



There are trees, said the poet, that only God can make. These were fashioned by artist Maren Hassinger of steel rope. They adorn freeways as part of the Caltrans Highway Art Program.

Times photo by Ken Lubin



TREE SCULPTOR—Maren Hassinger creates tree in her studio from industrial steel rope. Times photo

TREES OF STEEL

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include sculpture with their skyscrapers. "But I think it's also that there isn't really a tradition of interest in art here. Most people here just aren't used to going to see art or collecting it."

If that problem does indeed exist, Caltrans has at least partly solved it with its art program. Commuters northbound on the San Diego Freeway, for example, need only glance up and to the left just before they pass beneath Mulholland Drive to catch a glimpse of "Twelve Trees #2."

Steel Trees 'Grow' Along Freeways

Sculptures Unveiled as Part of Caltrans' Highway Art Program

BY MARK STEIN
Times Staff Writer

Inside her small storefront studio not far from Beverly Hills, Maren Hassinger has done what poets and scientists have for centuries declared impossible. She has made her own trees.

Tall, spindly sculpture born of lengths of industrial steel rope, Hassinger's trees stand starkly at attention in clumps of 12 alongside two of the busiest freeways in Los Angeles.

She planted her first dozen trees at the Vermont Ave. interchange on the Hollywood Freeway last year. A branch sculpture of similar design, set in the rocky hillside near the point where Mulholland Drive arcs across the San Diego Freeway, was officially unveiled by Caltrans earlier this month.

Both works are part of Caltrans' Highway Art Program. Under the program, Caltrans provides the land and processes the necessary permits; the artist supplies the sculpture, the funding and proof of community support for his or her work.

Hassinger proved community support for her projects by circulating petitions in nearby neighborhoods. She covered the funding by having Frederik Paulsen, president of the Paulsen Wire Rope Co. of New York, donate the materials for the first sculpture and by obtaining a grant from the California Arts Council for the second. Her time and talent were a gift from herself.

For Hassinger, whose whimsical, graceful work has been shown both locally and in New York, the

completion of "Twelve Trees" and "Twelve Trees #2" was a small but savored victory in her casual campaign to decorate Los Angeles.

After graduating from Bennington College in Vermont and spending seven months as an editor at Harcourt, Brace & World in New York, Hassinger came back to her native Los Angeles to earn a master's degree in fine arts at UCLA.

Her emphasis shifted from fabrics to natural-fiber rope to the industrial steel rope.

Two years ago, she was employed by the city to create public sculpture. She said it was a job she looked forward to because her father is an architect, and she learned from him to appreciate the combination of sculpture with architecture.

However, none of her work for the city has yet been used.

"I'm really bitter about the fact that I had this sculpture and the city didn't want it," she said, sounding anything but bitter. "It was free—the materials were donated and I was on salary. But they just didn't want it."

She left the city's employ a year ago last August when her contract ran out. She now teaches at Cal State L.A.

"It could be, of course, that they just didn't like my art," she said of her job with the city and her unsuccessful attempt to get Century City architects to

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