

ENTWINED WITH NATURE

The Sculpture of Maren Hassinger

By Maureen Megerian

Maren Hassinger's sculpture has received a good deal of recognition since the late 1980s, appearing in important museum group shows of work by African-American artists as well as a number of one-person exhibitions.¹ Yet the abstract, poetic, and fundamentally nondidactic qualities of Hassinger's art make it impossible to lump with the wave of political and identity-oriented work that has become fashionable during the 1990s. More concerned with nature and our relationship to it, her pieces encourage open-ended interpretation and offer rich, often emotional experiences for the viewer.

Hassinger shapes and configures industrial materials and natural objects to create sculptures and installations that resemble trees, bushes, branches, and landscapes. Her sculptures are most frequently made from galvanized wire rope that is unraveled and frayed into forms that are stiff and frizzy, gracefully bent, or thickly gnarled. She has created installations in gallery settings with branches, leaves, petals, and dirt; some pieces combine wire rope and natural materials. The medium of wire rope and the subject of nature are signatures of Hassinger's mature work, and she continues to mine them for their expressive potential. She also makes drawings and prints, creates performance and movement pieces, and uses video in her explorations of ideas about nature and our experience of it.

Born Maren Louise Jenkins in 1947 and raised in Los Angeles, her late father, Carey Kenneth Jenkins, was an architect, her mother Helen Mills Jenkins, a police officer and an educator.² Artistically gifted from a young age, she was exposed to both her mother's interest in flower arranging and her father's work at his drafting table, which was set up in the family dining room. She began to study dance at age five, an interest she continues to pursue and often incorporates in the forms of her sculpture. Although neither parent pushed her toward an art career, Hassinger says that her mother's independence encouraged her own.

When Maren enrolled in Bennington College in 1965, it was to study dance. Informed that this was not an area in which one could major, she switched to sculpture but did not feel truly engaged with this art form until close to graduation time. Though Bennington was then a women's college, most of the art instructors were men—many with New York gallery affiliations—whom Hassinger felt were distanced from the experiences of the students. During those years Clement Greenberg's formalist approach dominated the art department, so instructors focused on the creation of abstract, Constructivist-inspired welded steel sculpture. Minimalism, then predominant in the New York art world, presented another model of formulaic, abstract art for students to follow. The young artist ultimately rejected such strict formal strategies, although the discipline of these methods, especially such Minimalist devices as repetition and regular arrangement, provides her work with a rational underpinning that she consciously complicates and makes more emotionally engaging.

In 1969, after graduation, Maren moved to New York City for a

few months. She took a drafting course and worked as an art editor at a publishing company, where she advised on the inclusion of images of African-Americans in textbooks, a position she has described as "demeaning."³ In 1970 she married Peter Hassinger, a writer, taking his name. They returned to Los Angeles, so that she could earn a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of California at Los Angeles (1973). She was accepted into the fiber department, because she was told that her sculpture was not strong enough. But she ultimately turned her study of fibers to great advantage in her sculpture, claiming now that "all of my work is based on that experience."⁴

In a junkyard one day during the early 1970s, Hassinger happened upon some wire rope. She soon realized that this material could be treated both sculpturally and as fiber, since it can be welded and bent, frayed and woven. Making use of its quirky characteristics, she developed sculptural methods informed by fiber techniques. She found that wire rope could be manipulated to resemble vegetation and thus serve as a useful medium for expressing ideas she was beginning to explore about nature. She was reading then the work of the Southern novelist Walker Percy, whose fiction often concerns people's struggles to live in the modern world as it becomes increasingly removed from nature.⁵ An early piece, *Wreath* (1978; Artist's Collection) consists of entwined branches and wire rope, a combination of materials suggesting the blurring of the natural and manufactured worlds.

