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Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi: *Las Vegas Ikebana*

By Silvia Benedetti



Installation view: *Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi*, Columbus Museum of Art at The Pizzuti, Columbus, OH, 2025–26. Courtesy Columbus Museum of Art at The Pizzuti. Photo: Matthew Pevear.

Artists Maren Hassinger (b. 1947, Los Angeles) and Senga Nengudi (b. 1943, Chicago) have cultivated a profound, five-decade-long friendship and artistic partnership, meticulously documented in their correspondence and collaborative work. Since 1977, they have supported each other as they navigated the challenges of the art world and of being overlooked—in each of their cases, as Black women juggling motherhood, caring for their aging mothers, and teaching jobs. “We understood and accepted one another. Maybe the art world had no room for us,” Hassinger once said.

The exhibition *Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi* offers a unique glimpse into their lifelong creative bond. Curator Allie Tepper conceived the idea for the show—which presents letters, artists' books, ephemera, recordings, experiments, conceptual installations, and performances—in 2019, when she encountered never-before-seen materials at Nengudi's studio in Colorado Springs. "Las Vegas Ikebana" is an absurd phrase the duo created to embrace all aspects of their individual and collective work: improvisational compositions, ritual, humor, impermanence, popular culture, eroticism, and the natural world. The first piece visitors encounter upon entering the Pizzuti, the newly reopened campus of the Columbus Museum of Art, is a site-specific installation by both artists, titled *Las Vegas Ikebana* (2024), consisting of an ikebana arrangement incorporating branches and silk alongside a wall drawing made of dirt, glitter, and found gemstones. This piece is a continuation of their series of collages and drawings also called "Las Vegas Ikebana December, 2000" (2000), which play with "girly" aesthetics and are also included in the show.

They had friends in common, such as David Hammons, before they officially met on the phone in 1977, when both were living in Los Angeles. While maintaining rigorous solo practices rooted in sculpture and installation art, the artists first connected through dance and movement, sharing training in techniques developed by the choreographers Lester Horton and Rudy Perez. In the year they met, Nengudi performed a dance piece choreographed by Hassinger titled *Ten Minutes* (1977). A month later, they performed an iconic improvisation together for Nengudi's *R.S.V.P. Performance Piece* (1977), which featured sculptural webs of nylon pantyhose.

These early Los Angeles performances, as well as their long-distance collaborations until today, are well-documented in the exhibition. Although their works are quite conceptual, a material aspect is always very important. The exhibition shows how they adopted materials and techniques that were usually dismissed in conceptual art. For example, *Talking Book* (1988) is an analog audiobook and a sculpture made of dried twigs and moss that houses an early Walkman and a cassette. The 12-minute, 17-second audio-collage is a piece of nature poetry blending environmental sounds (birds, flies, running water) with shifting narrations. Nengudi's melodic voice describes a journey and an erotic scene, contrasting with Hassinger's somber narration of an apocalyptic vision and a reflective mantra. "Our collaborations were based on our creative desires and also served as a form of support. Like a life jacket that keeps us afloat, producing work and maintaining a creative mindset," Nengudi has said.

Since the late eighties, their relationship has been long distance: Hassinger lives in New York and Baltimore, and Nengudi in Colorado Springs. On several occasions, they initiated residencies in one another's homes. "We're two separate beings, and that's one of the wonderful things about our collaboration," said Nengudi. "We both had our own distinct practices, but when we came together, we were able to merge them to create something new."

A small selection of their individual works are also included here. Nengudi's sculptures are often associated with Dadaism and Surrealism, while Hassinger's sculptures, tangling forms made from galvanized wire rope, are associated with Minimalism. Nengudi describes Hassinger's work as exquisite: "It's the grace of nature, following its flow and relating it to our industrious society. Some of her pieces are wavy, like the ocean or grass blowing in the wind. She's able to duplicate that grace by using industrial materials, creating poetry in the process."

Among the commissioned works is Nengudi's *See-See Riders* (2024), a seesaw sculpture and live performance developed as a tribute to Hassinger and their shared inspiration. Nengudi noted that the concept "comes from the past" and was realized after Tepper discovered the idea in her notebook. Performed by Portland-based artists sidony o'neal and keyon gaskin, the piece features the dancers balancing on a 10-foot-long seesaw, bracing its T-bars and actively

engaging the themes of equilibrium and yielding—sometimes reaching out, other times performing a trust-fall dynamic. The 1943 recording of “See See Rider Blues” by Bea Booze begins playing midway, driving minor gestures like flicking wrists. This performance was followed by an activation of the seesaw by the artists’ grown children, Sanza Fittz and Ava Hassinger.

Las Vegas Ikebana reveals that the decades-long bond between Nengudi and Hassinger fueled their creative survival. Hassinger credits Nengudi with teaching her the foundational lesson, “don’t stop,” while Nengudi learned “patience and grace” and the power of collaboration from Hassinger. This enduring wisdom is encapsulated by a phrase Hassinger mailed Nengudi in the late aughts: “The air is thick with fear; become a river,” proving that their friendship is the resilient current that keeps their art and lives flowing.