

Sim, Lowery Stokes. "Maren Hassinger," *BOMB*, 25 September 2018.

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Maren Hassinger by Lowery Stokes Sims



Maren Hassinger, *High Noon*, 1976. Performance at ARCO Center for Visual Art during a two person exhibition. Photo: Adam Avila. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

For this segment of *BOMB* Magazine's Oral History Project, artist Maren Hassinger is interviewed by curator Lowery Stokes Sims. Maren was born and raised in Los Angeles, California (1947) and later attended Bennington College where she received a BA in sculpture (1969) and then the University of California, Los Angeles where she received an MFA in Fiber (1973). Working across the mediums of sculpture, installation, performance, and video, Maren's practice is underscored by her life-long love for dance and our shifting relationship to the environment. She is currently represented by Susan Inglett Gallery.

In Maren's world, newspapers, pink plastic bags, branches, trash, and wire grapple with ideas such as race, equality, identity, and nature. She has continually collaborated with Senga Nengudi and has taught since the '70s. Most recently she was the Director of the Rinehart School of Graduate Sculpture at the Maryland Institute College of Art.

Maren's manipulation of found objects and the human body is poetic and melancholic; she encourages us to consider our collective humanity. Below Maren recounts a life marked by a continued pursuit of artistic excellence. I'm grateful to have witnessed this convening of friends and am happy to share this interview with you.

—Stephanie E. Goodalle, *BOMB*'s Oral History Fellow

Lowery Stokes Sims We just looked at the video that you did, *Birthright* of 2005, which is about a complicated family history dealing with your father's lineage. Let's start with where you come from, where you grew up, and who your parents were because we can't figure out the rest of it without that. (*laughter*)

Maren Hassinger My father, Carey Kenneth Jenkins, was raised by acquaintances of his family. Jenkins wasn't really my father's name. That was the name of his adoptive mother. I think he always felt disenfranchised because he was separated from his biological family but, in retrospect, he was the one who was the most successful—he didn't have to compete with all those siblings and all that history of being in the South. He moved out to LA with his adopted family. He got a good LA education and became an architect. He was the one in the family who really prospered. He was very intelligent and intuitive and wanted to know the reasons for things. That kind of sensitivity also may have contributed to his feeling very turned out and very angry.

LSS Did your father have a private practice?

MH Yeah, he did after working for the state in the '50s. His final office was in Beverly Hills.

LSS Wow, that's amazing. This was like in the '50s and '60s?

MH This was in the '50s, '60s, and '70s. He died in the '80s.

LSS That's pretty extraordinary, because black architects didn't have it easy. One exception was Paul Williams, who was the first black architect to be inducted into the American Institute of Architect's College of Fellows and who was able to have a viable career on the West Coast. He designed the Theme Building at the LA airport, that

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Space Age Jetsons-looking thing, and Pueblo del Rio, the first kind of public housing, and numerous private residences for the Hollywood elite.

MH My dad designed the Martin Luther King Hospital. It was one of the last things that he did. I hadn't seen this, but my brother took me out to Central, South LA to see it. You go up this long drive to get to it, and it's all green grass. It's amazing! When you finally get up to the hospital, it's this very simple, post-modern-ish, grid-like place. Very greened out. I was really shocked at how beautiful it was. It was destroyed by incompetence and went bankrupt; the only part that's open now is the mental health facility.

LSS Hmm, that's interesting.

MH Yeah. My father should have been in there. (*laughter*) The thing is, there were always examples of his watercolors and stuff like that around the house, but when I went to be an artist, he was very against it. He wasn't supportive at all, and he hated Bennington College. On his deathbed, he complained about how much it cost.

LSS Well, it was one of the most expensive schools in America at one point.

MH Except that when I sent my son to nursery school, it cost the same, you know? So that was ridiculous. Basically, he wasn't supportive of me being an artist nor would he acknowledge that there might be something genetic to it. Now I see that artistic gene passed onto my daughter, Ava. My father and I talked about it, but he never wanted to admit it. "You're nothing, you're an artist. What are you doing?" My father actually came to my MFA show with my little half-brother, who was about hip high. Then my father kicked over my piece, twice in the space of an hour. My father did it on purpose. Isn't that nasty? That's a nasty, nasty thing, especially in front of my little brother.

LSS Well, you know my father, John Jacob Sims, trained as an architect at Howard University after World War II on the G.I. Bill. He was originally from Humboldt, Tennessee, had courted my mother before being sent overseas to Japan, and after the war, he left the South because he felt there would not be any opportunities for him there. He came to New York, married my mother, and then they left for DC where he studied architecture at Howard. He got his first job in New York and we stayed. He never got his license, but he worked for a lot of architectural firms and the last place he worked until he retired was the Port Authority.

My mother, Bernice Banks Sims, grew up in New York during the depression. Her family had come from Virginia and it was extraordinary, the life she made for herself in New York. She took advantage of the fact that you could get a library card, museums were free then, that you could get half-price tickets at the theaters, and standing room at ballets. So as kids, my brother, sister, and I were encouraged to go to a smorgasbord of things. My father went along with it: my sister, Anne Benna, became a ballet dancer and worked in Europe before being hired at Disneyland Paris, I became a curator, my brother, John, didn't become an architect but he had his own construction firm and then became a building inspector. But the upshot is that my father and mother supported me and my brother and sister in our creative endeavors, in fact they encouraged us and forced us to—

MH—Have culture or die! (*laughter*)

LSS Right! Three or four years after my father died, I was looking through things in my former bedroom upstairs in my parent's house. It had become this dysfunctional storage space where my mother just threw in everything. I found three big composition boards that I had never seen before. They were architectural watercolor renderings my father had done at Howard. One was this mountain chapel, one was this Frank Lloyd Wright type house, and the third was an entrance to a museum. It's almost like he was conjuring my future career. I gave them to Jack Whitten's wife, Mary, and she conserved them. I gave one each to my brother and sister, and I kept the one with the museum façade.

MH Oh, nice.

LSS When I was growing up in Queens, we were sort of an anomaly. There was no one in our social circle who was into the arts at all, except there was one woman, Juliette Hall, who lived down the street from our house, and somehow she got me into a theater production. I'd never done much theater, but I was in this production of *Oklahoma*. (*laughter*)

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MH Did you sing? Did you dance?

LSS I don't remember singing and dancing, but I remember being totally infatuated with my leading man. (*laughter*) I was in my early teens. Aside from my parents, she was probably the most artistic person that I knew outside of people I would have met at school.

MH I think those things get passed on generation to generation; it's a genetic predisposition.

LSS The Baltimore-based artist, Joyce Scott, talks about the fact that while her mother inspired her creativity, her father wanted her to be practical. Did you think your father didn't want you to be an artist because he thought you would have a hard life rather than financial security?

MH He thought being an artist was like being a bum. He should have at least admitted that he had something to do with it because of his inclination toward architecture, but he never did.

LSS Now what about your mom? Was she from the LA area?

MH No, my mother, Helen Louise Mills Jenkins, was from Cincinnati, Ohio. Her family was originally from North Carolina and then during the black migration after World War I, they went to Cincinnati, and then ended up coming to LA. They came to LA the same year my father came to LA without their knowing each other. That was 1930. My parents met socially—I'm not sure where they met. My mother went to Los Angeles High, which was considered to be on the West Side, and my father went to Jefferson High School, which was on the East Side. I don't know how they got together, but they did. They married in 1942 and I was born in 1947. They stayed married for twenty years and then they had a horrible breakup.