Two exhibitions at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1973—one paintings by Agnes Martin, the other sculptures by Eva Hesse—helped refine her search.⁶ Martin's use of geometric abstraction and reductive, often monochromatic color to represent an unmediated sense of the order and texture of nature greatly impressed Hassinger, as did her ability to render experience abstractly. But it was Hesse's work that made the greatest impact. Hassinger admired the often obsessive exploration of forms and techniques in Hesse's work, and Hesse's use of fiber methods to create sculpture encouraged her own work with wire rope. Hesse's work demonstrated to her that simple forms can convey strong ideas and emotions. Hassinger recalled:

It was as if I was looking at somebody's spirit made manifest . . . it was an absolute gut level, wrenching experience . . . as if the sculpture were made flesh . . . later when I began to read about her, it was as if she had managed somehow to put all the emotional truth of her life into that piece, and it communicated that way. . . . It was a total true expression of life.⁷

Hassinger embraced abstraction for its potential to convey strong content and powerful emotions. She sought formal restraint so that her constructions would resonate deeply rather than become didactic. Nature, or the memory of a time when humanity and nature were more closely aligned, became the subject for her formal experiments—and for her materials. She liked the fact that



Fig. 1. Maren Hassinger, *On Dangerous Ground* (1981), wire rope, 21 units, approx. 4' x 3' x 3'. Los Angeles County Museum of Art Installation. Photo: Adam Avila.

nature was a primary concern of people of every culture and era. Wind in the Garden, the title of one group of early wire-rope works (and a title that recurs in her oeuvre), she was pleased to find years later was a phrase used in the Bible to refer to the breath of life.⁵

Hassinger's art is never explicit about the ideas and emotions it conjures, allowing nature to appeal with its own power. "Somehow," she believes, "within our beings, we can recall an initial experience of this idyllic natural space." And her work with gardens became, for her, "a metaphor for our shared beginnings in paradise." This stance has been described as "bearing witness," but she also sees it as regenerative: "If it's possible to look at the work and reflect, then there can be a regenerative process going on. But my work is not about going out and saying 'save the whales' or 'recycle.'"⁶ At the same time, the artist sees her own humanity as inevitably inscribed within her work:

When I make a work, all of me is contained within it. I make things that are extensions of myself that will express a basic humanness and so allow viewers their own point of entry into the work. . . . Of course I embrace the feminist struggle, of course I acknowledge the horrors of racism. . . . But my work to this point has been more about timelessness and issues of eternity. I want my work to offer an experience to look and to see, to contemplate.

As she explored wire rope and its expressive potential, Hassinger began to gather her sculptures into arrangements and installations that suggested the movement of nature and also invited viewer movement within the spaces. *Walking* (1978; Artist's Collection), for example, measured 15 feet square and consisted of bundles of wire-rope strands 2 feet high, variously splayed and frayed and arranged on the floor. As viewers navigated the room-sized installation, their movements contrasted with the arrangement and implied movement of the sculpture. *On Dangerous Ground* (1981; Fig. 1), an installation at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, evoked a more menacing vision of nature. The

piece, composed of 21 4-foot high haystacklike wire-rope sculptures, filled a narrow gallery space. Dramatic spotlighting created intense areas of gnarled shadowy spaces between the "bushes," which viewers were compelled to navigate. Conflating the dangers of nature with the urban environment they often seem separated from, the forms and random positioning of the haystacks were conceived as a "reflect[ion of] the turmoil of contemporary urban reality where one feels a sense of confusion . . . and lack of 'centeredness.'"⁷

The artist's interest in movement grew out of her continuing involvement in dance and performance. During the late 1970s, in particular, she created and participated in many movement performance pieces with colleagues in Los Angeles, further developing her boundary-crossing approach to art. By suggesting movement and including viewers within the space of her installations, she found she could enhance the relationship between viewers and objects and make more immediate the experience of nature she was trying to convey.

While living in Los Angeles, Hassinger exhibited at numerous galleries and museums in California, including the small one-person show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1981, and installed several public sculptures. She also taught at California State University, the Otis/Parsons Institute, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. When Maren was invited to be artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 1984-85, the Hassingers returned to New York City. Their daughter Ava was born in 1986, their son Jessie in 1989. Hassinger's sculpture gradually came to the attention of the New York art world. She has also continued to teach—at the School of Visual Arts, Hunter College, and at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, where she is an adjunct professor. She finds that contact and dialogue with students enriches her own work.

