

The history of African American sculpture is a powerful continuum of resilience, innovation, and cultural reclamation. It begins with 19th-century artist Edmonia Lewis, who, as one of the first Black women to gain international acclaim as a sculptor, carved both marble and metaphorical space for herself in a white- and male-dominated field. Her neoclassical works, often centered around themes of African-American and Native heritage, were revolutionary in both subject and presence. Moving into the 20th century, artists like Meta Warrick Fuller and Augusta Savage further expanded the visibility and scope of Black sculpture during the Harlem Renaissance. Fuller used the figure symbolically to address themes of identity, race, and struggle, anticipating the movement's broader cultural mission. Savage not only contributed through her own work, but also laid critical institutional groundwork as the first director of the Harlem Community Art Center. There, she mentored future luminaries and fostered an ecosystem of Black artistic development.

Aaron Douglas, though primarily a painter, also helped shape the visual language of the Harlem Renaissance by combining African artistic motifs with modernist abstraction. His work, informed by African sculpture, Egyptian reliefs, and contemporary Western movements like cubism, was part of a broader reclamation of African heritage that many Black artists of the era pursued. This search for identity, history, and cultural continuity would continue to evolve through the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and '70s, where artists like Senga Nengudi, David Hammons, and Maren Hassinger pushed the boundaries of form, function, and performance in Black art. Their works responded not only to aesthetic concerns but also to pressing social and political realities emerging from the Civil Rights and Black Power movements



Maren Hassinger stands out in this lineage as a crucial bridge between modernist sculpture and performance traditions rooted in both activism and communal experience. Trained as a fiber artist, Hassinger began using industrial materials like wire rope, plastic, and newspaper (items often associated with labor, infrastructure, and disposability) to craft sculptures that evoke organic forms such as bushes, vines, and bodies. Her manipulation of these materials reflects both a critique and reimagining of the modernist legacy: while modernism often eschewed identity politics, Hassinger reclaims the vocabulary of abstraction to speak about race, environment, femininity, and interconnectedness.

Hassinger's work also strongly aligns with performance art traditions shaped by figures like Lorraine O'Grady and Adrian Piper, though her approach is often more meditative and collective. In performances such as *Love* (1977) and *Pink Trash* (1982), she has explored ideas of environmental degradation, community healing, and human vulnerability. These performances, often involving movement, simple gestures, and participation, echo the embodied resistance

seen in earlier performance work by O'Grady, who used her own body as a tool to interrogate race and gender. However, Hassinger often emphasizes the quiet power of collaboration and shared space, highlighting how Black performance art can be both a site of resistance and restoration.

By integrating sculpture and performance in ways that are simultaneously abstract and deeply grounded in social commentary, Hassinger continues and expands the legacy of Black sculptors and performance artists who came before her. She reflects the ethos of Fuller's metaphorical figures, Savage's community-driven pedagogy, Douglas's Afro-modernist symbolism, and Piper's conceptual activism, while articulating her own unique voice through material, movement, and space. In doing so, Hassinger embodies the evolving nature of Black art—its capacity to carry history, challenge systems, and imagine new futures through form and gesture alike.

