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## LE QUOTIDIEN DE L'ART

# Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger, 50 years of artistic collaboration: "both a creative process and mutual support"

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Senga Nengudi, *See-See Riders*, 2024 in the exhibition "Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi" at the Columbus Museum of Art at The Pizzuti in Columbus, Ohio through January 11, 2026.  
Photo: Matthew Pevear.

Since meeting in Los Angeles in 1977, artists Maren Hassinger, now 78, and Senga Nengudi, 82, have cultivated a deep friendship and a groundbreaking artistic collaboration. Their partnership has been a source of strength. Through this bond, they have been able to confront the challenges of being rendered invisible in the art world because they are Black women and mothers. The [exhibition "Las Vegas Ikebana"](#), on view at the Columbus Museum of Art at The Pizzuti (until January 11, 2026), and curated by Allie Tepper and Daniel Marcus, offers a unique glimpse into their 50-year creative relationship through their correspondence (letters and recordings), conceptual installations, and performances. The exhibition also features a curated selection of their individual works. The title itself, an absurd expression coined by the artists, presents a playful contrast between the grace of Japanese floral art and the "vulgarity" of Las Vegas. This juxtaposition embodies the humor, rigor, and penchant for exploring opposites that characterize their work.

**In a 2002 text, "Maren and Me," written for a residency application in Boulder, Colorado, you stated your desire to "explain and share our work, our collaborations, and our survival techniques." Could the "Las Vegas Ikebana" exhibition be presented in this way?**

Senga Nengudi: This is certainly a fundamental element, as our collaborative work is based on our creative desires and also constitutes mutual support. In some aspects of our lives, it's akin to a form of survival: like a life jacket that keeps us afloat, allowing us to create and maintain an inventive spirit. Even though many things could have distracted us, this has kept us on the path we wanted to follow, both as artists and in the continuity of our shared project.

Maren Hassinger: When we met, we were the same age, from the same background, and we were both women, in addition to living near each other. We were in an art world that often excluded us. So there was a reason for us to become close, both as friends and as collaborators. We understood and accepted each other, realizing that the art world, like society as a whole, perhaps didn't have a place for us.

**How have your friendship and mutual support enabled you to continue your joint practice over the decades, despite the personal and professional challenges you have faced?**

MH: It happened gradually. We never consciously thought about it. It was during a time when we were spending a lot of time at home with our young children. And it was a great way to talk, even while hearing the children yelling in the distance demanding something.

SN: While we were both living in Los Angeles, we did a lot to stay close and support each other. When we didn't have a residency, we created one ourselves. I invited Maren to my place. Maren invited me to a residency at MICA (Rinehart School of Sculpture at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore), which provided me with an income. Even though we've been apart for a while, we still get together to work on projects.

**Senga Nengudi's work falls within the tradition of Dadaism and Surrealism, while Maren Hassinger's is linked to Minimalism. You have created performances for each other. Do your individual practices, sculpture and choreography, converge in any way?**

MH: No. The fact that Senga and I performed these physical pieces together stemmed largely from our experiences and the dance classes we had taken when we were younger. We understood that there was a way to create a movement language capable of expressing something and with which we could connect with the audience. It was during this period of learning the craft of art that we collaborated on these performances.

SN : We are two distinct beings. That's one of the most beautiful things about our partnership: we each have a very distinct practice, but when we come together, we manage to guide them together to create.

**What proportion of your collaborative performance work relies on improvisation?**

MH: Everything. It's our method, it's a constantly evolving process.

SN: Even though I can say I choreographed a piece, the important thing is the ability to improvise. Our work is based on concepts. Maren choreographs a piece for which we have a text. We agree on the idea we want to explore and on a common way of moving. Then improvisation takes over.

### And what about participation?

SN: It's absolutely essential. Maren and I have led many public projects involving participants. When I give an artist talk or perform, I love to involve the audience. They listen and truly become part of the creative process.

### What have you learned from each other over the years?

MH: Never stop!

SN: I learned the strength of friendship and the excitement of creating something together. I learned patience and grace. In 2007, Maren mailed me a photocopy of the phrase: *"The air is heavy with fear; become a river."* That's what I learned from her: the absolute grace of nature and the fact that it takes care of you. If you let yourself be carried by it instead of letting fear overwhelm you, then everything will be alright.