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The Relentless Efforts of Maren Hassinger Result in an Overdue Retrospective

Maren Hassinger's retrospective *The Spirit of Things* at the Baltimore Museum of Art not only validates her career but indicates something about our current political moment.

Cara Ober



Maren Hassinger, "Embrace/ Love" (2008/2018) (pink plastic bags inflated with human breath) with "Birthright" (2005), video) (image courtesy of the artist)

BALTIMORE — It is unusual to hear loud peals of laughter echoing through a museum. As artist Hugh Pocock walked up the stairs to view Maren Hassinger's *The Spirit of Things* — a retrospective of sculpture, video, drawing, and photo documentation of performances at the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) — the voices grew louder and more joyful. As he turned the corner, he found nine African-American women wearing nine different shades of red and pink dresses and skirts, assembled in front of Hassinger's glowing pink installation, "Embrace/Love," to celebrate a birthday.

They had planned a photo shoot, coordinating their outfits and hats with Hassinger's sculpture, which encircled the gallery, filled with human breath-inflated hot pink shopping bags, each containing the printed word "Love." Like a horizontal balloon arch, Hassinger's site-specific piece created a welcoming space for this multi-generational group of women to create and capture a memory together, posing in a boisterous, pink-on-pink entourage.

Pocock, a former colleague of the artist's at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), asked for permission to take a photo to send to her. "I knew she would really appreciate it," he said. "This wasn't your typical museum experience. They had brought wardrobe changes and were having a great time. Maren's work had inspired them."

"Emotionally, it was a big moment for me," said Hassinger later by phone. "That these women felt welcome in this environment and made use of it for their own purposes, to celebrate an occasion, is a validation of the art that I make."



A group of museum visitors pose in front of "Embrace/ Love" (2008/2018) at the BMA (photo by Hugh Pocock)

Hassinger should know. Since the 1970s she has been making ambitious sculptural works that reference nature and equality, but her opportunities to exhibit those works in museums has been few and far between — until recently. After a retrospective at Spellman College in 2015, inclusion in *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-1985* at multiple locations in 2017, and a 2018 mini-retrospective at Art + Practice (A+P) in Los Angeles curated by BMA curator of contemporary art and department head, Kristen Hileman, she was invited for

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a spring solo show at the Susan Inglett Gallery in Chelsea. (Susan Inglett informed me that she had developed her relation with and appreciation for Hassinger after including her in several group shows beginning in 2013, and that they had planned the spring 2018 solo exhibition far in advance of her appearance at A+P and the BMA.) The gallery has recently announced representation of Hassinger.



Installation view of *The Spirit of Things* at Baltimore Museum of Art (photo by the author)

Her current exhibition at the BMA, curated by Hileman, features many of the same works in the smaller A+P space and lays it out expansively, a luxurious retrospective that features performances, drawings, video, and the large sculptural installations made of the *New York Times* newspaper, rope, wire, and plastic bags that the artist has become widely known for. Hassinger cites Hileman's interest, and the opportunities that were generated after the original A+P show, as the impetus for her recent projects. However, one can argue that Hassinger's presence at the BMA also functions as validation for its recent claims of changes to curatorial and acquisition policies in the past year as well, including the controversial announcement of the deaccessioning of seven works by historically vetted White male artists in order to buy art by women and artists of color — including some based in Baltimore.

Until recent exhibitions in 2017 and 2018, the Baltimore museum had only hosted one major show by a female, African-American, or Baltimore-based artist in the previous two decades: Joyce J. Scott in 2000. This recent tide of exhibitions of previously marginalized artists has reached a perfect crest with Maren Hassinger and *The Spirit of Things*. The 71-year old artist, who loosely fits all three categories of previous relegation, is now based in New York, but was the director of the Rinehart School of Graduate Sculpture, an MFA program at MICA, for the previous twenty years and based in Baltimore for much of that time. Hassinger had exhibited at the BMA in 2008 in a group show of finalists for the annual \$25,000 Sondheim Prize for a regional visual artist. She had also worked with BMA Educators Jessica Braiterman and Peggy Sell in 2012 on an interactive performance involving Hassinger's students that resulted in an installation that was on view for several months at the museum. Additionally, Hileman had done critiques with Hassinger's students over the years. However, the opportunity to explore the entirety of Hassinger's work in a solo exhibition did not materialize until more recently.

