

'Maren Hassinger: Living Moving Growing' at the Berkeley Art Museum

Frances DeVuono

'Maren Hassinger: Living Moving Growing', Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), Berkeley, California, 6 June – 29 November 2026

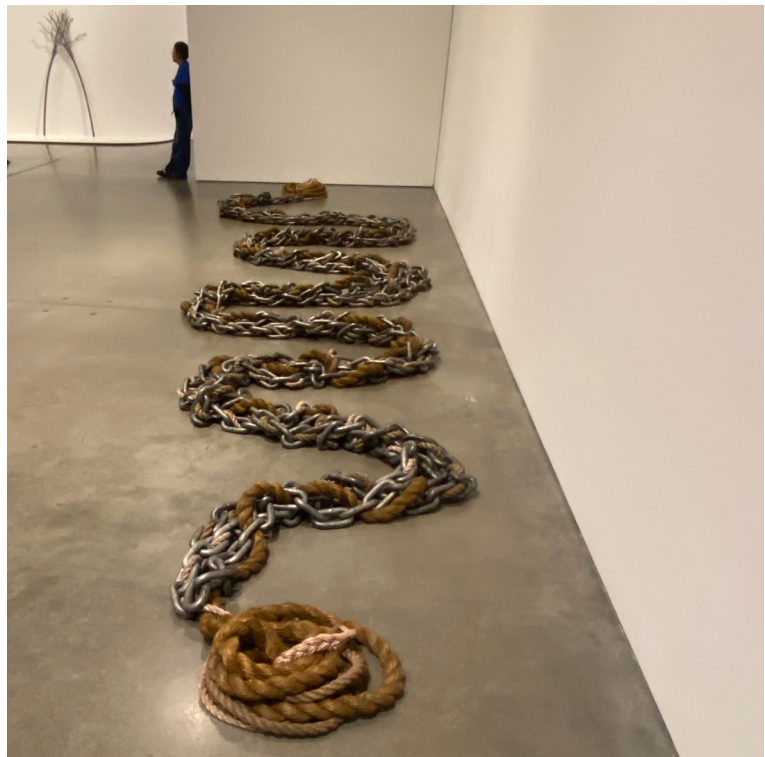


Installation view, 'Maren Hassinger: Living Moving Growing', Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), Berkeley, California, 6 June – 29 November 2026, photo by Chris Grunder

'Maren Hassinger: Living Moving Growing' at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) is a retrospective spanning over fifty years of the artist's work in sculpture, dance, performance, film and video. Viewers can become immersed in floor-to-ceiling walls meticulously covered with rose leaves or be taken in by the grace of Hassinger's large sculptures. Performance history buffs will be captivated by her 1970s collaborations in Los Angeles. There is also a giant pyramid made of redwood branches installed a little over a mile away at

UC Berkeley's botanical garden. It is a lot, and to the curators' credit, this seems deliberate. Work isn't separated by media, and there is only a slight adherence to chronology. Instead, various objects – films, sculptures, performance stills, videos, documented public works – are set side by side, giving us a glimpse of Hassinger's approach to art.

Untitled Rope (1972) dominates the first room with four enormous pieces of hemp rope placed flat upon the floor, each carefully knotted in circular loops at the centre. Made from material used to hoist large objects in construction or shipping, the ropes, in Hassinger's hands, are rendered quiet and reflective. *River*, made the same year,¹ is an undulating shape of that same rope, this time combined with thick metal cables. Laid out snake-like, even with all its curves, it is over twenty-five feet in length. The beauty of both pieces exists not only in their formal elegance, but also in the way Hassinger subverted the use of industrial material to evoke nature or calm. Remarkably, both were made while Hassinger was still in graduate school – fully realised abstractions that were bold breaks from minimalism, akin to what a few other women, such as Jackie Winsor, Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis and (early) Yayoi Kusama, were doing on the East Coast. With these strengths, it is not surprising that only eight years later, in 1981, Hassinger was given a one-person exhibition at the Los Angeles County Art Museum (LACMA). Unfortunately, it is equally unsurprising that she was the first Black artist to be given that opportunity.