Then my father met my stepmother who is from St. Louis. She is a Native American who was adopted by black people. She may have been Navajo, because there was a tribe near her adoptive dad's military installation in New Mexico. She married black men, had black kids.

LSS Now what did your mother think about you becoming an artist?

MH My mother never expressed opinions like, "That's bad." My dad was always, "Bad, bad, bad" and she was like, "Okay." She never worried about me making a living or not. She liked to play cards. Her family all played bridge. That was their thing. That's what they did their whole life, maniacally. And, in my mother's case also, square dancing.

LSS When do you remember first doing artistic things, when you were a kid?

MH I think it was the first grade. I made a shape of a woman from the number seven. I put the hair on top of it and then I had a profile. I remember a lot of the kids in the class wanted me to make that for them. The idea that you could transform something, I think, was magical to them. And I always participated in art classes; in junior high and in high school, I took a lot of painting classes. I had also, outside of school and inside of school, taken a lot of dance classes. When I got to Bennington in 1965, I went as a hopeful dance major. The dance department said to me that technically I wasn't good enough to be there. Now people are saying, "That was so racist of them." I don't know about all of that, but it was devastating. I was going to leave because I really wanted to be a dancer.

LSS When did you start dancing?

MH I remember being four and a half, not even having started kindergarten yet. I took creative dance classes from Anne Lief Barlin on Western Avenue and Third Street in LA at her Dance Center. Anne and her husband Paul were specialists in early childhood dance movement and then later, in dancing for people of advanced age. I was so young, and so new at it that my mother didn't even buy me a leotard. I just had my little red and white striped sundress on. What happened at the end of each class was so electrifying. They would stack two phone books in the middle of the floor and we were supposed to run, run, run and leap over the phone books. Imagine me being this high and in a little red and white sundress, so excited about running and jumping. So that's how dance started for me.

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Maren Hassinger, Family Portrait, 1955. Maren (Age 8) and cousin Evelynna in Tijuana. Courtesy of the Artist.

LSS Do you get a sense that there has always been a problem about the place of art in schools? When school budgets get cut, that's the first thing to go. Back when you were in elementary, junior high, and high school, did you feel that that art classes were cut off from the norm, in terms of the curriculum?

MH It was the norm, but it was frowned upon by the people who took a more academic approach to their education.

LSS Really?

MH I went to John Burroughs Junior High School, which was primarily Jewish with about twenty black people. There were a couple of black teachers who my mother happened to know and then there was Jane Eisner who was the art teacher. People in that school didn't think it was weird taking a lot of art classes, but when I got to Los Angeles High School—that was very mixed race, but at that point, I think still predominately black—with this whole black middle-class thing about how you have to have a profession, and that entailed taking math, science, and all the core academic classes. There's no way that you could be an artist, and who would want to be an artist anyhow? I was pursuing something that I really liked doing and that had value, but was considered dumb.

LSS Where I grew up in Queens, when my sister and I were getting into our professions, people used to refer to us as the dancer and the curator. We never had names. (*laughter*) Everyone was a social worker or schoolteacher; they just couldn't understand. A lot of their children, who were my age, if they did anything professionally, became a professor or something like that.

MH The peer pressure was enough to make me question my involvement in the arts, but I had such a strong ingrained notion of the importance of the arts that that didn't do too much to deter me.

LSS What kind of relationships did you have with kids in your neighborhood growing up?

MH Alta Loma Elementary School, which my mother had attended before me, was also an unusually integrated school. And, in LA High School, it was also very integrated.

LSS Did you get out in the streets and play? In Queens the boys would play skully in the street, and people would converge on the schoolyards. Although my mother never allowed us to go there because she felt that's where drugs and sex happened. We had to bring our friends home. There was a lot of interaction in the streets at playtime.

MH Well, in LA, everyone had their own backyard, so if you were going to have friends over, it was arranged. I remember feeling disappointed in childhood because I was an only child. My brother wasn't born until twenty years later. I would call a friend to come over and they would already be busy. Then I'd say to myself, Now what? But it was an oddly integrated neighborhood. Carol McKinney, who was white, was a friend, but also Sammy and Johnny, who were Japanese, were on the corner. Then, every once in a while, you would see a black actor or someone from the *Amos n' Andy* TV show. This guy Joel Fluellen who lived up the street was also on *Ramar of the Jungle*. Do you know the actor, Joel Fluellen?

LSS No.

MH He was always walking around. I didn't think it was weird, but now I realize it was weird because it was integrated.

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LSS So when you got to Bennington the dance professors weren't very receptive to you, but talk about your relationship to the sculpture department.

MH The sculpture teacher really liked my work—I had taken some introductory sculpture courses, so I ended up staying and majoring in sculpture.

LSS What kind of sculptures were you making?

MH They were in the vein of Anthony Caro and David Smith. That's what was happening at the time. They were the most popular sculptors. My teacher had been in South Africa and immigrated to London; he was Jewish.

LSS Do you remember his name?

MH Isaac Witkin. Do you know Isaac?

LSS I know of him. I'm not sure I ever met him.

MH Well, he was my teacher and he's the one who said, "You're good, you should stay here." There were so few people in sculpture. Everybody was in painting, so he remembered me. He came and spoke to my students later when I went to teach in Baltimore at the Maryland Institute College of Art in the Rinehart School of Sculpture. He was a really nice guy, very sweet, and basically let me do whatever I wanted to do. The reason my early sculptures ended up looking like Caro and Smith's work is because I was ambitious and the stuff that was out there to look at was their stuff. They were considered advanced. And then we had this final critique: Clement Greenberg was our critic.

LSS Oh my God.

MH He said to me, "You have to watch out for that, you have to watch out for that!" Meaning that my work was derivative—too close to that of Anthony Caro. My particular teachers, Isaac, and Pat Adams, who was a painter, didn't get much action from Clement Greenberg. So, they were outcasts. There were about three Greenberg artists teaching at Bennington. That created a terrible schism among the faculty. When I finished, I came out West. That whole thing going on in New York City just was not good. One guy running the entire art market?

LSS Clement ruled the roost at that point.



Maren Hassinger, *Untitled*, 1969, Installation view at Bennington College during the Commencement Show. Painted wood, 48 in. height. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

MH The last time I saw him was in 1994, but by then I was a total adult, and I was teaching at State University of New York at Stony Brook. They have some kind of relationship to the Pollock-Krasner House, you know, which has the Pollock studio on its grounds.

LSS Yes.

MH Every year they would have a big meeting there and invite a special guest, and I happened to be there the time they invited Clement. He poured a glass of vodka, I swear it was this tall, and he just pontificated for like two hours nonstop. Amazing! Hadn't changed his story at all, even though by that time he wasn't in fashion anymore.

So, I finished Bennington. Isaac liked my work a lot, I did a very ambitious show. Pat Adams also liked me a lot, I saw her recently. I went to Bennington in the early spring to give a talk. Unfortunately, Arnold Ricks, her husband, had just passed away. She's in her 90s now, but she's doing good; her mind is clear as a bell.

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LSS So now, the move back to LA. When was this?

MH I moved back to LA in 1969, when I graduated from Bennington.

LSS What was happening in LA? What did you think you were going to do when you got there, teach?