When asked about the reasons behind her many current high-profile projects, Hassinger is humble. "I don't really believe that the position I am in is based entirely on the work I have been doing, but based on the moment we are currently in," she says.

The BMA is now trying to include the political and social currents of our time, especially work that has been long overlooked, and to figure out how to make its collection representative of the times we are living in now.



Maren Hassinger, "The Veil Between Us" (2007/2018) (on wall) Courtesy of the Artist and Susan Inglett Gallery in foreground and "Whirling" (1978) (on floor) Morgan State University: The James E. Lewis Museum of Art, Baltimore

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Hassinger says that when Kristen Hileman approached her for a studio visit two years ago in 2016, she apologized for not coming sooner. "I think she had been interested in my work for a long time but didn't have the opportunity to pursue it until more recently," said Hassinger. "Kristen wanted to create a retrospective that linked my work from Baltimore to Los Angeles, where I started my career."

Hileman has previously curated posthumous exhibitions of Anne Truitt's work, both as a retrospective at the Hirshhorn and a smaller exhibition at the BMA, as well as shows featuring the work of Baltimore-based artists Seth Adelsberger and Gaia, LA-based Njideka Akunyili Crosby, and a fall 2018 John Waters retrospective. Although this may not seem radical, within the context of the museum's history it proves a forward-thinking vision that is slowly becoming mainstream at an institution interested in becoming locally and globally relevant.

Hileman is clear about recognizing the efforts of her predecessors: "It's not that the BMA has been willfully neglectful in diversifying its collection and exhibitions," she says.

In fact, my curatorial colleagues have been actively committed to supporting women artists, artists of color, and local artists for more than 40 years. For instance, Anne Truitt, who grew up in Maryland and lived in Washington DC, has had multiple solo shows at the BMA, the earliest in 1969. But we have been limited by resources. It's an empowering moment for everyone to be able to bring new and expanded resources, including increased public awareness, to this essential goal. And I'm especially happy that it has allowed me to work with Maren, whom I've admired since I was a curator based in Arlington and DC in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The struggle for museums to exhibit and collect anyone but internationally recognized White, male artists is not unique to Baltimore and Hassinger's career reflects it. At almost every stage she was marginalized by way of issues of race, sex, and her nontraditional approach to fine art materials, but managed to use the rejection that she endured to become a stronger artist, poised for a dramatic moment in the current spotlight.

Hassinger, an LA native, started out as a dancer. "I tried to major in dance at Bennington College, but they didn't accept me," she says of her undergraduate experience. "Even though I had taken years of dance, I was not good enough for Bennington's Dance Department." Fortunately, Hassinger found sculpture at that point through Isaac Witkin and drawing with Pat Adams. "I was surprised by their acceptance because I had been much more serious about dance," she says. For her thesis, the department provided an outdoor enclosed meadow to exhibit large sculptures.



Maren Hassinger "Diaries" (1978) documentation photo by Adam Avila with the artist (courtesy the artist)

After college, she returned to Los Angeles, only to be rejected by UCLA's MFA Sculpture program. "After all my focus on sculpture, UCLA's graduate sculpture department did not accept me. It reminded me of what happened at Bennington, with dance." However, UCLA had just founded a new graduate program called Fiber Structure and it needed students. The director and acclaimed designer Bernard Kester accepted Hassinger and she became the first MFA from that program.

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Again, rejection led to innovation. "I was forced to invent something completely new," she says.

The history of sculpture was a sort of closed idea at that point, ruled by Anthony Caro and David Smith and I was not like either of them. In the fiber program, the field was wide open for innovation and ultimately a very good thing for me. This led to my own first professional body of work using wire rope.