Hassinger has also persisted in developing a distinctive yet varied formal language using wire rope. Like process artists of the 1960s and 1970s, she focuses on the breadth of possibilities inherent in a narrow range of materials and has obtained visually rich and varied results in both outdoor and indoor works. Some resem-

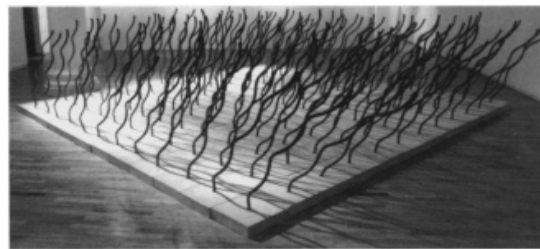


Fig. 2. Maren Hassinger, *Paradise* (1990), wire rope and concrete, 4' x 16' x 14'. Gracie Mansion Gallery Installation, New York. Photo: Robert Ransick.

ble groupings of stalks or windblown weeds. Eight-foot cascades of wire-rope clusters are evocatively called *Rain*, and in *Tall Grasses* (1989), installed on Roosevelt Island, New York, a grouping of upstanding wire-rope stalks suggests damaged, perhaps lightning-struck natural forms while evoking the lithe and sturdy bodies of dancers in motion.

The paradoxes inherent in Hassinger's work are readily apparent. Her imitations of nature are both sincere and ironic. She manipulates industrial wire rope to look like natural forms, yet these objects also retain their metallic, unnatural quality. The process of creation is quite evident, and in this sense Hassinger's work is akin to process art. Viewers can easily reconstruct the nimble movement of fingers and tools fraying, unraveling, shaping, and arranging. Although there is sometimes a suggestion of the decay, neglect, or displacement of natural forms—the result of human activity—these works also strongly insist on the constructiveness of human touch. Some critics, and even the artist herself, have described her works as expressing a sense of memory, nostalgia, or even mourning for the loss of a closer experience of nature.¹¹ Yet, these pieces also suggest nature's tenacity, survival, and even its abundance. As critic Gretchen Faust has noted, "[Hassinger's] work, in all its forms, is curious in its ability to be interpreted as monuments to an embattled environment while at the same time acting as metaphors for nature's ability to adapt itself to ecological conditions that we may not survive."¹²

It is ironic that such paradox is also found in Hassinger's works that most directly refer to Minimalism, which is generally characterized as straightforward and unparadoxical. These ironies are most evident in pieces such as *Field* (1989; AT&T Collection) and *Paradise* (1990; Fig. 2), in which Hassinger embeds wire-rope forms in blocks of concrete, which are then arranged in "minimalist" rows or grids. Despite such formal devices, there is a sense of nature unleashed. In *Field*, wire-rope stalks emerging from a large square of concrete blocks are unraveled to resemble an asymmetrical mass of tangled grass. One can imagine a harsh wind blowing, bending, and intertwining the blades. Characteristically incorporating a sense of movement and dynamism, the piece also suggests the power and fragility of nature. Critic Michael Brenson described the piece as giving "a sense of an entire field exposed to what could be an atomic wind."¹³

In *Paradise* a group of heavy, sinuous wire-rope stalks arch gracefully and gently in unison. Though organized geometrically, these gatherings of units, by multiplying

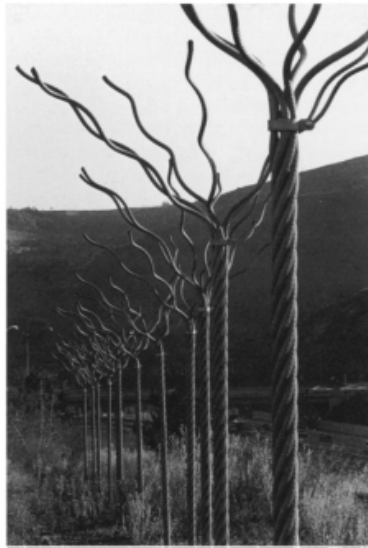


Fig. 3. Maren Hassinger, *Twelve Trees #2* (1979), wire rope, 10' x 150' x 5'. San Diego Freeway. Photo: Adam Avila.

dustrialized auto-culture. The deceptively simple visual double-entendre of this early piece is expanded in other outdoor projects. *Three Bushes* (1989; inside back cover), at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, New York, is composed of wire-rope objects resembling brittle-edged bushes. They meld visually with both the park's natural vegetation and the industrial landscape of the East

River site—as they have rusted over time, their colors suggest both autumn leaves and decaying steel.