MH At first, I thought I was going to live in New York, but ended up returning to LA. I was going out with Peter Hassinger who had attended Williams, and at the time he was in New York. I decided that we should get married. So, he came out to LA and we ended up staying in LA after we got married. I decided I wanted to go to graduate school and I applied to the sculpture department at UCLA. The sculpture department did not accept me in the same way that the dance department at Bennington did not accept me. But a guy there, Bernard Kester, wanted me to be in the fiber structure department, a new department where he was involved with fabric design. So this new opportunity came up. I remember that Mildred Constantine, who was at MoMA, had started championing people like Shelia Hicks and Magdalena Abakanowicz, who were doing exciting monumental sculptural weavings off the loom. And Kester was starting this new course called fiber structure—

LSS—I remember MoMA had an exhibition, "Wall Hangings," in 1969, where I first saw Abakanowicz's work and it changed my life.

MH Yeah, it was amazing. Changed my life also.

LSS This is a pivotal time, 1969, 1970.

MH Kester accepted me into his program. He allowed me to get an MFA because at first I was going to get an MA. Then I realized that an MFA would be better leverage in getting a teaching job. He was so supportive.

LSS What kind of work were you doing in grad school?

MH Well, I tried to weave but talk about tedious bullshit. (*laughter*) But then he kept talking about Magdalena Abakanowicz and Shelia Hicks and all these great people who didn't touch a loom, really. Then he was teaching us how to do these knots. We got *The Ashley Book of Knots*, which is a naval publication. I did two pieces on the loom. Weirdly, later when I went to move a bunch of stuff out of LA from a garage, the rats had eaten everything, but when I opened this one clothes hamper, there was this perfectly preserved woven thing I had made. It was white and pristine! That was one of two things I made. But basically I never, ever, ever—

LSS—Wove again. (*laughter*)

MH Never.

LSS Well, you do weave newspapers, but that's a whole different story.

MH That is so different than weaving on the loom. (*laughter*) There were only about six people in Kester's class and I was the only one who got an MFA, as far as I know. My husband, Peter, found a place for us to live next door to my classmate from high school. His dad was wealthy and had bought this whole square of buildings. It had three storefront spaces and a house connected to it and he rented Peter and I this corner studio. It was fabulous, and we stayed there for, I don't know, ten years? That's when I started making pieces out of wire rope and I just kept making them once I graduated. I got a few teaching jobs here and there. I got married in 1970, so let's say this was '75.

I was always ambitious: I wanted a gallery, museum shows, all of this stuff! So, in 1981, I had a small solo show at the LA County Museum. I was still doing the installations of wire rope sculpture, and the show was reviewed. Betye Saar was having a show in a commercial gallery at the same moment. So the review went something like: "Oh, look at what these two black women are doing." The only thing that made them notice us was the fact that we were both black. That was an embarrassment. There she was, old enough to be my mom, and she's done all this incredible work. I had this small show in the museum. I was like "Man, this is disgusting." Then a couple of years later, I had a show at ARCO Center for Visual Art.

LSS Tell me about that one.

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MH Betty Gold, who was the director of the ARCO Center, was a big champion of my work. So I had a nice two-person show there in 1976 with William Mahan. I did a performance called *High Noon*—inspired by the Gary Cooper movie—that might be described as a transgressive, confrontational improvised performance; where I moved among the various different sculptures, sometimes holding natural branches.

LSS I want to back up before going forward. How did you get into performance?

MH Even though Bennington didn't want me to major in dance, I took a couple of dance classes there and then when I moved to LA, I took ballet classes from this woman named Mia Slavenska and her assistant Gloria. Every Friday night—my husband took classes, too—we would try to do pirouettes together; it was hysterical. I also took classes at the Stanley Holden Ballet Institute on Pico Boulevard. And I took modern dance from the people at the Lester Horton Company, including Lelia Goldoni, who later became an actor. Yvonne de Lavallade was with the junior company and her sister Carmen was in the big company. And Carmen and Alvin Ailey moved to New York and Alvin of course had his Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

LSS So, this is when Carmen married Geoffrey Holder?

MH Yes, around that time I think she danced with Ailey and was a soloist.



Maren Hassinger, *Rain*, 1974, galvanized wire and wire rope, 92 x 50 in. overall, 92 x 10 in. each (5 units), Photo: Adam Reich, NYC. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

LSS Funnily enough, she also danced with American Ballet Theater. My sister was a member of the corps de ballet and an occasional soloist in the Ballet Theater in the late '70s. So when Misty Copeland came on the scene, the blogosphere went nuts when the company tried to say—

MH—That she was the first black person.

LSS There was another woman named Janet Collins. My sister has always been scrupulous when talking about the people that came before her in that sense.

MH Yes, I took classes with Janet one summer when Jack Jackson had his summer workshops called *Inner City*. Janet was the aunt of Carmen and Yvonne de Lavallade. Anyway, the person of color all of the ballet historians used to talk about was Maria Tallchief, a Native American.

LSS Exactly, so you're dancing? How did you meet Senga Nengudi?

MH: So, I'm taking all these classes, like every day there would be a class. And one day, Senga called on the phone. I don't know how she knew to call me. I don't know how she got my number. My studio was on San Vicente Boulevard near Pico. You know that South of Pico scene that Kellie Jones talks about in her book, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s*? Well, I was one block north of Pico, actually. So anyway, Senga called me. Maybe she had seen my show at ARCO. She was having a show with Greg Pitts. His father was a minister who had this big hall that Senga made over into a gallery. And she was having a show there with her pantyhose sculptures and she asked me to come and see it. I realized we had both been interested in dance and had a dance background, but I didn't know we had the *same* dance background.

LSS Ah...

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MH We didn't know that for years and years. The guy she had been taking classes with, Jimmy Truitte, was in the Lester Horton Company, and Lelia, my teacher was also in that company. We had the same dance roots. Lester Horton was famous because his was the first interracial company and he delved heavily into influences from Asia, Mesoamerica, and Native America. He was one of these world-artist types of people.

LSS I remember reading about him.

MH: At this time, I was also taking classes from a man named Charles Edmondson who was black and in Bella Lewitzky's company.

LSS: What a lineage!

MH: All these people were very serious and had these rigorous classes that I went to all the time, every day. Then Senga called and asked me to move around her suspended panty hose sculptures that were being shown by Gregg Pitts. The movement was improvised modern dance idiom.

After that, she kept reaching out. Then we both got accepted into a program at the Brockman Gallery, which at the time had a grant program for public art funded by the California Department of Transportation. We collaborated on her project *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*; moving with her knotted stocking pieces under the freeway overpass. We worked with other people who had done murals and public art stuff. One of those was Ulysses. Although he wasn't a part of our group—

LSS—Ulysses Jenkins?

MH [—Yes] Somehow or another, we also met Houston Conwill, who was a sculptor and an installation and performance artist. I don't remember how we met Houston but Senga knew David Hammons because they shared a studio. So I was working with Senga, Houston Conwill, Ulysses Jenkins, Frank Parker, and David Hammons was around a bit before he moved to New York City.

LSS: Was there a performance that you and Senga did that David participated in? I remember seeing a photograph.

MH: That was *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*. Instead of it being an artwork cemented into the ground or a mural that was painted on a wall, Senga decided to do this homage to Africa. So she made little balls out of old stockings. They looked like grapes except they were stockings. She took these and under the freeway overpass, she tied them all around the freeway support pillars. She invited a bunch of musicians who were into Afro and jazz music. She made costumes, and then she invited David and I to improvise with her. We had costumes and we improvised and I remember spinning around and around.

Another piece of Senga's that I worked on was *Kiss*, in 1980 at Cal State University LA, Senga's college alma mater. Frank Parker also collaborated. And later on we did it in 2011 at the show at the Hammer Museum that Kellie Jones curated.