Hassinger got married in 1970 and earned her MFA in 1973. She got a studio and started teaching part time in Los Angeles. Her wire rope sculpture work was featured in 1980 in an LA County Museum show called *On Dangerous Ground*. She recalls being told that it was overhung with too much work by someone who worked at the museum, but that he didn't get it – it was deliberately supposed to be crowded. "It was an installation with dangerous looking bushes that would poke and prod you if you came too close," she says. "The whole point was that a museum is a dangerous ground for artists, especially artists like me."

At that time, Hassinger also started collaborating with Senga Nengudi, whose nylon pantyhose sculptures were used as props by dancers like Hassinger, who performed wearing Nengudi's pieces. "Senga was a young mother and we had a mutual artist friend. We were both ambitious and were doing the best we could to keep our hands in the game. Senga knows how to build community." Interestingly, both women's careers have coincided again, with both showing in the past year at A+P and the Baltimore Museum of Art.

In 1982, Hassinger created "Pink Trash," her second installation that relied upon hot pink, the only hue that she has used consistently over the years. "For me the color pink is not about being a woman, but more about choosing a color with the power to compete with the green of nature." In her first pink piece she painted paths pink in an abandoned neighborhood in Lynwood, California in a project sponsored by CalArts students. Hassinger's pink trash interventions were enacted in three NYC parks sponsored by Art Across the Park in 1982. In Central Park, she removed piles of weekend litter from field and replaced it with pink trash – a striking contrast to the green of the grass. A park visitor said it looked like fallen leaves! She returned the next day to take pictures and the entire fifty-by-fifty foot field had been picked clean. "It was the color that made the cleaners fastidious," she says. For Hassinger, color became another building block with palpable content that also carries a social message.



Maren Hassinger, "Pink Trash" (1976) Pink plastic shopping bags, each filled with a love note and inflated with human breath, (courtesy the artist, photograph by Horace Brockington)

In 1984, Hassinger was accepted by the Studio Museum of Harlem, as an Artist in Residence and she moved to New York and has since remained on the east coast. "I wanted to live in New York because art of all kinds was serious there," she says. "I was finally in a place where my practice could be respected. In LA, at that time, you could say you were an artist and made sculpture and people would just blankly look at you."

After a few years in suburban East Hampton, New York, where she had two children, got divorced, and commuted to an adjunct teaching job at SUNY Stony Brook, Hassinger was offered a full-time job in 1997 as the Director of the Rinehart School of Graduate Sculpture at MICA in Baltimore. "I needed the job," she admits.

I made an attempt to better my future, and I got the job after one interview. Later, when I arrived to teach at Rinehart, I think students were disappointed because I was a woman and a person of color. I did not look like the sculptors they admired.

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"When I came to Baltimore, that idea of patriarchal patronage was still huge," she says.

Particularly in sculpture, you had to be an upper-middle-class White guy to be a successful sculptor. That was the deal. And I realize that much of my success, whatever it is, is due to the fact that there's been a change, albeit not total, but a historic change in the way that women and POC are seen as integral to society. We have value.



Maren Hassinger, "Ocean Savanna Rivers Dreaming Floating" (2007) pen and black ink on paper (courtesy the artist and Susan Inglett Gallery)

Despite her initial misgivings about moving away from New York, Hassinger settled in and raised her children as a single mother. For twenty years she has mentored graduate students who have gone on to successful careers, and she cites the changing demographics of the students in her program as part of her success. "I am leaving Rinehart in a healthy place," she says, having just retired from her directorship in the spring of 2018. "After twenty years, the program attracts a diverse range of applications and now around a third of the students come from all over the world. It's been a good thing."

