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The transformative art of Maren Hassinger comes to Berkeley

From iconic wire-rope sculptures to massive community installations, a major new BAMPPFA exhibition brings the legendary artist's career into vibrant conversation.

By [Anne Brice](#)



For decades, Maren Hassinger didn't consider the political impact her art might have. She created work not to influence others, but to express how she felt about our shared humanity.

"The problems that we associate with life here on Earth are problems that are caused by our inability to see each other as one," [Hassinger has said](#). "One thing that we all share is nature."

Born in Los Angeles in 1947, Hassinger is widely considered a foundational figure in Black conceptual art. She rose to prominence in the 1970s with a series of wire-rope installations, where she unbraided rigid industrial materials like steel cable and twisted and curved them to mimic natural elements or ecosystems, like rain or grasses blowing in the wind.

"It's quite inspiring to see how she's able to take a simple material and manipulate it in ways that it feels so monumental, yet so intimate," said Margot Norton, chief curator at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).

Hassinger went on to pioneer community-driven public rituals and integrate modern dance into sculpture, and spent 20 years mentoring generations of younger artists as the director of the Rinehart School of Sculpture at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Her work has been acquired into the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Long fascinated by Hassinger's work, Norton wanted to honor the artist in a way she hadn't been before. So Norton, along with BAMPFA senior curator Anthony Graham, decided to put together a landmark retrospective that would showcase Hassinger's five-decade career, from her early 1970s wire-rope innovations to her latest community-driven installations — vibrant landscapes of hand-twisted newsprint and hundreds of pink plastic bags inflated by the breath of strangers.

"There's a lot of research involved in working with an artist that has been so influential," Norton said.

The curators got to work. They tracked down 50 years of performance documentation, commissioned an illustrated 344-page exhibition catalogue and worked closely with the artist's studio to plan complex recreations of Hassinger's early, ephemeral installations. And now, three years later, the exhibition — [Maren Hassinger: Living Moving Growing](#) — has opened in BAMPFA's main gallery. The show, a collaboration with the UC Botanical Garden, is the largest retrospective of Hassinger's art practice to date.

Rather than mount the artworks strictly chronologically, Norton said the curators focused more on themes present throughout Hassinger's decades of work — nature, community, equality and the interconnectedness of all living things — and attempted to put them in conversation with one another.

"I do feel like every artwork is alive," said Norton. "Part of our job as curators is to let them sing."

In one room, there's a piece called "Birthright," a documentary-style video where Hassinger examines her family's complicated history, confronting the thievery of slavery and interviewing relatives she'd never spoken to before. And on the opposite wall is a work called "Love," an installation of hundreds of pink plastic bags that are filled with breath and little notes that say "love" inside of each bag. These two pieces, Norton imagines, have a lot to say to one another.

That dialogue is amplified by the humble, industrial media that Hassinger uses to tell these profound stories — and the way those ordinary materials invite others into her creative process.

"In a lot of her art, Maren works with everyday materials that are just part of our surroundings," said Norton. "Throughout her career, she has foregrounded ideas of community, ideas of collaboration, ideas of the potential when people create things together."

In "[Pink Trash](#)," which Hassinger will perform with Berkeley students on the campus's Crescent Lawn in September, she collects garbage, paints it pink — a prominent color in her work — and strews it across the lawn to draw attention to the immense waste humans produce. Another artwork, "[Wrenching News](#)," invites the community to collectively twist and knot newsprint to build an installation that will grow throughout the exhibition. Led by Berkeley-based artist Julia Goodman, these collaborative sessions will run monthly through November.

Deeply moved by nature, Hassinger frequently brings the outdoors inside the museum walls. In collaboration with the UC Botanical Garden — its staff provided limbs from a recently felled cherry tree — the curators carefully selected branches to recreate Hassinger's historic late-1970s sculptures, including "Pas de Deux," "Deep Down" and "Dry Flow." In these pieces, the organic branches intertwine with industrial wire rope in meticulous, grid-like compositions, with each material intersecting and adapting to the other's shape.

"There's this constant conversation between inside and outside, organic and industrial, and also how the human body navigates through it all," said Norton. "The way the viewer moves around her artwork, I think, is just as essential as the artworks themselves."

The exhibition extends far beyond the physical museum galleries, too. Nestled in the UC Botanical Garden's Oak Knoll, with a sweeping view of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, stands "[Monument \(Pyramid\)](#)" — a massive, 10-foot-tall public sculpture. Sustainably constructed entirely out of fallen redwood branches sourced directly from the Garden, the towering piece required a week of collaborative labor from Garden and BAMPFA staff, as well as dozens of the Garden's volunteers, to meticulously weave together.

"It's like these two monuments are looking at each other," said Christine Manoux, director of education and visitor engagement at the Garden. "One is a natural material, the other steel and cable, both created by human hands."

In its entirety, Norton hopes the exhibition acts as a vibrant connection — linking the natural world with the industrial, and bringing people and the artworks into conversation with one another. By inviting the public to touch, build and navigate her art, Hassinger invites us to contemplate our temporary place in the environment.

"A lot of what Maren's work celebrates is the potential held within the very brief time that we exist," said Norton.

For Norton, bringing this history together has been a profound privilege.

"It is such an honor to be able to tell Maren's story in this way," she said. "I do think that's where museums do their best — when they can combine scholarly research with awe-inspiring art, and be a bridge linking publics from wide-ranging backgrounds to an artist whose works spark important conversations," Norton said.