

Ickes, Charlotte and Dorothy Moss. "Artist Maren Hassinger Has Spent Her Entire Career Mediating the Current Moment," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 9 September 2020.

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Hassinger's film (above: *Birthright* by Maren Hassinger, 2005) is a powerful history of seven orphaned children, a story of stolen labor and stolen lives, a family chronicle "that came out of being enslaved, the aftermath of slavery," says the artist. (Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC)

The Harlem-based artist Maren Hassinger is known for work that spans performance, installation, sculpture and video. She sees the natural world as a reminder of our shared purpose. On October 19, Hassinger's *Monument*, an installation inspired by its location and woven with the help of volunteers from local tree branches cut to size (supported by a wire and steel armature), will go on view in an outdoor setting in Washington, D.C.'s historic Dupont Circle neighborhood.

The project comes at a time when both righteous reckoning and healing take on an increased urgency following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and Tony McDade and the subsequent and ongoing Black Lives Matter protests. In a city of historic memorials, Hassinger's appropriately titled, *Monument* is in fact part of the changing landscape of new installations arising in urban centers. As Confederate statues are being questioned or removed because of their histories grounded in racial violence and white supremacy, Hassinger's *Monument*, in contrast, quietly and resiliently responds. Her work provides context to initiate the process of justice and healing. *Monument* is a call to action in its fundamental message of transformation, rooted in a collaborative process of volunteers working with recycled materials in the creation of art.

The project, a partnership between the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative (AWHI) and the Golden Triangle Business Improvement District, is the first public work to go on view in a series that will feature outdoor sculptures of self-identified women artists from around the country, including an installation by the artist Rania Hassan, among others.



On October 19, Hassinger's *Monument*, (above: *Monument 1, Corner #1* by Maren Hassinger, 2018) will go on view in Washington, D.C.'s historic Dupont Circle neighborhood. (Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC)

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*Monument* was initially commissioned by The Studio Museum for Harlem's Marcus Garvey Park, where "Maren Hassinger: Monuments" premiered in June 2018 as part of a series of eight outdoor sculptures designed to provide a space for community introspection and reflection. The park is frequented by picnickers and joggers, and in the summer months, families make their way to the pool for a swim. The series of sculptures quietly responded to the site, and existed in the landscape peacefully and cohesively.

This year in Washington, D.C., the work shifts in focus, and significance. Hassinger's D.C. *Monument* will be a single sculpture situated on an overpass above the city's well-trafficked Connecticut Avenue. Prior to the global pandemic, the area was a thriving restaurant, arts and shopping district, but now the neighborhood is seeing many closed storefronts. Makeshift tents have sprung up, where people have congregated who have no home or a place to sleep. In this context, in concert with the surrounding buildings, pavement and concrete, *Monument* recalls one of Hassinger's important dictums: "We are all passing through. From this untenable place, I make things." *Monument's* new site specificity beckons us. Hassinger asks the viewer to "imagine your eyes travel[ing] upward towards the sky, and in that gesture, there is hope."

The companion presentation of Hassinger's 2005 video *Birthright*, via a live Zoom screening on October 7, will help to inform viewers and set the scene for the artist's outdoor installation. The 12-minute documentary-style film, about the artist's search for information about the paternal side of her family that eventually left Louisiana for Los Angeles during the Great Migration, begins with a close-up of the artist's hands, assuredly twisting the torn pages of recycled newspaper. She manipulates the material while narrating: "My legacy was to feel unloved, and it's interesting to think how that legacy came down to me. . ."



The Harlem-based artist Maren Hassinger is known for work that spans performance, installation, sculpture and video. (Grace Roselli, Pandora's BoxX Project)

The story develops around a central encounter between the artist and her uncle James, whom she is meeting for the first time. The quiet, but intense unfolding of the family's complex history is captured on camera by the artist Donna Conlon, one of Hassinger's students at the time. The artist's father never acknowledged that he had siblings and for decades he

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intentionally kept his daughter in the dark. Every year, however, Christmas cards would arrive from someone named James.