Hassinger moved back to Harlem after her children finished high school in Baltimore. "The kids moved on to NYU and Yale (with scholarships). So, don't let folks tell you stories about public education in Baltimore. It's a system that needs work, but it's possible to excel ..." Hassinger has just recently expanded her practice to a large Harlem studio. Of her two decades spent teaching in Baltimore, she says:

There were periods when I wasn't making a lot of work, or making the greatest work, but never stopped. Even though I was focused on parenting and teaching and in Baltimore, I was always aiming for the highest ground I possibly could. After my kids grew up and moved away I realized, OK – I have to leave now. It's time to step it up. I sold my house for a tiny 750 square foot apartment, which included my studio. I never gave up. It's just something inside of me, I'm just not done yet.

Over her two decades in Baltimore, Hassinger exhibited works intermittently but discovered two primary materials that she continues to work with today: pink plastic shopping bags and *The New York Times* newspaper. "For me, these everyday materials repurposed into art materials are alchemical and are about movement," she explains.

The NYT is the paper of record, a material that represents all of us in it. At first, I thought that using these disposable materials that often become trash was about the vanishing of nature in my lifetime. But it's not just about that, it's about how we as people react to that change. It's understanding how and why nature is threatened. How a few control so many ... this work is about the idea that humans are more similar than different, and to survive we have to work together and value equality, to love one another. I want to use materials that deliberately contain and relate to everyone, so it's about a collective consciousness.

In *The Spirit of Things* Hassinger's earliest wire rope sculpture works sit next to her most recent pieces, large mandalas of twisted newspaper and works like "Love/ Embrace" that cover multiple walls and surround the viewer. "Sculpture to me is about being expressive in the dimension we also walk in," she says. "This can mean a

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lot of different things to different people, and I am thrilled to see people interacting with my work in the museum." With video and photographic documentation of recent and historic performance collaborations like "Wind," (2013) created with Ava Hassinger, the artist's daughter, the artist's oeuvre feels cohesive, as if all the disparate bodies of work, including sculpture, drawings, and video, fit together into a neat conceptual puzzle. Even the three tiny drawings, each filled with repeating cursive words to create a pattern, reference the wire rope sculpture in the previous gallery and hold their own on a giant white wall.



Maren Hassinger, "Wrenching News" (2009/2016) (left); New York Times Newspapers, (courtesy of the artist and Susan Inglett gallery); "Interlock" (1972-1973) (right) wire rope (courtesy the artist and Susan Inglett gallery)

"When Kristen came to look at my work two years ago, I had framed photographs leaning against the wall, where wall and floor connect, low so you have to look down," she recalls. "Kristen actually got down on one knee to look at them, but she didn't know that I had called these pieces "Genuflect."" The works featured images appropriated from the *New York Times* and local New Orleans papers — stories from the previous summer about racial strife and community leaders standing up against police brutality.

"These people were like saints," Hassinger says, of the individuals depicted in the photos. "And you genuflect before saints. When I saw Kristen approach them in this way, it blew me away and I thought, this is the curator for me. And now that my exhibit [sic] has coincided with new leadership at the museum, well it's wonderful."

Kristen invited me to be in those shows and now I am exhibiting at a level I have never reached before. Susan Inglett asked me to be a part of her gallery and I have so many new opportunities ahead of me. When I was in Los Angeles for the A+P show I had lunch with Mark Bradford, and his advice was to do as much as I could. And I am. I am going crazy, but I am doing it because there's so much I have to do.



Ava Hassinger, Maren Hassinger, and Curator Kristen Hileman in front of Embrace/ Love, 2008/2018 (pink plastic bags inflated with human breath) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

With a new studio space, new gallery representation, a yearlong public art exhibition, "Maren Hassinger: Monuments," (2018) in Harlem at Marcus Garvey Park, and abundant artist talks and projects on the horizon, Hassinger says, "Even though I am retired with limited income, I am starting to see income coming in from the work. I am hopeful and truly grateful to be in the place I am now. I've survived at a difficult task and so can you."

Editor's note: The author has amended the piece to make more clear the development of the relationship between Susan Inglett gallery and Maren Hassinger.

The Spirit of Things continues at the Baltimore Museum of Art (10 Art Museum Drive, Baltimore, MD) through November 25. The exhibition was organized by BMA Senior Curator of Contemporary Art Kristen Hileman.