With her indoor installations, Hassinger brings nature into the built environment. In *Heaven* (1985), installed in the art gallery at California State University, Northridge, for example, she covered the walls of a room with scented rose leaves. Though structurally simple and quite literal, the piece was sensually rich to both eye and nose, so the leaves and their surroundings became a unified environment that engulfed the viewer. Like flowers preserved between the pages of a book, the leaves evoked a sense of nostalgia.

Especially poignant and unsettling are works that combine both indoor and outdoor aspects, like *Excerpt from In a Quiet Place* (1989; Studio Museum in Harlem)—they seem displaced from any certain environment. Here stiff, branch-like wire-rope elements nestle into a pile of dark-brown dirt. Both the earthy, undeniably organic odor of the dirt and the industrial weeds at first seem out of place in a neutral gallery setting, yet they appear quite natural together.

Window Boxes, a 1993 site-specific

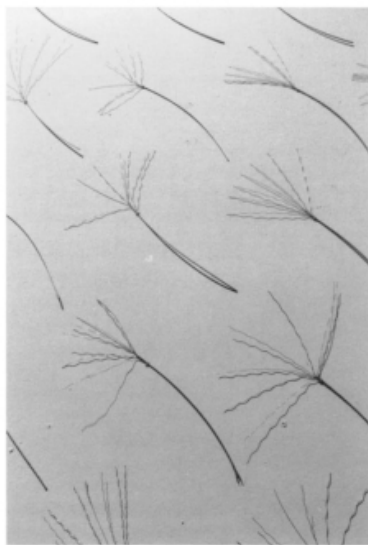


Fig. 4. Maren Hassinger, *Garden Path*, from *Treachery and Consolation* (1996), wire rope, Trans Hudson Gallery Installation, Jersey City, New Jersey. Photo: Beam Kim.

Megerian, Maureen. "Entwined with Nature-The Sculpture of Maren Hassinger," *Woman's Art Journal*, Fall 1996/Winter 1997, pp. 21-25.

project, commented on the connection and separation between indoor and outdoor environments. Created for the Sculpture Court of the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris—an area that is both exhibition space and a public gathering place at the company's midtown Manhattan headquarters—the installation consisted of 22 concrete boxes "planted" with 5-foot lengths of wire rope and placed along the ledges that line the glass walls of the court. The work at once enclosed the interior space and provided a screen between inside and outside views. The wire-rope forms both emulated and mocked the steel structures of the surrounding high-rise architecture and suggested a profound alienation from nature in the contemporary urban environment.

Window Boxes was reconfigured into *Evening Shadows* for the sculpture garden at the University Art Museum, California State University at Long Beach. Installed in their new location, the wire-rope forms both align and merge with nature, as they cast their shadows on a surrounding wall, along with those of real trees. In this work, as in many others, comments Hassinger, "Nature and art blend. The wire rope imitates and blends with nature in an uneasy coexistence to illuminate context."¹⁵

Partly as a practical measure after a 1991 family move to Long Island, where she had little studio space, Hassinger began experimenting with video. She rented editing space at a local television station and, influenced particularly by Gus van Sant's 1991 film, *My Own Private Idaho*, began to make videos that explore a sense of place and family amidst surrounding nature. Whereas previously she had used video to document her performance pieces, these new works she views as unique artworks, the medium "appropriately technical for making art at this time."

In *The Cloud Room* (1992)—one of a group of public art projects at the new Pittsburgh International Airport—Hassinger created a meditative environment where visitors can rest during their travels. The room has a curved ceiling and floor tiles that look like clouds and sky. Viewers watch a 5 x 21-foot video triptych of slowly changing cloud formations, atmospheric conditions, and light, punctuated by the sounds of wind, crickets and birds, and rolling African drums.