LSS *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980*.

MH Yes, it was supposed to be a remake of the original performance, but by this time Frank Parker had passed away. So then it was Ulysses—who had never been in the first one—Senga, and myself. Things got a bit crazy from the first performance in 1980s. For example guess what Frank is wearing on his fingers? Douche nozzles. (*laughter*) I was trying to look all dance-y, and Senga and Frank were walking around with these douche things.

LSS I remember first meeting David and others in Los Angeles in 1974 or '75, when a group of us East Coasters went to the National Conference of Artists meeting at Pomona College that was being organized by Samella Lewis and Mary Ann Hewitt.

MH Oh right, Pomona had hired me to teach at one point.

LSS So, 250 of us had chartered a plane and if that plane went down the entire East Coast black art world would have been lost. (*laughter*) It seems incredible now...this was just after I'd met Linda Bryant, who was working in the library at the Metropolitan Museum, where I was working. She had just come up from Atlanta, had these two small children, and wanted to open a gallery. We all just realized we had no choice but to jump in and help her.

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Maren Hassinger in Senga Nengudi's performance *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* for CalTrans, sponsored by Brockman Gallery, 1978. Performance in collaboration with David Hammons, Maren Hassinger and Studio Z members. Photo: Roderick 'Quaku' Young.

When we got to LA we rented this car and we're driving all around and I remember specifically Linda was our liaison with David, I don't remember how she met him. And we met Dan Concholar.

MH Oh, Dan!

LSS We also met Susan Jackson at that time. Our little group that was coalescing around Linda and Just Above Midtown became aware of you West Coast artists who were doing something totally different from what was happening on the East Coast. So, what I want to ask you is, were you guys aware of the fact that your involvement with performance/installation/found object aesthetics was very distinct from what was happening on the East Coast where we were trying to decide if abstract artists could be black enough? Did you have to be a black artist to be revolutionary? Who was blackstream and mainstream and all that?

MH Well, we didn't have an organization behind us so we were free to do anything. I know for myself all of that installation, performative, non-object making, non-figurative making came from my dance thing. I always thought if I wanted to make work that was figurative, I would make a dance. I would make something with my body in it and that would be the figurative part. I'm pretty sure Senga felt the same way. I don't know how she came to the pantyhose thing. It's said she was pregnant and noticed her body stretched and she got the panty hose to symbolize that stretch. By the time I met her, she was already doing that. She was having that show I mentioned at Greg Pitts's Parish Hall Gallery.

Earlier this year, Greg Pitts came to my retrospective, *In the Spirit of Things* at Art + Practice Space, which opened in Los Angeles in February 2018, and will be on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art starting in July 2018. We didn't have a chance to talk much, but he did come. That was very good of him. Senga's now gonna be in a show out there. So now everybody is hooking us together like never before!

LSS Well, I was thinking about that. I was just at the Baltimore Museum of Art with Leslie King Hammond and we saw Senga's exhibition, "Head Back & High: Senga Nengudi, Performance Objects (1976–2015)" at the Museum. I was thinking that it's weird because it's Senga's show and half of it is you, in videos and photographs. It's interesting how you two have become intertwined to a certain extent, at least for that period of time in the '70s.

MH We still do performative and intertwined things. One of the best things that we ever did together...I had done this piece in Santa Barbara in an arts organization. I can't remember the name now—

LSS—About when was this?

MH 1986. Ava was just born and she came with me on the trip. She was born in February and she was about five or six months old, so it was in June or July. I did this blanket of branches on the ceiling. And then I asked Senga and Ulysses if they would like to come up and do some kind of performative thing under those branches. And Senga invented this piece. I don't know how she thought of this. She had music by Butch Morris. Then she did this eternal triangle thing where Ulysses and Frank Parker were vying for my attention underneath these branches.

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Maren Hassinger in Senga Nengudi's performance *Kiss* at California State University – Los Angeles, 1980. Performed by Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi and Franklin Parker.

LSS I've seen the video of this.

MH Right, and Butch Morris had this really abstract sound track that went with it. Horns and saxophones. It was just so beautiful. That was the video that I used when I did the retrospective show at Spelman in 2015. I don't know if you can remember, but you can hear the music throughout the whole show because there were these squeaking horns. Sometimes Senga would make a show and the photos would be from Greg Pitts's show. At some point, she made those photos into something large and she sold a couple and split the money with me, but not many of them sold.

I was never part of a dance company until Senga and I started working together. Then we became the dancers that we always wanted to be, but couldn't, and it really affected the work that we make still. Her work grew out of her body changing and my work grew out of motion, you know? My pieces like *Leaning*, which MoMA acquired, *Whirling*, which is in the collection of the Morgan State University Museum, and *Walking*, recently acquired by the Williams College Museum of Art, were all wire sculptures that were made about movement. They were below knee level and intended to be like feet and legs moving in space. So that had a huge effect. Installation-wise, you don't think about isolated objects.

LSS Right, you think about it in a space.

MH That was acceptable at that time, too.

LSS At some point you and Peter and the family moved to East Hampton. That was in 1991?

MH Yes. The motivation for the move was the fact that the kids had been born and it was time for Ava, the eldest, to start kindergarten. There were no public schools around us at all.

Before that, when I was pregnant with Ava, I was an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in 1984; we sublet an apartment from this woman who was living in the Rivington Houses. She and her husband had a home in Puerto Rico and they were gone eight months out of the year. I wasn't quite finished at the Studio Museum when they came back and needed their apartment. Some other friend told us about Long Island City and then we moved there. I had a studio right on One Hundred Twenty-Fifth and Eighth Avenue in the same building as David, but I was never able to get to it from Long Island City. The person who came after me at the Studio Museum was Kerry James Marshall. I told him about the woman who always went to Puerto Rico and he got her apartment. Then I told him about my studio which I didn't have time to go to and he took that. Last year Phaidon published this big book on him and in it, he thanked me. I must say, that was a 40-year gap. (*laughter*) It was weird. That's how we got out to Long Island City.

Then, either Peter or I or the baby sitter would get on the subway every morning and take Ava to St. Bart's on Fifty-First Street to go to her nursery school. I was serious; and she was going to start regular kindergarten. Then we didn't know what to do. Peter was raised in Stony Point, New York, the suburbs, and was dying to get out of New York City. He had a friend from his early 20s, Neil Hausig, who had moved out to East Hampton and he found us a place. That was the worst mistake ever. It was too far away from New York City. I guess it was okay for the kids because they had decent schools to go to, but everything else was a mess. Our marriage ended. We ended up moving away. He moved to one place; I moved to another. I was trying to raise the kids so I was putting out feelers for jobs, and I got the job at MICA. In the meanwhile, Howardena Pindell was instrumental in getting me a position as an adjunct at Stony Brook teaching design.

Sim, Lowery Stokes. "Maren Hassinger," *BOMB*, 25 September 2018.

So finally, I left East Hampton and moved to Baltimore in 1997. The kids got an excellent education because in our neighborhood there was a really good public school. Baltimore was known for the television show *The Wire*, and the public schools on that side of town were not so good. But this one was ten minutes from my job as well. They ended up going to grammar school, middle school, and high school in Baltimore public schools and they got scholarships to Ivy League institutions, both of them. They ended up doing whatever they wanted to do. They pursued what they wanted to pursue, and they did fine.

