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Art in America

Maren Hassinger Won’t Be Weighed Down

By *Emily Watlington* November 21, 2026 5:00am



Maren Hassinger poses with *Wallflower series* in 1975.
Photo Adam Avila

Maren Hassinger’s retrospective at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) has a radiant warmth about it—surprisingly so, given that it’s a show made mostly of gray metal sculptures whose edges could prick you raw. This warmth owes a lot to the photographs, printed mural-sized and filling vitrines, taken by her long-term collaborator Adam Avila. Scattered throughout, they show Hassinger dancing, beaming, and/or hamming it up for the camera, often mirroring her sculpture’s forms with her body. But it owes, too, to the ways she rose to meet her career’s surprising twists and turns.

Rejected in college from Bennington’s dance department in the 1960s, Hassinger was pushed toward sculpture by a teacher who noticed her gift. “My love of motion,” she says in the catalog, carried her from one to the other. Clement Greenberg was a guest at her senior thesis critique: He had “the gift of gab, but was a bit of a bully” she remembers with accurate alliterations. He would not be her last mean man.

In graduate school, at UCLA, Hassinger was rerouted once again after finding the sculpture program to be a boys' club. As she remembers it, not one single woman was enrolled. So she found a home in fiber, a typical tale, and made it work: "Truthfully," she admits in the catalog, "I was just trying to get a degree so I could teach and make art." But she found herself too impatient for the loom and uninterested in making fabric. So she gathered fibers out in the world, chancing upon a weighty rope in a shipyard. It was made of blonde hemp but discolored by oil. Playing around, she eventually unraveled some of its strands before tying segments into a series of loose, giant macrame knots that greet visitors to BAMPFA, where they lie on the ground as if waiting to be pulled tight.

Hassinger would marry craft techniques with industrial materials henceforth—a revealing portrait of women's changing work in her time. She became such a regular at one LA wire shop that they featured her on the cover of their trade magazine. Soon, she was incorporating elevator cables—effectively wire ropes, their cords twisted together—into what would become her best known works. *Leaning* (1980) sees cables with frayed ends bundled in some two dozen bouquets. Only the central arrangement has a flat bottom and sits sturdily; the rest are free to lean.

Fiber meets metal in *River*, a 2,000-pound rope-chain Hassinger made as an ambitious graduate student in 1972. But where was a student to store such a behemoth? Recognition would not come until much later—as the title of her work *Wallflower series* (1975) attests—so she let *River* go, then finally remade it in 2011 for a Studio Museum acquisition. (Good thing she had so many photographs). A few other works at BAMPFA are recreations, too, but after school, she mainly made sculptures that could be coiled up and made compact: a resourceful response to the realities of real estate.

To see Hassinger's work is to think about the act of making it. It shows you: Knots are blown up big so that you can see each twist and turn. Her titles are often verbs, as with *Whirling* (1978), *Walking* (1978), and *Leaning* (1980). "When she talks about the work, she moves" explained Margot Norton, who co-curated the show with Anthony Graham.

Hassinger met the obstacles that came her way, as a Black woman born in 1947, with poetry and practicality in equal measure. Of her turn to newspaper, which she twisted and knotted for a cascading 2008 installation, she explains that the material "is very handy and cheap [*laughs*]." But it also must have been cathartic to rip the headlines into strips. Her resourcefulness and resilience define the show, which sees her rethink sculpture without storage, fiber without fabric, choreography without corporeality.

Hassinger hardly did it alone. "Working alone is so antisocial" as she quips in the catalog. When Senga Nengudi first saw Hassinger's work in 1975, she was thrilled to see another Black woman working with sculpture and performance, then looked her up. They became fast friends. With David Hammons, Nengudi then suggested that Linda Goode-Bryant show Hassinger at her gallery, Just Above Midtown (JAM). That show's main work, *Beach* (1980), is installed at BAMPFA, too.

When Hassinger's cohort of Black LA artists—known as Studio Z—lacked opportunities, they invented their own, as when Hassinger, Nengudi, Ulysses Jenkins, and others performed at the 1982 opening of "Afro-American Abstractions." They had neither hung work on the walls nor been included in the checklist, but they did call up the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery to accept a nonexistent invitation: "We *are so thrilled to be doing the opening performance!"* they informed whoever answered the phone.

In the 1990s, Hassinger found herself without a studio. Starved for space, she turned to video. *Birthright* (2005) is nothing like her sculptures, but it will forever change how you see them. Onscreen, the artist interviews her uncle about her family tree. She learns that her grandmother, Puddin, had been the product both of incest and an interracial affair. Puddin's parents hadn't known that they were nephew and aunt, because Puddin's father was born out of wedlock to his lover's father who had a secret Native mistress.

Once the affair was discovered, Puddin was given away to a plantation caretaker who had been enslaved, and her father was lynched by a white mob. Puddin's son—Hassinger's dad—never talked about any of this: He was abandoned too by Puddin, then struggled to relate to women, cutting Hassinger out of the will and passing down patterns. "My legacy was to feel unloved," the artist concludes in the video. But then the show keeps going.

Right next to *Birthright*, the curators installed *Love* (2008/2026), and it is here—halfway through the retrospective—that galleries of gray give way to hot pink. Plastic shopping bags filled with human breath and love notes cover the walls. Her lightness beams off the building, but look closely and you'll find a sense of play throughout the show.

Thinking about familial lineages, Hassinger's knots and ropes start to feel like umbilical cords severed and frayed. History is hefty, but it never weighs the work down in any sense of the word. "I always felt so good when I danced," the artist explains, "lighter, faster." It is easy to imagine her dancing in her studio while walking around BAMPFA, where one gets a sense of heaviness made to look light. *Untitled* (1972/2020) sees ropes with looped ends, noose-like, but instead of being tied into knots, strands are undone and then woven back together seamlessly. In the galleries, the ropes dangle gracefully from the ceiling and weigh heavy on the floor.

Hassinger is an artist who sees things soberly as they are and imaginatively as they might be—a gift that enables her to turn junkyard findings into elegant arrays and litter into love.