In *Beige* (1992), Hassinger videotaped the brown winter landscape of Long Island. Again, nature fills the screen as scene after

scene of fields, trees, and grasses become abstract in their close-up detail. Many shots were taken from the window of a moving car, which suggests both the viewer's own movement through the setting and the typical way one experiences such scenes of the suburban landscape. *Beige* begins and ends with close-up shots of a cream-colored silk scarf, delicately patterned with leaves, flowing gently in the breeze. Like a curtain rising and falling, the scarf also represents the blending of that which is natural and that made by humans. As a metaphor for Hassinger's own endeavors, this image brackets scenes of landscape and reminds us, as does all her work, that human experience and the natural world are thoroughly meshed.

Given the identity-charged milieu of the art world, Hassinger has said that because many of her works "don't necessarily talk about my African past . . . I think this is a problem for others viewing me."¹⁶ Though her work is not overt in expressing a feminist or racially based sensibility, Hassinger has spoken out about issues of gender and color:

I'm not a white male and I'm not a part of a clique, and that makes a difference. . . . I won't be bought until I'm asked to be in shows without race and gender adjectives in the title. . . . I have a basement full of work, I have pieces in the back yard, things hanging off all the walls, they're stuffed in boxes all over the place—like Louise Nevelson, perhaps. So maybe someone will discover me, too. Maybe they'll look in my bathtub.¹⁷

Yet, in the same interview, Hassinger ultimately asserted her conviction that persistence in creating art works, even against the odds of recognition, is its own reward.

However, the three-part 1996 installation, *Treachery and Consolation*, at Jersey City's Trans Hudson Gallery, combined cross-currents of grievance and redemption with her characteristic formal approach: it is a metaphoric evocation of her art-world experiences. Outdoors, *Garden Path* (1996; Fig. 4), a row of foot-high wire-rope stems, led into the gallery, where the wire-rope bundles of *Treachery* were suspended from the ceiling and punctuated by dramatic lighting. Similar in form to *Walking* (1978), these bundles cast menacing shadows, suggesting spiders or hanging bodies

Scarecrow Press is Pleased to Present...

Abstract Expressionist Women Painters

An Annotated Bibliography

Françoise S. Puniello and Halina R. Rusak
1996 372 pp. • 0-8108-2998-3 \$55.00

While there have been many tools that cover women artists in general, this is the first to cover artists in depth. The six women represented in this bibliography—Elaine de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, and Ethel Schwabacher—were in the forefront of the American Art movement as the center of the art world shifted from Paris to New York. They left a lasting impression on the American art scene, and two of them, Frankenthaler and Hartigan, continue as major forces in the art community. Annotations are given for books, catalogs, and journal articles. An excellent resource for libraries, museums, and departments of art history and women studies.



Scarecrow Press
4720 Boston Way • Lanham, MD 20706
(800) 462-6420

Lives and Works

Talks with Women Artists, Volume II

Sally Shearer Swenson, Joan Arbeiter, and Beryl Smith
Fall 1996 280 pp. • 0-8108-3153-8 \$58.00

In this collection of refreshingly candid interviews, women artists talk about their lives and works, revealing the costs and the rewards of following a path that has led them to recognition. The aim of the volume is to continue to document the women's movement in art and the way it has affected the artists who are a part of that movement. Unlike other books, however, the perspective is from the point of view of the artists themselves, rather than from historians or critics. The artists are Doty Attie, Nancy Azara, Cathey Billian, Agnes Denes, Patricia Lay, Charlotte Robinson, Ce Roser, Miriam Schapiro, Mimi Smith, Joan Snyder, Judith Solodkin, Kay WalkingStick, Faith Wilding, and Jackie Winsor. Biographical information and a selected bibliography are included for each artist.

threatening to descend. *Consolation*, on the other hand, was a brilliantly lit wall grid of gently fanned wire-rope fronds. So the "garden path" of artistic integrity led to a place of peril and threat, but also ultimately to Hassinger's familiar evocation of a gardenlike paradise. As the artist describes it, "The *Consolation* section was intentionally, incredibly seductive and beautiful. Beauty is the only consolation for making art."