Ava went to graduate school and decided to be an artist so she got an MFA at University of Pennsylvania. She's still suffering from being an artist. You know how we suffer. "I can't stand it! How am I going to eat and get a job?!" That whole thing. But she does really wonderful work and she got a lot out of her relationship with Terry Adkins before he passed away. That was good.

My son Jesse never wanted to go to graduate school. He got a degree from Yale in politics and economics. He ended up coming back and living in Baltimore for a while and was running Democratic political campaigns. I don't know how he got into that. He began to rise up through the ranks and became the one in charge, not the one ringing all the doorbells. He worked really hard for this guy who was in Montgomery County, Maryland but the guy still didn't win. Jesse then ended up going to the West Coast. He got a job with this new startup that facilitates Democratic campaigns. You can put the app on your phone and it will help you with your campaign. He's been doing that for about three years and he got a promotion; he likes it.



Maren Hassinger, *Walking*, 1978 (installation view Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA) One part of a trilogy about motion from the knee down, which includes *Whirling* (1978) and *Leaning* (1980). Wire and wire rope elements, 22 x 5 1/2 in. each (148 elements) 22 x 120 x 144 in. overall. Photo: Jim Gipe, Florence, MA. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

LSS I want to double back to a comment you made about being annoyed because when you and Betye had shows, people focused on the fact that you were both black.

MH Yeah, that was annoying.

LSS But that was just about the moment when the women's movement was making an impact in the art world. I remember there was always so much controversy about how black women fit into that dialogue because to a certain extent, the economics of this country had already liberated us: we always had to work both in and out of the house to support our families. So, what was the big deal?

I'm wondering how that sense of blackness and femaleness played into your life. Coming from the West Coast, did you have any sense of that when you were at Bennington? You would have been at Bennington just as *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963.

MH I was at Bennington in 1965–69. In my experience black women weren't a part of feminism.

LSS I am also wondering if early critical response to your work both from the issues of gender and race was based on the fact that there wasn't anything that people could relate to that was recognizable as a culturally specific trope. I mean culturally specific in the way people conceive of what a black woman artist would do.

MH Right, but I ask, "Who else would do this shit?"

LSS Well that's a whole other question. (*laughter*) You've said that your work proceeded from movement, but I always thought it had an extraordinarily nature-based celebration, even when you were using manufactured materials.

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MH Right.

LSS It's interesting because from my perch at the Metropolitan Museum, this is the moment when everyone was getting pluralistic and conscious of including black people in exhibitions. At the last minute, I'd inevitably get a call requesting recommendations of some black artists. I remember I got an inquiry from someone who was doing a painting show of women artists in the early '80s and I realized that every artist I knew in my circle was doing performance work. I started doing research about that phenomenon that became an article in a feminist anthology.

Then Richard Mayhew came and asked if I would participate in a panel in a symposium at Penn State for the exhibition "Since the Harlem Renaissance," which had originally been organized at Bucknell University in 1985 by Joe Jacobs. I was excited to present my research on black women artists doing installation and performance because no one had talked about it.

All the luminaries were at the symposium: Elizabeth Catlett, I think Romare was there. Maybe Norman Lewis and Ernie Critchlow. Of course the contemporary panel was the last panel. I was on with Benny Andrews and someone else. We were running out of time so I couldn't read a formal paper, so I started showing these images.

Boy! I got such hell from everybody. I was accused of destroying African- American art because artists needed to make commodities that could be sold. Joyce Scott and I think Oletha DeVane had driven up from Baltimore. I had been following Joyce's performance art. When I came down off the stage, all the young women in the art department flocked around saying, "I can't believe you presented this material. We've been trying to do this in our department and our professors won't let us."

This connects into the larger feminist movement where women were moving into photography, installation, and video as a way of avoiding being in competition with white men making big paintings. This was their way of expressing themselves. It was a zeitgeist, even though it wasn't necessarily hooked in together.

MH There is a way women have of living in their bodies, which is certainly something Senga exploited, one hundred percent.

LSS I think you also bring into your own work a lot of spiritual and intellectual concepts from other cultures, let's say Zen. It's one of the challenges of your work.

MH Yeah, that it doesn't have a racial specificity. I obviously had to think about what I was going to make, because artists make things. For example, I had this experience with fibers and wire ropes. They were like ropes but made out of steel. I really thought the big issue of my lifetime would be a loss of nature. I made that decision. Just like I made the decision about being an artist. It was a decision. It wasn't like vague or anything. It was like when I decided I was going to get married or have kids.

So that when I started doing the *Citizens* pieces and the *Equality* pieces in 2017 and 2018, you gradually see my themes about the loss of nature morph into themes of equality. All these things were intellectual decisions about how to proceed. It wasn't like, "Oh, I think I'll experiment and see what happens." Maybe I didn't voice them, but I wrote them down and I kept notes.

LSS What was it in that moment that put that thought in your head? Were you involved in ecological and environmental issues?

MH No. I never wanted to be an ecologist type specifically. I wanted my work to be an overarching statement about the nature of our lives now. Our relationship to nature is going to be different than other generations' relationship to nature because we have damaged everything. Then, twenty-five to thirty years later, I start reading a lot of William Faulkner, *The Bear*, and I also read Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. *The Bear* and *Moby Dick* have a lot in common because they both identify non-white people as visionary and as connected to the land in a way that white people are oblivious to, because white people are too busy trying to make money. In the case of *Moby Dick*, they have to get that oil to make light and in Faulkner's *The Bear*, they have to get that land and make it pay. What I came to finally and weirdly was supported from the readings of these visionary writers Faulkner and Melville. I see the loss of nature as intimately connected to people who have created social situations and monetary

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gains, based on killing nature. Only recently, I got really interested in how the rape of nature and discrimination against certain individuals, certain human beings, are related.

LSS Let's back up and pick up from the mid '70s. When did you meet Linda Goode Bryant? Did you meet her in '75 when we came out to LA?

MH No, I never met you or her that time. I met Linda through Senga in New York. I didn't know about Just Above Midtown when it was on Fifty-Seventh Street. What I knew of it was in Senga's catalogue, that famous picture where she's standing and stretching lengths of stockings in both hands. Around that time, I had a show in 1978 at the gallery of Pat Adams, my Bennington teacher, who showed with Virginia Zabriskie.

LSS Oh, okay!

MH That's where I showed *Walking*, which the Williams College Art Museum just bought. What I knew of Fifty-Seventh Street was Virginia Zabriskie. Then Linda asked me to have a show down in—

LSS—Tribeca where Just Above Midtown Gallery had relocated on Franklin Street.

MH That one seemed kind of glamorous to me because Robert De Niro would walk up and down and Harvey Keitel and all those actors.

LSS It was a much sexier neighborhood then. It was just when Tribeca was heating up.



Maren Hassinger, *Our Lives*, 2008/2018, shredded, twisted and wrapped New York Times newspapers, 72 in. dia. Photo: Adam Reich, NYC. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.



Maren Hassinger, *Whole Cloth*, 2017, muslin dyed with tea and coffee, 62 x 66 in. Photo: Adam Reich, NYC. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

MH I did this show at Just Above Midtown when it was there. Oh! I remember how they found out about me! It was the summer of 1980. I had done an installation for "Art on the Beach" that Creative Time had organized on the landfill site before it was developed as Battery Park City.

LSS Oh, I remember, right on the beach!

MH Yes! I was still living in LA when I came to New York to do "Art on the Beach" and then I had the follow up show at Linda's gallery in 1982 that was inspired by that experience. I used different materials for the work and did something like these individual stones with dowels coming out of them and all leaning in the same direction. It looked like some beach scene.

