Minimalism. Writing at the time, Robert Pincus Witten remarked, "The limp, the pliable and the cheap were sought; the hard, the polished, the expensive became suspect." Rawness, playfulness, and naturalistic coloration had replaced shiny stainless steel and prismatic colored plexi cubes.

That shift in artistic values allowed for a rediscovery of autobiography and social issues and hastened the interrogation of sexual, individual and racial identities so prevalent in the art of the 80's and 90's. The rationalistic, analytical basis of Formalism had yielded what Maurice Berger described as "the passive static art of viewing" to become rather a "phenomenological journey, a passage of tactile and visual discovery rooted in strategies of performance and theatricality."

For Hassinger whose dance and performance pieces focused on a consideration of the temporalities and theatricalities of entire sites and the dissolution of framing devices that impede direct communication with the spectator, a renewed humanism and engagement with materials resulted. The departure from traditional aesthetic concerns and the immersion of the natural into the social and cultural seen in choreographed performances like *Ten Minutes* (1977) in which tree branches were symbolic of the natural world, informed the use of the industrial materials like steel, concrete, plaster, infusing them with opposing qualities like fragility, growth, dance-like movement recalling shamanistic rituals. Conventional binaries and hierarchies that neatly separated industry from a thoroughly sanctified nature were challenged, suggesting that as nature is artificially reproduced—genetic engineering, theme parks, suburbia, etc. – and our infringement upon it intensifies, those changes bear examination. Given the strong emphasis on unorthodox sculptural materials coupled with the emergent environmental issues at the time, one would have most likely experienced the 1972 version of *River* as a highly experimental challenge to the sculptural status quo as well as a poetic addressing of the devastation of nature by industry in its symbolic transmutation of water into steel and rope. Subsequent installations like *Heaven* 1985, a room of preserved and scented rose leaves covering the gallery walls or *Blanket of Branches* (1986) a ceiling mounted suspended web of bare intertwining branches, challenged traditional sculptural aesthetics as well as requirements for permanency in traditional art valuation with their ephemerality. No longer substituting the illusions of the natural found in conventional landscape representation, these pieces initiated a contact with the landscape based not on separation and alienation but on a tactile and visually beautiful appreciation. Performances like *Pink Trash* (1980) in which Hassinger, clad in a suit fashioned from bright pink plastic garbage bags, carefully replaced trash that she had collected on site in several New York parks and then painted rose petal pink, had underscored but ultimately attempted to harmonize the rift between civilization and the natural environment via an art gesture. Further, her gallery installations like *Perimeter* (1990), a room sized open picture frame constructed of cut twigs and branches that delineated a corner of the white gallery, reversed the usual perceptual model of traditional landscape painting. Instead of designating a portion of nature for our pleasurable gaze, "nature" enclosed the viewer and space within the frame, directing attention to the artifice of viewing the environment in order to interrogate the boundaries that separate humans from the natural world. The work of this twenty year period continuously



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subverted expectations for representation, materials, proper art contexts, disarming and disrupting many of their associations with power, privilege, or repression. Our attitudes—positive and negative—toward the natural world rely on how culture frames the experience and Hassinger has continued to explore that dynamic for over forty years.

Beginning around 2000, Hassinger became more explicit in her exploration of public and private identities. She has made expressive masks of herself cast from strips of the London Financial Times to explore how we are impacted by economic news and the stories that create our collective and personal images. In *Wrenching News* (2008) shredded, twisted and wrapped newspaper was shaped into a mandala-like icon for spiritual contemplation and transformation. *Rainforest* (2004) fabricated of shredded, twisted and knotted newspaper then hung from the ceiling like a thicket of vines, reiterates content in early work that either represents the natural by the human manufactured or returns natural artifacts to the realm of culture to and dramatize the tensions, relationships and connections between those realms. Healing has assumed a more important role. The "Sit Upens" (2010) wove hundreds of strips cut from daily newspapers into seats for the "Global Africa" show so that participants can engage in "the simple act of sitting in repose" and gain a new understanding of the space around them but also in a way that promotes person-to-person communication, sitting together, telling personal stories. The *Sit Upens* invite a palliative counterforce to the detached stance of mass media. She references the act of weaving to the kente cloth factories of Ghana and Ivory Coast, the "origin of my practice", acknowledging the importance of her heritage. Likewise, in a video also named "The River" she made in 2005 for the African American Performance Archive, an interview with her uncle in St. Louis evoked floodplains where debris is deposited to suggest this is what is inherited from our ancestors. Having realized these projects, she returned to the remaking of the 1972 *River* currently on view at the Hammer.

Then what does it mean to recreate a previous work of art with new intentions and perceptions and in light of current events? What of revisionism to fit a curatorial scheme? Are an artist's intentions and ideas irrelevant anyway as determined by theorists who equate viewer interpretation with intention? Since an artwork is always subject to new discoveries and observations, we could reconsider Hassinger's metal sculptures of the past as metaphors for co-existence, not only between nature and civilization but between the marginalized and the larger culture, i.e. a wire shrub is "out of place" in a natural environment. The struggles to find a balance between nature and human life that much of her early work embodied extends now to human-to-human relationships. In examining Hassinger's prolific four decade practice it became clear that unlike many of the pieces in *Now Dig This* that are so bound by the urgencies of the era in which they were made, *The River* has grown more meaningful and powerful from the particularities of its immediate and past contexts. Because it was originally made by a 25-year-old artist who hadn't lived yet to see the full extent of environmental degradation, globalism, the full significance of the struggle for equality, even the election of the first African American president, the artwork -in keeping with the non-permanent, ever changing nature of many of her previous pieces—now has multi-leveled associations. The work is no less about nature being subsumed by industry, the oppression of slavery and racial bias, or the ropes and chains that tie our trading ships laden with foreign produced goods to the docks leaving Americans without jobs and healthcare. If anything, Hassinger's reimagined *River* is one of the few pieces in the show that accomplishes what might have been the single most important goal of post-war black artists: that no matter the race or gender behind it, a great work of art has the ability to touch us all in myriad ways.



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