The busy activity of Hassinger's hands twisting newspaper becomes a proxy for tracing the twists and turns of her family's history in *Birthright*. The meditative endeavor helps her to process what she is learning about her family. "Trauma gets passed on. People are *twisted* by it," Hassinger says, drawing on the metaphorical power of what the artist calls an "umbilical cord" that connects us on a wrenched, rather than straight, path to our past, a path that ultimately brought the artist from Baltimore to St. Louis to locate James, the uncle, who for so many years, she never knew she had.

In the film, she is seen holding a small portrait of two young boys as she asks "which one is my father?" She scrambles to write down the story of her paternal grandmother whose father was hung as punishment for his relationship with his half-aunt, the white daughter of an enslaver and mother of the artist's grandmother. Hassinger concludes that her grandmother "gave all her kids away," including the artist's father and his siblings, after being "given away" herself. After her father's murder, she was placed in the care of a man who had been enslaved by her grandfather. Hassinger recalls how her own father, after she was cut out of his will, stated that he was "giving her away."



Next year, *Birthright* will be screened at the outset in the museum's historic Great Hall and participants are invited to twist newspapers (above: *Women's Work* by Maren Hassinger, 2006/2012) with the artist while sharing family stories. (Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC)

The film asks the viewer to consider the nature of birthright when your inheritance constitutes not necessarily property or wealth but a history of racial terrorism and white supremacy that is both singular and shared. *Birthright* is a powerful history of seven orphaned children, a story of stolen labor and stolen lives, a family chronicle "that came out of being enslaved, the aftermath of slavery," says Hassinger. But also one of reunion.

Her story is an American history and inheritance, something her uncle James reminds us of in the video when he asserts: "it only takes one family. . . to bring this into focus."

As an outgrowth of *Birthright*, which the artist refers to as a "portrait of a Black family," Hassinger is also scheduled for a performance next May at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. *Birthright* will be screened at the outset as participants assemble in a circle in the museum's historic Great Hall and are invited to twist newspapers with the artist while sharing family stories.

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The busy activity of Hassinger's hands (above: *Birthright* by Maren Hassinger, 2005) twisting newspaper becomes a proxy for tracing the twists and turns of her family's history. (Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC)

In an act characteristic of the artist's collaborative spirit and generosity, Hassinger is offering her family's story as an invitation to meditate on "who we are, where we are, where we came from, and where we're going." It also represents a monumental departure from the standard fare of a national portrait museum that has long privileged the histories of mostly wealthy white men in a narrow focus of American history that has left out the stories of others like Hassinger's. The artist's presence and performance in the museum is a quiet demand to consider how a lived family history like her own—passed down orally and remembered from generation to generation—circulates so often unacknowledged within museums and haunts the official historical record museums preserve.

Whose history is being told, Hassinger's performance asks us, whose history do we have the right to tell, and how can we decolonize the way we tell history? Can we imagine the future we want ("where we're going") without reckoning with our past ("where we came from")?

"Nobody seems to acknowledge that that's why America is powerful now because it had that whole free workforce for 300 years," Hassinger says at the beginning of the video, "it became the most powerful nation in the world on the backs of slave labor."



*Our Lives* by Maren Hassinger, 2008/2018 (Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC)

The performance also asks "where we are?" The question becomes ever more acute during this moment of uncertainty, anger and grief and as people take to the streets demanding the dismantling of white supremacy and universal recognition that Black Lives Matter.

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One further note. Hassinger's performance was originally scheduled for June of 2020 but was pushed back due to the global pandemic and the closing of the Smithsonian museums. Collected throughout this consequential year, the newspapers represent how the world has, in many ways, fundamentally changed. The news has been a crucial source of vital information and, at the same time, unending anxiety. When people come together to twist and wring the papers, we give ourselves not an opportunity to forget, reconcile, or erase what's reflected in the news but rather, in Hassinger's words, to find a moment to "quiet ourselves."

*Join New York-based artist Maren Hassinger October 7, 2020 at 5:30 p.m. for an online screening of her video "Birthright" (2005), sponsored by the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative. During the virtual event, Hassinger will teach attendees how to twist newspaper, a meditative ritual she performs throughout the course of the video. Attendees are encouraged to bring their own newspaper to the screening and conversation. This event anticipates Hassinger's related performance next spring, commissioned by National Portrait Gallery as part of its IDENTIFY series dedicated to performance art and portraiture. Free-Registration required.*