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There was no one at the opening except David Hammons, me, and Linda because she wasn't big on advertising and I didn't know anybody from New York. Two other people were there, the parents of one of Peter's friends, Lenny Goldberg, from Williams College. David did an interactive piece where he played a flute. It was a poignant tune he was playing; it was very supportive and very nice. I think it was his way of reaching out to become friends. With David, the conversation is about the doing of the art, not the sitting down and having a conversation about it. Also, during that time when I was making that piece, David asked me if I wanted to go hear Sun Ra. And I stupidly said no. I should have gone to that. I blew it.

LSS I remember seeing Sun Ra at Tompkins Square Park. Oh my God, it was all too much. We were all transported to Venus. But getting back to Linda: she supported and promoted a lot of people at JAM who went on to bigger and better things.

MH Well, her intention was to make black art important, and she was doing it. I don't know how she does the stuff she does. Like right now with the gardens; it's amazing. I'm beholden because she was my entrée into the New York art scene and it still took me a long time. That show was thirty years ago and Susan Inglett has just asked me to join her gallery.

LSS Thinking about what's going on in the 80s—there's postmodernism, people bringing all these kinds of figuration back, mixing it up, bringing history and primitivism into it, and you're making your nature-based work. I want you to talk about the materials that you're attracted to and eventually talk about the marketability of your work.

MH I'm sure everything affected the marketability. I was a black woman doing abstract work that wasn't about making objects. It was installation, often large and often created with materials that weren't traditionally art materials.

LSS They weren't paintings on the wall.

MH Right, they weren't paintings, they weren't colorful, but I kept doing them because that's what would come to me. I could have stopped, I suppose, but to me they seemed like good pieces and they were in line with my thinking. Artists do what they think is important to them in their life span. That's what they've always done—Rembrandt or Van Gogh or Picasso. They did what they did because they thought it was important. Not because they thought someone was going to buy something. I knew that if it was going to be what I thought was important, I would have to find another way to make a living. That's why I at least had the foresight to get an MFA, because then teaching became how I ate. After I got a divorce, it's how I supported the kids: they got a decent education, they got into college. That teaching job at Maryland Institute was very important.

LSS I remember when we had this string of people coming into the interview for the position at the Maryland Institute, which Leslie King Hammond organized in New York City. They were giving these pat answers and statements, and then when you started talking about spatial and conceptual ideas about artmaking, we were all transported. I remember being so inspired, I was going to quit my job at the Metropolitan Museum the next day and enroll at MICA to study with you. I think you probably attracted a lot of students.

MH Teaching was really good to me in more ways than making money because I ended up having some really good students who were inspirational in their approach as to why they were making art and why they thought it was important. I worked with inspirational colleagues like John Peacock and we could talk and talk and talk about what was important. We talked a lot about education and what it means.

But initially I had a tough time with the students at MICA. It took me about ten years to find some students who took me seriously. I have to tell you very seriously. There were so many macho white men at the Institute who were like, "Who is this black woman? What kind of work is she doing? And sculpture has gotta be big." It was hard, especially the first five years. They hated my guts. Then we moved to the new building in 2015, and John Peacock started coming for all the seminars and we started talking about Paulo Freire, the Brazilian writer. Actually we spoke of him earlier along with bell hooks, but it seemed to really take flight after the studio move.

LSS Yes, he wrote *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

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MH That's when we started cooking with some fire. (*laughter*) When I went into that interview, I thought I was going to be teaching a sculpture class and this woman who came out right before me had a silk scarf on. She looked like she worked in an office. Also, the student on the interview team, I just thought he was a young teacher. I just talked about sculpture and addressed a lot of remarks to him not knowing he was going to be one of my students.

LSS: Hmm.

MH: Then he went back and told the other students that I was the one that talked about sculpture, but they didn't like me anyway. Later on, I invited him to come back and share his work with the students, and he kept saying, "Okay, I'll be there," then he would call at the last minute, "Oh, I can't make it."



Maren Hassinger, *Beach*, 1980, homemade rocks out of plaster, sand, paint and wooden dowels, each unit 36 in. height, field size variable. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NY

LSS So, talk about the materials you use and what initially attracted you to them because it's almost like this "Maren" vocabulary. Why cords? Wire ropes? Pink plastic bags? Newspaper? Branches? And now you're doing some photo-based work.

MH I guess I came to the conclusion early on that if you're going to talk about nature, then you have to use it. That's why I was using the branches.

LSS And the leaves.

MH And the leaves. I figured out a way of preserving them. They don't last forever but they last pretty well, especially if you put them behind glass and they don't get a lot of air.

The wire rope thing took me longer to figure out, but I figured it out why I was using it when Ava was born. I had the midwives and I didn't take any medication to be knocked out. I saw the umbilical cord. It has a twist, and inside the twist are all the veins, etcetera, feeding the baby; but it was covered by a membrane, and it looked just like wire rope. It was even gray like galvanized wire rope. Then I realized I was doing the right thing. Even now I think about that, all mammals have that experience of that umbilical cord. It's a twist; it's a twist! It looks like a twist.

LSS So it would seem that the experience of childbirth inspired both you and Senga.

MH Yes. Then I realized I was doing the right thing. Even now I think about that. That twisting thing has to be central to all mammals. I didn't make that up.

LSS Hence the twisting of the newspaper, too.

MH The newspaper has a dual value of being us because it's writings about us. It's photographs of us. It's humanity, worldwide, all of our stories.

LSS That twist must relate to some kind of subatomic structure of a helix or something like that. It might be something that comes in your DNA; you sort of recognize it in that sense.

MH Or it's our innate knowledge about our body, which allows us to illustrate it in that way.

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LSS I think it takes a certain amount of awareness. There's lots of people walking around the world in their bodies and yet have no sense of it. They're totally divorced from it. Your ability to make these kinds of connections is key.

MH But that's what artists are supposed to do, right?

LSS Uh huh.

MH Ava always says she feels like I'm more of a poet. She says, "Mom, it's the poetry."

LSS What a lovely thing for a daughter to say to her mother!

MH I know! She treats me very nicely around the issues of art and then we have run-ins on other things. I respect her art, too. She did some crazy stuff for the show she was in recently. (*laughter*) She was making this analogy between umbilical cords and all the wires that we have now. Wires, wires, wires everywhere. One of her pieces was tangled wires coming down from the wall and each wire was attached to a cell phone. The image on each cell phone is of a belly button. She asked a whole bunch of people for photos of their belly buttons: me, her godmother...this belly button and that belly button—

LSS—And the photos of the belly buttons are Face Timed on the cell phones?

MH Yeah, yeah. It was really great.

LSS All right, now, talk about your attraction to pink plastics bags.

MH Okay, that happened because of an installation, *Pink Paths*, that I did in LA in 1982 under the auspices of the Foundation for Art Resources-Transitional Uses. It was organized by some women who had gone to Cal Arts. One of those women, Megan Williams (assisted by Candy Lewis) was going out with Jonathan Borofsky at the time. As a young artist, she was doing quite well; she was really well respected, and continues to be, I think. I don't think they're together anymore. She asked me to come out and do this piece in Lynwood, California because in Lynwood they had torn up this entire neighborhood to put in a new freeway route. But then they didn't put the highway in, so it was an abandoned area with bands of wild dogs running through the neighborhood, which was right in the middle of a black community. For some reason, a bunch of people wanted to do some kind of project in this neighborhood, because it was really like a ghost town. Every block would maybe have one house left on it, it had been flattened, and then the wild dogs took over. Mercifully I didn't see any wild dogs. My dance teacher, Charles Edmondson, went out there with me and helped me make this piece.

