

Stokes Sims, Lowery. "Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi's Storied Art Collaboration," *Hyperallergic*, 10 March 2024.

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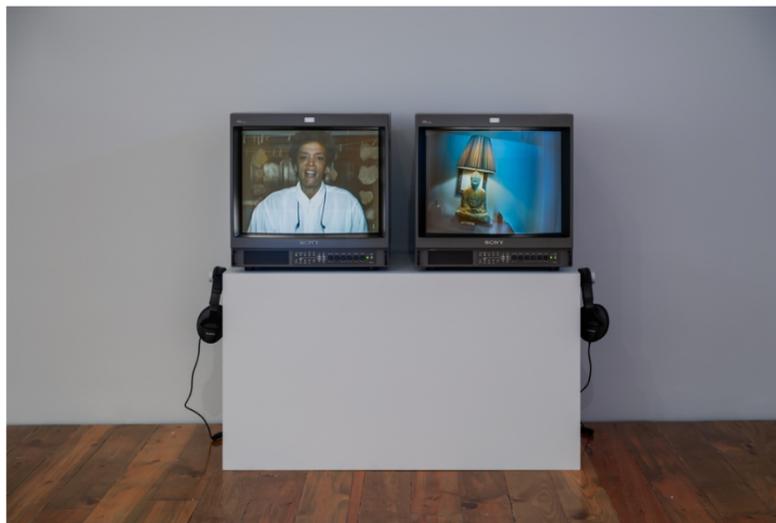
Art **Reviews**

Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi's Storied Art Collaboration

Las Vegas Ikebana chronicles both the character and persistence of decades of work produced by the two artists.



Lowery Stokes Sims March 10, 2024



Installation view of *Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi* at the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College, Portland, Oregon. Pictured: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi, *Video Letters*, September 17 and September 18, 1998 (1998), video (color, sound), 48:18 min. (all photos Mario Gallucci unless otherwise noted)

PORTLAND, Oregon — It certainly is about time that an institution presented an exhibition on the collaborations between Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi. In every exhibition of one artist's work, the other's presence is palpable. *Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi*, organized by Allie Tepper for the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College, has redressed this situation admirably and thoroughly. The exhibition is on view through May 19, and if you find yourself in the area, you would do well not to miss it.

Tepper has diligently excavated a plethora of documentation that chronicles not only the character of the artists' collaborations but also their persistence. According to the Cooley Gallery website, the title *Las Vegas Ikebana* was conceived by Hassinger and Nengudi "to describe and catalyze many of their creative expressions": the exhibition "encompasses many aspects of the artists' individual and collective work," including Hassinger's experiences working in a flower shop and Nengudi's interest in Japanese aesthetic forms.

As Tepper notes in the illuminating wall labels, "Dance was a primary language through which Hassinger and Nengudi first connected to one another as artists." Both studied the language of movement with several Los Angeles-based dancers, such as Lelia Goldoni, Carmen

de Lavallade, and James Truitte, and choreographers Lester Horton and Rudy Perez. In addition to documenting individual projects, such as Hassinger's "Tree Duet" (c. 1977/2021) or Nengudi's "Studio Performance with R.S.V.P." (1976), the show features several photographs of Hassinger's performances with Nengudi's signature *R.S.V.P.* sculpture series, moving in and around the stretched and attenuated forms of the nylon pantyhose. Among their numerous collaborations with dance companies and workshops are "Art Moves" (1979) and "Dance Card" (formerly titled "Nature's Way"), the latter performed in 1986 by Maren Hassinger, Ulysses Jenkins, and Franklin Parker at the Contemporary Art Forum in Santa Barbara.



Installation view of *Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi* at the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College, Portland, Oregon. Pictured: Senga Nengudi, "R.S.V.P. X" (1976/refabricated 2014), exhibition copy, commissioned by the Cooley Gallery, nylon, sand, and rose petals

This archival accumulation is a reminder of the potent fermentation of Black creativity in Los Angeles in the 1970s and '80s, chronicled in the 2011 publication *Now Dig This!: Art & Black Los Angeles, 1960–1980*, edited by Kellie Jones. Hassinger and Nengudi were clearly focal points in that scene. For example, participants in performances such as Nengudi's 1978 "Ceremony for Freeway Fets" (for which photo documentation and ephemera can be found in *Las Vegas Ikebana*) included artists such as David Hammons and Ulysses Jenkins, future forces in the art world. Houston Conwill, Peter Hassinger, Franklin Parker, May Sun, Larry Abrams, Chris Choi, and Dee McMillin are recorded participants in other projects at the Women's Building, as well as various galleries, colleges, and universities. An additional presence on that scene was Suzanne Jackson (who was at the Cooley Gallery opening events); Jackson's Gallery 32 (1968–70) was one of the few galleries where Black artists could exhibit at that time.

