

Uszerowicz, Monica. "A Maren Hassinger Installation Blossoms From a 'Tree of Knowledge' Rooted in a Majority Black Florida Town," *Hyperallergic*, 18 February 2020.

HYPERALLERGIC



Maren Hassinger's Tree of Knowledge at the Boca Raton Museum of Art, curated by Kathleen Goncharov (all images courtesy of the Boca Raton Museum of Art)

Boca Raton, FL – When George Ashley Long – land agent of Florida East Coast Railway developer Henry Flagler – plotted Pearl City in coastal South Florida, it was a three-block patch of land designed to house the Black families who worked on nearby farms. The surrounding and today predominantly white neighborhood of Boca Raton wouldn't be incorporated until 1924, nearly a decade later. Alex Hughes, one of Boca's Black pioneers, is considered Pearl City's first resident; he purchased a lot for \$25, working daily at the Chesebro farm, building a home and tending a garden with his family. In *Pearl City, Florida: A Black Community Remembers*, authors Arthur S. Evans Jr. and David Lee suggest the origin of the community's name might be its streets – there was Pearl, Ruby, Sapphire – the neighborhood's first born baby, or the Hawaiian pearl pineapple, which was processed through the city along its shipping route.



The "Tree of Knowledge"

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Today, the neighborhood is mostly populated by the descendants of its first inhabitants; its oldest resident is the Tree of Knowledge, a towering banyan located on what's now Glades Road. Decades ago, the tree functioned as a meetinghouse, a space for shade in a Florida without air conditioning. "There were all sorts of stories, all sorts of conversation exchanged under the tree," Amos Jackson, who was born in the neighborhood, told the *Sun Sentinel* in 1992. In the spring of that year, the tree was designated a historic landmark by the city's Beautification Committee, saving it from a potential leveling by the Florida Department of Transportation. The tree was and is a living metaphor, to say something of roots – which, in banyans, grow downward from the treetop and engulf their periphery.

When she visited last winter to prepare for an exhibition at the Boca Raton Museum of Art, the artist Maren Hassinger was taken with the Tree of Knowledge, lingering there for a long time. Now based in New York, Hassinger's career began officially in the avant-garde scene of 1970s Los Angeles; she has long been drawn to trees, to their metaphors. "I looked at the neighborhood and I looked at the tree, and then I went home and thought a little bit," she tells me. Hers is a slow way of speaking, and of working; Hassinger likes to take her time. Later in our conversation, she reveals that recent outside and overdue attention to her career is both exciting and discomfiting. "What worries me is being able to properly devote myself to the inspiration of work," she explains. "I'm working so much that I don't get to sit with it and figure it out."



Maren Hassinger with Pearl City students who helped create the *Tree of Knowledge* installation

Hassinger returned in the spring to visit the city's Historical Society and meet the neighborhood's descendants. "The city started here," she says. "All of these fabulous mansions and wealth and green lawns – that all happened after the fact. People in Boca should know that. They should know it was Black people who started it."

Her research culminated in an installation now on view at the museum, *Tree of Knowledge*. A ceiling-height simulacrum of the titular banyan, the tree's "roots" are composed of twisted, flowing rolls of newspaper, knotted and swaying from the ceiling and stretching into the first floor's main hallway – a decision she attributes to the museum's preparator. You might walk through the tendrils, or take them in at a distance.

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Installation of *Tree of Knowledge*

When I met Hassinger at the show, it had only been open a week, and locals were still visiting for the first time. One member of the Boca Raton Beautification Committee was enamored with the work, and Hassinger thanked her, reiterating that it was a collaborative effort. Most of the twists were made by the public at several community workshops, a few of which the artist taught herself, and you can see the work of many hands: in the roots made at a workshop comprised solely of Pearl City children, there are no knots; they are corkscrewed like vines. "Square knots were a new concept for the kids," she explains. "But pretty much everybody understood twisting." It is the same communal twining used in her participatory performance *Women's Work* (2006), the same contours in the wire ropes of *On Dangerous Ground* (1981) – shapes and materials that recall equally the environment, power structures, and labor.