Hassinger's most recent work, a design for a mural, *Message from Malcolm*, for the 110th Street and Malcolm X Boulevard subway station sponsored by New York City's "Arts in Transit" program, has set her on a new course. As part of her research, she re-read Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*¹⁸ and discovered a fascinating relationship between her treatment of wire rope and the ancient written language of the Ejagham people of Cameroon and Nigeria. She incorporated some of these ideograms into her mural designs. She also feels there is a potent connection between her nature-based work and this latest project: "I realize I've been having an unconscious dialogue with my past, as well as conscious dialogue with materials. I'm involved with a tradition that is beyond my time in history. If you're honest about your work, you'll acknowledge that there are recesses of meaning you can't always know."

In contrast to the frequently shrill insistence of much current art, the power of Maren Hassinger's work lies in its ability to quietly prompt thought and suggest memories. Critic Maurice Berger claims Hassinger's strategies to place viewers in the midst of her work accords them "a considerable degree of prestige" and a ripe opportunity to reflect on both the state of nature and their relationship to the aesthetic object at hand.¹⁹ Her works are both understated and powerfully suggestive; they allow for immediate visual enjoyment as well as contemplation. ●

NOTES

1. For example, "The Decade Show" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990; "Transformations and Traditions: Contemporary Afro-American Sculpture" at the Bronx Museum, 1989; and "The Appropriate Object," a traveling exhibition organized by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1989; "Maren Hassinger 1972-1991" at the Hillwood Art Museum, Long Island University/C.W. Post Campus; "Window Boxes" at the Whitney

Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, 1993; "Maren Hassinger: Treachery and Consolation" at Trans Hudson Gallery, Jersey City, 1996.

2. All biographical information and direct quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from the author's numerous conversations with the artist since 1991.

3. "Maren Hassinger, Visual Artist" [interview with Lorraine O'Grady], in *Artist and Influence* (New York: Hatch-Billops Collection, 1993), 23.

4. *Ibid.*, 24.

5. See Maurice Berger, "The Weeds Smell Like Iron": The Environments of Maren Hassinger," in *Maren Hassinger 1972-1991* (Brookville, N.Y.: Hillwood Art Museum, Long Island University, 1991), 3.

6. The exhibitions were "Agnes Martin," April 3-May 27, 1973 (organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia), and "Eva Hesse: A Memorial Exhibition," September 18-November 11, 1973 (organized by the Guggenheim Museum, New York).

7. O'Grady interview, 25.

8. See Northrup Frye, *Words With Power: Being a Second Study of "The Bible and Literature"* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1990), 202.

9. O'Grady interview, 28.

10. Berger, "Weeds," 6.

11. See, for example, Beryl Wright, *The Appropriate Object* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1989), 13.

12. Gretchen Faust, "Review," *Arts* (February 1990), 96.

13. Michael Brenson, "Quiet Art Need Not Be Boring or Wimpish," *New York Times*, November 26, 1989, H43.

14. Michael Brenson, "Black Artists: A Place in the Sun," *New York Times*, March 12, 1989, H36.

15. "Excerpts from a Conversation with Maren Hassinger," in Constance W. Glenn, ed., *Reconfiguring Boundaries/Defining Spaces* (Long Beach, Calif.: University Art Museum, 1994), 9.

16. O'Grady interview, 29.

17. "Making Art, Making Money" (interview with Lilly Weij), *Art in America* (July 1990), 137-38.

18. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 227-68, esp. 244-45, and pl. 152.

19. Berger, "Weeds," 8.

Maureen Megerian is an art historian and curator at Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York.

HELENA HALE

ONE-WOMAN THEATRE

SPOTLIGHTING SIGNIFICANT WOMEN ARTISTS

O'Keeffe/Nevelson, Cassatt, Gentileschi (805) 569-0506 803 Paseo Alicante, Santa Barbara, Ca. 93103

ADAPTABLE TO ALL SPACES

Hale's performances bring to dazzling life the personality and art of some of the pre-eminent artists of all time. SANTA BARBARA MUSEUM OF ART

Megerian, Maureen. "Entwined with Nature-The Sculpture of Maren Hassinger," *Woman's Art Journal*, Fall 1996/Winter 1997, pp. 21-25.



REMEDIOS VARO

The Lovers (1963), oil on board, 29½" x 11¾". Courtesy Walter Gruen.

MAREN HASSINGER

Three Bushes (1989), wire rope, each bush 8' x 7' x 7'. det. Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York.

