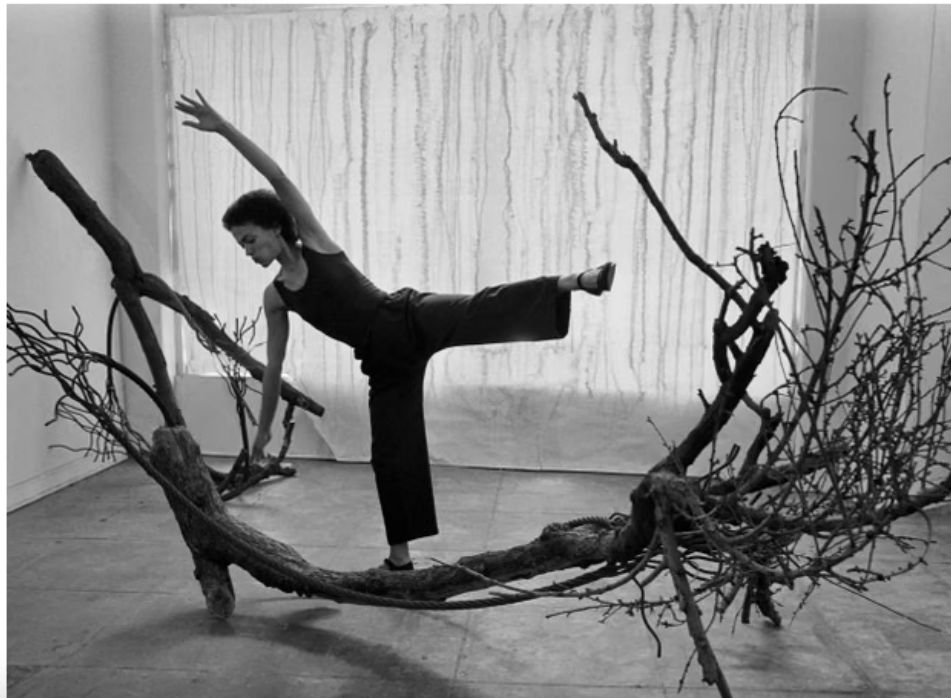


Esposito, Veronica. "There's a kind of magic to her work': Maren Hassinger's one-of-a-kind sculptures," *The Guardian*, 17 June 2026.



'There's a kind of magic to her work': Maren Hassinger's one-of-a-kind sculptures



Veronica Esposito

Wed 17 Jun 2026 07.00 EDT

For 50 years, the American artist Maren Hassinger has created fascinating site-specific sculptures out of the simplest of actions: tying a square knot, twisting metal into organic shapes, blowing breath into a plastic bag, walking through a room. With *Maren Hassinger: Living Moving Growing*, the Berkeley [Art Museum](#) (BAMPFA) offers a suitably comprehensive, yet ephemeral retrospective, recreating her most celebrated works, documenting her many performances, and even bringing audiences into the fun.

"There's a kind of magic to her work," said the BAMPFA senior curator Anthony Graham, "the way she's able to transform materials and really change the space that those things inhabit, to make us see them in a new way."

Indeed, Hassinger makes you look at things anew. One of her earliest pieces, simply known as Untitled Rope, brings together four biceps-thick, industrial-grade lengths of the titular material, each arranged into a loose macrame knot tantalizingly on the verge of being pulled taut. "I always approach the sculpture thinking that it's this latent performance," said Graham, suggesting what would happen if we joined forces to tie off the ropes. "Like if we were just to walk on either end, pick up the rope, and close the knot together, we'd be pulling away, but also joining us closer."

Knots are found everywhere in Living Moving Growing. They are present in pieces like Untitled Rope and Sign of the Times, the latter of which features innumerable strips of the New York Times carefully twisted and tied together to form massive ropes of newspaper that hang down from a gallery wall. You can see enormous pieces of wire rope on the verge of being knotted, pink plastic bags tied off to hold breath, and even Hassinger's hands effortlessly tying one knot after another in her 2005 video piece Birthright.

