

Miranda, Carolina A. "An Ecosystem of Her Own," *The New York Review*, 24 September 2026.

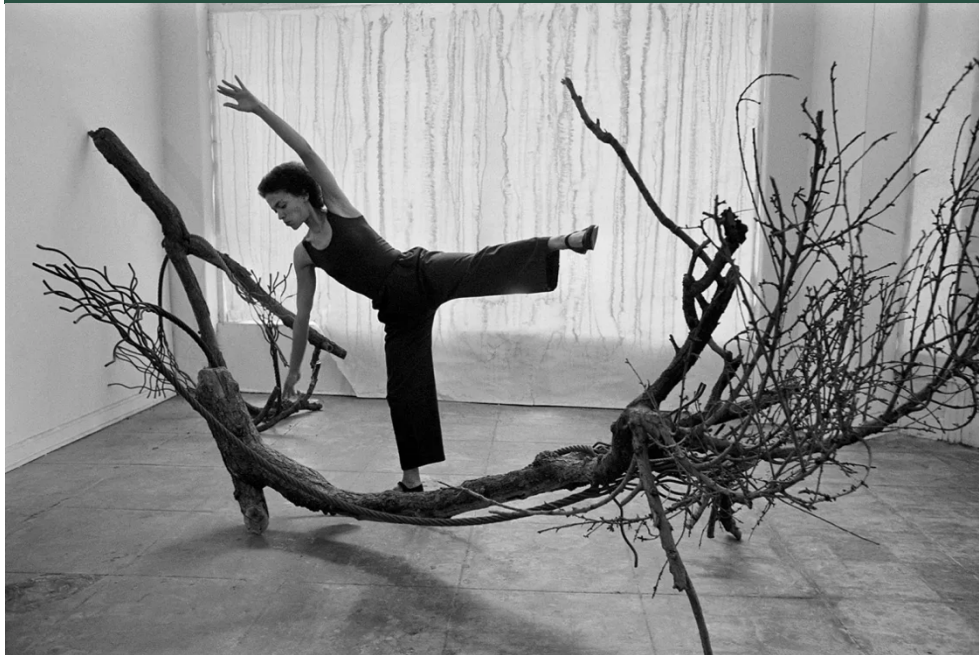
The New York Review

An Ecosystem of Her Own

Carolina A. Miranda

Maren Hassinger's alchemical touch transforms the most resistant materials into evocations of the endlessly changing natural world.

September 24, 2026 Issue



In Maren Hassinger's hands, bits of frayed industrial wire pinned to a wall come to resemble dandelion bristles carried away by the breeze. Wire cables, arranged in clusters across a gallery floor, conjure tufts of grass. And weighty ropes—the sort that might be used to moor a boat—are braided with chains and arranged on the ground in the form of a curving river.

The products of Hassinger's alchemical touch are on view in a resplendent exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), her most comprehensive retrospective to date. The show is roughly chronological, charting her career from her native Los Angeles to New York, where she continues to make work at the age of seventy-nine. At the University of California Botanical Garden, two miles away from the museum, stands a recent sculpture called *Monument (Pyramid)* (2022/2026), a ten-foot-tall pyramid made of woven redwood branches. Its woodsy setting is fitting for an artist who has, over the course of her career, regularly turned to nature for both materials and ideas. Even her works made with processed matter can call to mind phenomena like the current of a stream or a gust of wind.

In *Beach* (1980), which consumes several dozen square feet at BAMPFA, slender, hip-height wooden rods fixed in plaster bases tilt like tall grasses rustled by a breeze.

It was by stumbling into dead ends that Hassinger found her métier as a sculptor. In 1965 she left Los Angeles for Bennington College in Vermont, intending to study dance, one of the institution's more renowned programs. Told by her professors that she lacked technical proficiency, she was steered toward sculpture instead, and she learned to make abstract geometric works inspired by Anthony Caro and David Smith, both of whom had taught at Bennington. She was then rejected by the graduate program in sculpture at UCLA, but her work caught the eye of the ceramicist and textile designer Bernard Kester, who became known for curating the influential 1971 exhibition "Deliberate Entanglements," which highlighted the sculptural potential of weaving. He had established the school's fiber arts program, where Hassinger ultimately enrolled and began to incorporate elements of textile production, such as knotting, into her work.

The curators of "Living Moving Growing" have done an admirable job of pulling together a body of work that defies easy categorization. Hassinger came of artistic age during the height of the Black Arts Movement. She was part of a loose community of Black artists in Los Angeles in the 1970s that included David Hammons, Houston Conwill, and Senga Nengudi, who were, in varying ways, merging sculpture, abstraction, video, and performance. But Hassinger's early work didn't directly make use of the typical signifiers of the African American experience, and even in those early years she stood apart for her interest in permanence and scale.

Her sculptures can form their own discrete mini-ecosystems—*Untitled* (1972), for example, features a dozen industrial ropes dangling in a small gallery like elegant microbial forms—but she has also used her pieces as settings for performances. Included in the show are striking pictures taken in the 1970s by the Los Angeles photographer Adam Avila that show Hassinger and others dancing among her installations of tree branches and undulating strands of cable.

Her interest in experimentation has not dulled over time. One gallery wall is covered in inflated pink plastic bags, an installation titled *Love* (2008), offering a startling burst of color that nods at environmental degradation. Also on view are a number of videos, including *Wind* (2013), created in collaboration with her daughter, Ava Hassinger. The pair, dressed in loose white clothing evocative of Afro-Caribbean spiritual traditions, advance along a wild shore, the wind whipping up their ensembles. There is billowing movement even when they stand still.

No single category can contain Hassinger, and neither can any one museum. Some of her most significant sculptures are too large to be displayed simultaneously at BAMPFA. Missing, for example, is the installation *Walking* (1978), composed of dozens of clusters of cables bundled together to resemble a forest of roots. But this is a quibble, and the curators are right to let many of her other works breathe. With their inventive and graceful incorporation of natural materials and forms, they are quietly seductive, and they function as a warning: touch grass before it's buried in steel and concrete.