LSS Who was going to come see these pieces?

MH Well, some art people because recently, Margo Cohen Ristorucci, coordinator of public programs at the Brooklyn Museum, was very instrumental in having me do a *Pink Trash* redux in Prospect Park in 2017. But back to the original, I looked around this neighborhood and decided that I wanted to work with the paths, I think it was because of color theory, but I wanted to make hot pink paths. Some of them were short. I know one of them went to an existing house's doorway. Two others were in what must have been driveways but since they tore down all the houses, the driveways seemed to be connected to other driveways. When I put the pink paint down, which Charles helped me with, the pink went next to the grass.

LSS This is pink paint you're talking about?

MH Right, outdoor pink paint that I had gotten right at the paint store. The pink paint and the green grass were complimentary colors, so the pink was pinker and the green was greener. Then, I was supposed to do a project for "Art Across the Park" in 1983 with Gylbert Coker and Horace Brockington. Horace went with me to all the sites through all the different parks. He took photographs of all the sites we considered and that's why I have those photos. For this installation, I wanted to call attention to trash in the environment. I picked up all the existing trash, threw it away in bags and then I put the pink trash out. I decided I wanted to use cigarettes in this one.

LSS Now wait a minute, did you collect pink trash or did you create it?

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MH I collected some and made some. I collected some reams of pink paper, but I made pink cigarettes and pink beer cans and pink—

LSS—Geez....

MH For "Art Across the Park" I bought pink plastic eating utensils and pink paper plates. Then I had this pink bag and I had this pink outfit. I shipped it all to New York. I made enough for three parks. Because I had already done the pink paths, I knew about pink and green. Then I would get my pink bag out, fill it with enough pink objects for each park. I would then go with a real trash bag and pick up all the white trash, put that aside, and take the pink objects out of my pink bag and put them all down as pink trash. This guy in Central Park said, "Oh my God, it looks like fallen leaves." He made the connection between nature and what I was doing. And that really made me feel good that I was staying in my bailiwick.

LSS Your little path that you set for yourself. (*laughter*)

MH And then I went back to Central Park the next day (I hadn't taken photographs that day for whatever reason), and every single bit of trash had been picked up. There wasn't one little pink cigarette. And that was the dirtiest park. We did it on a Monday and the previous day, Sunday, people had been barbecuing and there were nasty meat packages. But someone picked up all that pink trash, so I guess it really succeeded.



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



Maren Hassinger, *Pink Trash*, a performance in Prospect Park across 50 square feet in partnership with the Brooklyn Museum's "We Wanted a Revolution – Radical Black Women 1965-1985," 2017. Photo: Kolin Mendez. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

LSS How did you move from using those kinds of objects to using the blown-up plastic bags?

MH Well I had noticed in New York City on my various trips back and forth, all these plastic bags caught up in the trees. All up Eighth Avenue, and in the projects. They were beautiful. Then I did a piece at the Neuberger Museum at SUNY Purchase in 1997. This time I got some pink bags and I asked people to put notes in them, and then I tied them all up there. They're supposed to be wishes.

LSS Did you tie them into a tree?

MH I tied them into a lot of trees that were in a row. They began to fade quickly because of the rain and the snow and the sunlight. They became very much like the bags you see over here. But people put really significant, serious notes in there. It's like that Japanese thing where you're doing a prayer tree and you connect the notes to the tree. The next time I did that, I decided that I would do it indoors, I put a prayer of love inside, little love notes, and then I created the installation *Love* at the Baltimore Museum in 2007 for The Janet and Walter Sondheim Finalists exhibition, and installed the bags in a corner.

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LSS I think that was the first time I saw them.

MH First of all, only a crazy person would be up on one of those extension things—

LSS—The cherry pickers.

MH I blew them up and tied them off and then a woman art handler on the cherry picker would put them in place. It took like seven days. It was crazy! If you do it for one day, you've lost your mind.

LSS But Maren, all of your work is kind of mind blowing. Sitting there, untwisting wire cord, hello?

MH Yeah that was weird, too.

LSS Gathering up branches and leaves. I mean, really.... (*laughter*)

MH And those leaves. Those initially came because I was working in a flower shop before I started teaching.

LSS You just installed a pink bag work at Susan Inglett Gallery this past spring. Was that the one that was purchased by the Studio Museum in Harlem?

MH Yes, the Studio Museum in Harlem purchased that one. My daughter Ava said the pink bag piece in a room at Art + Practice, looked vaginal and that shocked me. But, once I looked at it, I realized that it was. That A + P piece made more sense being that way, since it was in a corridor. But, the original pink [bag piece?] at the BMA cast pink shadows on the wall and created this incredible color theory effect where, say you were wearing a white shirt, and you stared at that thing and you looked at your shirt, your shirt became green. If somebody got close to it, it didn't matter what skin color, if you were very, very, dark skinned it would still give you a rosy glow. If you were light skinned, your flesh might seem pink. It had the capability of being very luminous and reflective. It had air, it had love, it had wishes.

Stephanie E. Goodalle: I remember this piece from the "Material Girls" show that was organized by Michelle Joan Wilkinson at the Reginald Lewis Museum in Baltimore and came to the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art. I had to help install it at Spelman.

MH: Oh, were you there?!

SEG: Yeah, I was blowing up the plastic bags.

MH: Oh my God!

SEG: There was a small group doing that. I remember a couple of installers and Anne Collins Smith were just sitting there telling us to "Heavy inhale and exhale."

LSS Maybe next time you'll use balloons and get a helium machine.

MH Well, you know I had this compressor, but got to the point where I couldn't blow or use the compressor and keep the air in long enough. I started doing this other thing where you catch the air in the vicinity and it just runs into the bag and then you can tie it right quick. I just have to tell you that it was nuts.

LSS Let's return to your use of newspapers. We sort of talked about—

MH—The twist. My technique of twisting strips of newspaper.

LSS One of my favorite pieces was where you created leg pieces made of the twisted strips and you danced with them, but they also existed as static pieces in an exhibition.

MH Oh, yes, that piece is known as *Anklelets*, and a group of them were in the 2009 Studio Museum exhibition "30 Seconds off an Inch". I did three 30-second performances with them in the galleries. Well, you know there is a lot of African influence in them. The African section in the Morgan State College Museum has beautiful raffia costumes that I was thinking about when creating this work.

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Maren Hassinger, *Love* (Pyramid), 2008, pink plastic bags filled with air, breath, and love notes, steelhead pushpins, dimensions variable, sized to wall. Edition of 5. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

LSS Maren, this brings us to—what do we call it? Placemat seating, “sit-upons”—the pieces you wove together from newspaper that you did for “The Global Africa Project” exhibition, which Leslie King Hammond and I curated at the Museum of Arts and Design in 2010.

MH I had a lot of help doing those because those are tedious to make as well.

LSS I know, we had to do them in Girl Scout camp!

MH Yeah exactly, that’s why I did it. I was involved in Campfire Girls, and we made those so we could “sit upon” them when we had a meeting or whatever. My mother and grandmother were involved as leaders. In our Bluebird group were girls from my first elementary school, Alta Loma. That school was totally integrated. There were black girls, white girls, Jewish girls, Asian girls, both Japanese and Chinese. I don’t think there were any Latino girls, but part of what we did as Campfire Girls was meet at different girls’ homes so we would learn the customs: dreidels, tea ceremonies...think about this.