As Graham shared, the quotidian nature of knots, as well as their great versatility, make them ideal practices for Hassinger, who tends to zero in on things that become invisible to us in their repetition, yet that are essential building blocks of our shared lives. "Tying knots is a skill that is at once everyday, like tying one's shoes, but could also be decorative, like macrame, or could be industrial, like the kinds of knots that are needed on ships," he said. "In a lot of her work there are these kind of repetitive gestures, but really approached with a sculptural sensibility so that there's a shift in scale."

In Hassinger's hands, these routine practices can become a means of reaching out to others to build connection. Her piece Love (Pyramid) shows the artist filling innumerable neon pink plastic shopping bags with her own breath and a tiny love note, then pinning them to the gallery wall in a huge sculpture.

With work like Love (Pyramid) and Sign of the Times, what would otherwise be consumerist trash becomes a source of wonder and humanity, drawing in onlookers and making us think about how the simple act of breathing unites us all. Love (Pyramid) is also a piece that requires upkeep, meaning that it assumes a degree of ongoing care and interaction that brings museum staff into Hassinger's practices of the quotidian. "It's really simple, just to take a deflated bag, fill it back up with air, and pin it right back on the wall," said Graham. "So there's again this ability to care for things and to give them new lives."

Sign of the Times brings Hassinger's creation into the Berkeley Art Museum's community, as the institution is staging workshops to slowly build the sculpture over time. When I toured the exhibit, long cords of knotted newsprint hung down several feet of a gallery wall, looking like a cross between jungle vines and shredded paper. Over time, as Hassinger leads monthly workshops to fill in more and more space, the sculpture will become progressively larger, eventually filling up the entire gallery with the strangely organic forms.

These workshops are more than an opportunity to exorcise some anxiety by tearing the paper of record into tiny little strips, twisting it up and knotting it into itself — they are a way to bring Hassinger's use of repetition to a wider audience, and to have it form the basis of togetherness.

As Graham explained, inviting everyday people into Hassinger's process of creation breaks down hierarchies and power structures that are usually embedded into an art museum, giving curators, experts and audiences alike a basis for simply interacting as people. "On opening day, we were in the theater and it was kind of incredible," he said of Hassinger's initial workshop. "The theater is full of

everyone just talking, everyone was kind of in the world together, and it had broken down this hierarchical thing. It was, like, 'no, we're like all in this world together, right?' For Hassinger, that becomes the radical act, to create a caring world."

Video pieces like *Birtright* and *Daily Mask* foreground politics of race and identity that, while present in Hassinger's sculptural work, are far less available on the surface of things. The former traces her family history, as it documents the moment in which she began to explore new branches of her family tree through a first meeting with her uncle. The latter shows a closeup of Hassinger's face while she applies a grease oil stick to her face, eventually covering herself in a depiction of blackface.

As a Black female creator coming up in the 1970s largely in performance and site-specific sculpture, Hassinger faced her share of difficulties finding her place in the art world. After graduating from UCLA in 1973, she found community with other Black avant-garde artists, including David Hammons, Franklin Parker and Ulysses Jenkins, supporting each other at a time when few others would support them.

Hassinger moved to New York in 1984, continuing to build her reputation and practice, eventually landing a position as the director of the Reinhardt School of [Sculpture](#) at the Maryland Institute College of Art. That institutional recognition helped boost her reputation, as did a 2011 show at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles titled *Now Dig This!*, which brought to prominence the pioneering work of a community of Black artists working in Los Angeles. "I think that show was, for many, a real revelation of this entire art history that hadn't been known to many people," said Graham.

Having a career-spanning retrospective at the BAMPFA is a major moment for Hassinger, and one that arrives at a time when the simplicity and ecstasy of her practice are sorely needed. As Graham shared, at the root of Hassinger's artistic work one finds caring and joy, and her intent is to open up spaces of sharing. Recalling a Hassinger newspaper workshop in Ohio, he paraphrased the artist as she held up a gigantic wad of rolled-up newspaper: "If we can come together to make something as absurd as a newspaper ball, we can come together to bring love to one another always."

Graham wants this feeling to be infectious in his audiences. "I hope that the show helps people slow down and pay closer attention to the world around them," he said, "to see all of the small gestures and movements and materials that we're constantly surrounded by that are full of meaning. It's the power that these very simple gestures have, that when we do them together, we can really make a change."