"It's not always part of my work, but I realize where it comes from," Hassinger says. "When my daughter was born, I could see the umbilical cord, gray and twisted. The shape is like a DNA spiral. All of these things are embedded in us. To make this whole piece out of this twisting – compulsive twisting – seems appropriate."



Coiled newspapers that made up the *Tree of Knowledge* installation

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In *Tree of Knowledge*, the tree and the community are inextricable. When I ask Hassinger if she sees the tree as a kind of witness to the neighborhood, she nods: "The people and the tree are intertwined. When I got out of graduate school, I thought to myself, *What's important to make work about?* Nature came to me – the vanishing of nature, in particular. The climate crisis wasn't a big thing in 1973, but you could feel it coming." Hassinger began working with materials she was familiar with – paper and wire rope, branches and leaves.



Love at the Boca Raton Museum of Art

Wind your way through the paper banyan and you'll find Hassinger's video *Wind* (2014), a collaboration with the artist's daughter Ava and Nicholas Buchanan, projected on the wall, along with documentary photos from her work "Twelve Trees" (1979) – a series of tree-shaped wire roping on Mulholland Drive – and "Pink Trash" (1982), in which she collected bits of white trash, painted them pink, and placed them back on the grass. In an adjacent installation at the museum, *Love*, Hassinger has filled a room with hot-pink plastic bags, each containing a love note. "The idea was shopping bags filled with love and light – and if that if you walk amongst them, you become pink, from the darkest-hued skin to the lightest." (She regrets using plastic, "something that's part of the reason the earth is dying," and plans to avoid the material in the future.)

Hassinger intimates nature, basks in it, cleans and decorates it; how we care for the land, she purports, is bound by how we treat each other – hegemonic power structures that fuel racism, sexism, and classism are environmentally noxious. "I really believe in equality as a way of achieving the goals that we need to keep the earth together, so it doesn't die on us. I don't think the kind of division we have now, based on skin color and gender and who has the most money – I don't think that's going to work anymore." She adds that the art world "finally wants to talk about racism and sexism openly," referring to the import of publicly acknowledging such cruelties to better extirpate them.

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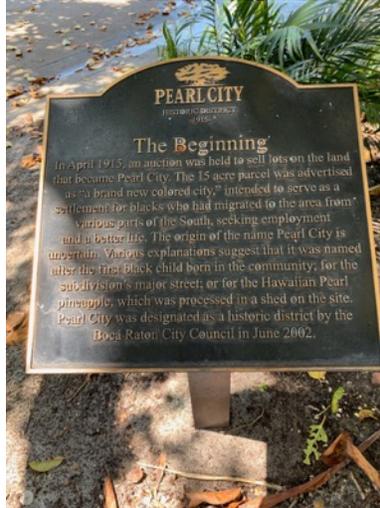
Next to the Tree of Knowledge is a scrolling LED plaque featuring the names of every volunteer who made roots; in a proximate corner, there are video interviews with Pearl City's longtime residents, recorded in 1999 and archived by the Historical Society. "On Sunday, three or four residents came," Hassinger relays. "They were calling their friends and family, saying they'd better come over, because someone's aunt, grandmother, or mother was being interviewed [on the screen]."

I ask Hassinger again about the inherent physiological connection between a community and its landscape – between the roots of a tree and whomever first tended them. "There absolutely is [that connection]," she insists. "In the beginning, there wasn't any of this division. We are nature. What else is there?"



A plaque at the site of the banyan tree

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Maren Hassinger: *Tree of Knowledge* continues at the Boca Raton Museum of Art (501 Plaza Real, Boca Raton, FL) through March 1. The exhibition was curated by Kathleen Goncharov.