During a February 17 panel discussion for the exhibition's opening, Hassinger and Nengudi described how they continued to work together, even as they moved away from the Los Angeles milieu that incubated their collaborations. Despite the demands of their individual lives, they exchanged and shared scripts, manifestos, notebooks, postcards, letters, and video letters (e.g., *Video Letters, September 17 and September 19, 1998*). In viewing their diaristic correspondences and homemade performance videos (e.g., the collaborative work "Senga's House (Brigadoon Lane Residency)," 2003, or "House Dances," from the early 2000s, the latter an impromptu choreography of housework, audiences are inevitably caught up in considerations of the private versus the public, the seen and unseen — raising the proverbial question of whether the falling tree makes a sound if no one is in the forest to hear it.



Installation view of *Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi* at the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College, Portland, Oregon. Left: Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger performing with "R.S.V.P. (Performance Piece)," Pearl C. Woods Gallery, Los Angeles (May 1977), photographed by Harmon Outlaw; right: Carmen de Lavallade, James Truitte (Nengudi's teacher), and Lelia Goldoni (Hassinger's teacher), performing "Another Touch of Klee" as part of the Lester Horton Dance Theatre (1951), photographed by Constantine

Hassinger and Nengudi noted in their discussion that their collaborations — whether public or private — required them to be “sensitive to one another,” and “well aware and able to depend on one another”; this allowed them to “exude confidence,” whereby they could achieve “balance,” which allowed them to cultivate “serendipity.” These qualities were clearly at play in the two inaugural presentations of “See-See Riders” (2024) a new work choreographed by Nengudi and “danced” by conceptual artist and writer sidony o’neal and artist and movement-based performer keyon gaskin, two presences in Portland’s art scene. This improvisational movement piece debuted a newly constructed see-saw form, inspired by a sketch among Nengudi’s 2004 *30 Day Exercise* (on view in the exhibition), and featured o’neal and gaskin balancing on the teeter-totter, using each other as counterweights as they intermittently eased along its length. Each twist, turn, gesture, and touch was both intuitive and deliberate, and all were at play during the second performance, when art historian Leslie King Hammond lingered too long in examining the sculpture’s dynamics and was spontaneously caught up in the performance. In what someone described as “trans-generational care,” o’neal and gaskin guided King Hammond through the movements as she gave into the moment and contributed her own variations.

This is all ironic since Hassinger revealed that her dissatisfaction with the quality of her dance experience torpedoed her dance studies at Bennington College. She joined the sculpture department instead, but when she arrived at the University of California, Los Angeles, her sculpture was rejected by the department, leading to her acceptance into the fiber department. This initiated her move into installations that employed woven branches or patternist works, such as “Heaven” (1984/2024), and unraveled discarded rebar cables, as seen in “Leaning (maquettes)” of 1979, both in the exhibition.



Installation view of *Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi* at the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College, Portland, Oregon. Pictured: Senga Nengudi, *30 Day Exercise* (selections) series (2004), ink and collage on paper, 8.5 x 11 inches each

Nengudi's high school years were full of dance and music. In a 2013 interview with Elissa Auther for the Archives of American Art she noted the importance of jazz music in stimulating her improvisational impulses. At Pasadena State College, she was involved in dance, but then she sought an art experience at Cal State, Los Angeles. She credits her contact with Noah Purifoy, in the crucible of the Watts Riots, with her exploration of new materials, personified in her aforementioned pantyhose sculptures, represented in the exhibition by "R.S.V.P. X" (1976/refabricated 2024).

If Nengudi's title "R.S.V.P" signifies a request for a response from viewers, then the panel discussion on February 17 did just that. Hassinger led the audience through an exercise of creating twisted segments of newspaper, a technique she has used in more recent sculptures. The individual strips were then tied together with square knots. Each row of the audience secured its collective contributions, which Hassinger's associate, Cole Palatini, rolled into a large ball as he circulated through the space. Next, Nengudi led an exercise she terms "verbalong," whereby rows of the audience chose a random word and then acted it out. According to Hassinger, the ball of twisted newspaper symbolized a connection between the lives and ideas of the people on its pages and of those in attendance. This could describe the essence of the practices of Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi, for whom collaboration, creation, craft, choreography, and community converge.