

Lankarani, Nazanin "How Women Made Their Place in Abstract Sculpture," *The New York Times*, 9 October 2021.

The New York Times

As a graduate student of sculpture in the 1970s, Maren Hassinger had little affinity for traditional fibers used in weaving class.

"I didn't like weaving with flexible materials," Ms. Hassinger said in a phone interview from New York. "One day in a junkyard I found some wire rope, and it changed my career."

"With wire rope, I could make self-supporting objects with a strength and linearity that appealed to me."

Ms. Hassinger is one of nine sculptors represented in a show at the Waddington Custot gallery in London during Frieze Week. Titled "Making It: Women and Abstract Sculpture," the show tackles the sweeping theme of the artists' contribution to the development of abstraction in modern sculpture.

"Two years ago, we had the idea to show women artists who have been forgotten or overlooked by the art world," said Stéphane Custot, co-founder of the gallery in an interview from London. "We went looking for artists who had brought something new to the history of art with techniques or materials that were unusual, even extravagant, for their time."



Also part of the show is "Untitled Vessel, (Small Body)" by Maren Hassinger. "I use wire rope because it describe me personally," she said. "It is tough and unbending, it never disintegrates, and I have to fight it to work with it."Credit...Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC, photo by Adam Reich

Like Ms. Vari, Lynda Benglis, Olga de Amaral and Louise Nevelson are established names, while others like Beverly Pepper, Françoise Grossen, Mildred Thompson, Ms. Hassinger and Barbara Levittoux-Swidarska, are getting new attention.

"Women have been overlooked from the greater narrative of sculpture, a practice long seen as 'macho' and dependent on an ability to wrestle with physical material," said Natalie Rudd, senior curator of the Arts Council Collection, the largest public loan collection of British art, speaking from Nottingham, in the north of England.

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"It is interesting to look at artists working in the 1960s and '70s when a collision of interests, starting with the second wave of feminism, the emergence of postminimalism in sculpture, and a move away from solid blocks to a wider range of materials, created a real opportunity for women to carve their own space," Ms. Rudd said.

Uncommon materials – found objects, latex foam, fibers, horsehair or wire rope – helped these artists create works that challenged convention by expanding the definition of monumental sculpture and by using abstraction to invent new forms of three-dimensional art.

"Untitled Vessel, (Small Body)" (2021) by Ms. Hassinger illustrates her longtime fascination with the rigidity of wire rope.

"I use wire rope because it describe me personally," Ms. Hassinger said. "It is tough and unbending, it never disintegrates, and I have to fight it to work with it."

Ms. Hassinger, 74, a director of the Rinehart School of Sculpture at the Maryland Institute College of Art, has been a teacher, performance artist and sculptor since the 1970s.

"Back then, very few women showed their sculpture," Ms. Hassinger said. "I quickly realized that there were many obstacles in my way as a woman and an African American.

"I felt underappreciated, but I wasn't hostile about it. I decided that I would continue to do my work even if there was no place to show it. So I made art, I was a teacher, and I raised my kids."

Institutional validation of her work came when Ms. Hassinger was in her 70s. "MoMA was one of the first museums to buy my work three years ago," she said.

In the show "Close to You" at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, Ms. Hassinger's piece "Embrace/Love" (2008/2018) shows her range. A wall installation of pink plastic bags filled with human breath, it is on display through January 2022.

"Today, public institutions are broadening the historical narrative around sculpture and it is becoming obvious that women have contributed so much to that narrative," Ms. Rudd said.

Fueled by the attention from public institutions, commercial galleries are taking a new look at female artists like Ms. Hassinger, who had her second solo show last spring at the Susan Inglett Gallery in New York, who have represented her since 2018.