LSS That’s amazing, this is the ’50s and ’60s.

MH It was the ’50s! My God, how special that was. So, I wanted to speak about what morphed into my equality issue, by using the newspapers. It’s using all of our stories together as captured in the newspaper of record, the *New York Times*. The twisted newspaper pieces recall that childhood experience of weaving all of our lives together.

LSS We had a pile of them for “Global Africa.” I remember you wanted people to sit on them, but the museum was afraid of liability in case visitors injured themselves getting down and up off them. So instead, Maren, you came on a weekly basis, Thursday nights, sat upon the mats, and talked to people from that position. It was fantastic.

MH It was fun, too. One time I saw Houston Conwill; he had been lost, nobody could find him. He came over one night and we had a wonderful conversation, which was the last time that I saw him.

LSS That is really cool.

MH And then after that something strange happened. You know Thelma Golden’s husband?

LSS Yes. Duro Olowu.

MH He was also in “The Global Africa Project.”

LSS Yes, he had a selection of his fashion designs in that show.

MH So he came over to me and said, “Now are you trying to sell those?” (*laughter*) And I would say, “Yes.” And he would ask, “Well, where are they?” and I’d say, “They’re in storage.” Then I realized when I saw his clothing designs why he liked them because there is a lot in common.

LSS Well, he has also done little pop-up shows at Salon 94 and elsewhere and he would bring in this interesting mix of vintage jewelry and art by people he knew, some of his clothing line too. Now about you finding a market and an institutional place for work....

Sim, Lowery Stokes. "Maren Hassinger," *BOMB*, 25 September 2018.



Maren Hassinger, *Sit Upons*, 2010/2018, New York Times newspapers folded, woven and stacked. Variable. Photo: Joshua White, Los Angeles, CA. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

MH Yeah, well (*sigh*), as I said before, I used to always say I wanted to be rich and famous. I used to say that all the time. I think that sustained me. Then recently, not that I'm getting rich, but it seems like every day I have so many e-mails and so much paperwork. I put my foot in it every time someone starts asking me about buying something. I realized, I really don't want to be rich and famous, I mean I've been so long without being rich and famous. Now all I really want is to make good work and not to starve in retirement.

LSS So you have to sell a little bit.

MH Well I have to sell a little bit more than a little bit because my retirement is at least \$15,000.00 a year short. But every time that I've sold something—there is always some glitch, so I realize I need to be more focused about managing being more rich and famous.

LSS I wanted to touch a bit on the relationship of your work and your way of working to the renewed interest in making. When I joined the staff of MAD (Museum of Arts and Design) in 2007, all of a sudden I realized that materials and process had become important again and we were in a post-Warholian moment. That's why your work has a lot of relevance today because of the intensity of the handiwork and also the way you manipulate the materials in that process.

MH I really like when I'm giving a talk to create a participatory event and have people making things so that we are seeing ourselves as working together. For example, when the Friends of Education at MoMA came to my show this past spring at the Susan Inglett Gallery, we all worked together in a big circle, twisting and tying paper and putting it together. This activity of "women's work" fulfilled my ideas around equality and everybody working together as a family to build something to take us into the future that would be poetically symbolic of our unity. I like doing all of that stuff. That is as obvious to me as choosing wood or leaves to make a statement about nature.

LSS Got it.

MH If you're making a statement about people being together equally, working together to build a new community or world, they should work together. It shouldn't just be me talking about us working together. It should be me working together to make something with people. And what better than a bunch of umbilical cords. (*laughter*) So that's it. So now when I give talks, I want the talks to be active.

LSS I think that's perfect. It's so in tune with what people are trying to achieve in museums in making these experiences relevant and interactive. So that might be your next stock and trade.

MH Maybe. It has to do with being a teacher.

LSS So when you got to Baltimore in 1997, outside of MICA, how was the art scene and community of people who you hung out with? Was it centered around MICA?

MH Baltimore may have been very good for the kids, but for me it didn't work out socially so well. I didn't have time to have a lot of friends, because I was very involved with the kids and getting them straightened out. Then it was getting my students straightened out, and by that time, there was nothing left for me. Leslie King Hammond

Sim, Lowery Stokes. "Maren Hassinger," *BOMB*, 25 September 2018.

was my only friend. The advantage of Baltimore, however, was that eventually I had a series of large and cheap studios to work in.

LSS So I'm trying to remember when you came back and got a place in New York. Did that happen when you had a sabbatical a couple of years ago?

MH Yes, I think it was in 2010. Then I decided I wanted to move to New York. By that time, the kids had grown up and they were living other places and pursuing their lives. There was no reason that I had to be in Baltimore. So I moved here and I thought it was going to be for the year of my sabbatical. Then I ended up staying and getting more involved in the New York art world. I was much happier that way, so I stayed up here. I never went back; I rented my place out in Baltimore. That was ridiculous; renters tore up the house. I don't know how people are landlords. So I sold it about a year and a half ago. I decided that I'd reinvest the money in something else. Otherwise I'd have to pay a lot of taxes. Then I started running around trying to find where I could live and this is it. This is a Habitat for Humanity apartment. I was the first to break the initial line of who was here originally.

When I completed my MFA at UCLA in 1973, I imagined then that if I were going to have a real career in art, I would have to be in New York City. At that point, there were very few galleries in LA; there were few black galleries that could have accepted me. No one was going to deal with any sculpture like I was making. When I finally bought this place in Harlem, my whole career changed. It was all like I thought was going to happen, but it happened forty-five years later.

LSS I hate to say it, but I suspect that it may not have happened earlier because the art world goes in these cycles, and right now the cycle is in favor of older women artists and black artists; older women artists who came up in the 70s, especially if they were doing abstract work or performance. It started five to ten years ago, but now it's a moment. I wouldn't worry about making a late decision because it wouldn't have helped. I am a firm believer that unless you strategically map out every single step of your life, it's really the cosmos.

MH It's hard to be strategic about everything you're doing in life because there's always some shit that happens. I held out wanting to live in New York. It was always the intellectual thing that I wanted to be a part of. It was the way that people dealt with their art and were serious about it.

LSS One final question: How do you feel your work has changed since the early sculptures and performance pieces to the work in your last show?



Maren Hassinger, *Women's Work*, 2006/2013, A performance, in which women (and now men), are asked to tear strips of the New York Times, twist them, and then know them together to form a ball at Grey Art Gallery, NYC. Photo: Nisa Ojalvo. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

MH I see my work as a constant return to certain themes. I do have a palette that I refer to that is the way I've "matured." There's vanishing nature and union in equality: those are ideas foremost in my mind. The palette is varied and includes in no particular order or importance: branches, the color pink (in pieces like *Pink Paths* and *Love*), rope, wire, wire rope, steel, chain, handmade rocks (from plaster, sand, and paint), preserved leaves, newspapers (mainly the *New York Times* as the paper of record for the US), newsprint paper (these various papers are twisted like wire rope and umbilical cords), concrete, an assortment of printmaking materials and processes—dance, drawn meditations using text (*Rivers*, etcetera), performances documented as film and video (*Daily Mask*, et cetera), performances as collaborations in films and videos, live interactions (like *Women's Work*), and collaboration as a part of a work method and as a political goal.

LSS Well, that's a good place to end.

MH Great! Because I'm tired and my jaw hurts! (*laughter*)