River, 1972/2011, installation view in 'Maren Hassinger: Living Moving Growing', Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archives (BAMPFA), Berkeley, California, 6 June – 29 November 2026, photo by Chris Grunder

¹ Signage dates *River* as 1972/2011 because this and a few other earlier works were recreated by the artist. As Chief Curator Margot Norton pointed out in her gallery talk on 24 June 2026, 'sculptors in particular had a hard time storing their work'.

Born in Los Angeles, Hassenger studied dance as a child and discovered sculpture during her undergraduate years, continuing to work in that medium through graduate school and after, without ever abandoning both her interest in movement and in working collaboratively. There are photo stills of performances with artists such as Senga Nengudi, Ulysses Jenkins, David Hammons, Franklin Parker and May Sun from her involvement in the Los Angeles performance art scene in the 1970s, as well as later performances in New York. One set of photos, *Tree Duet I and II*, features a young Hassinger dancing in relationship to a sculpture she'd made. The sculpture consisted of two larger than body-size tree branches with metal cable laced in and around them, as if to either meld the natural world with the human-made or illustrate their uneasy relationship. It was recreated for this exhibition as *Pas de Deux* from branches found on the UC Berkeley campus.



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The centre two rooms begin with a wall covered in blown-up, pink plastic shopping bags pressed tightly against one another. The work is titled *Love*, and signage lists the material as plastic bags filled with air, breath, and love notes. The rooms are filled with a mix of media made over forty years and, as varied as the artist's materials and ideas are, we get to observe how Hassinger circles back to certain themes. Her love of nature is established in her choice of imagery as well as her public actions and performances, but these rooms also demonstrate how she sees nature in conjunction with our 'human nature'. Several works connect the two directly. A small TV shows a seven-person performance titled *VOICES*, from 1981. The resolution is grainy, and the sound is not entirely clear, but nearby is a typewritten note by the artist,

in which she states: ‘VOICES expresses a concern with the role of nature in an increasingly technological society’. Across from this is *Heaven* (made in the same year), in which the walls are covered with rose leaves. Two videos run in a loop, one after the other. *Green* (1993) is filled with closeups of water, grass and leaves, and is a paean to the natural world associated with that colour. Another, *Beige* (1992), largely focuses on moving through a late-winter landscape of forests, fields and a farm, and is interspersed with hands wringing out what looks like some kind of domestic item, a tablecloth or napkin. There are photographs of her performances in a garden with Houston Conwill and Franklin Parker, and of her 2017 solo performance titled *Pink Trash*, in which the artist went to three of New York City’s larger parks, picking up pieces of trash and replacing them with other objects she had painted pink.²



Pink Trash, 1982, documentation of performance; performed for ‘Art Across the City’ at Central Park, New York; Van Cortlandt Park, Bronx; and Prospect Park, Brooklyn; 12,15 and 21 July 1982, courtesy of the artist and Susan Inglett Gallery, New York

Legacy (2006) is another landscape altogether. It consists of words projected onto an enlarged, bucolic-looking photograph of a plantation, taken by Henry P Moore four years before the Civil War ended. For twenty-seven minutes, words are projected onto the photograph like stream-of-conscious writing – words such as Pocket Watch, Stereotype, Internal Pain, Peanut Butter, the Civil Rights Movement, Compassion, Aftermath of Katrina, Exoticism – to mention a few.

² See Margaret Ewing, ‘Working Together: Maren Hassinger’s *Monument (Pyramid)*’, *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, 2024, pp 10–15, www.jstor.org/stable/27445374, accessed 26 June 2026

Headphones provide a range of African American music, starting with early spirituals, to jazz standards and a spoken-word piece. The sum is a powerful, and painful, musical lexicon of US history.

In the same room is a personal video titled *Birthright*, made in 2005. It begins with a closeup of the artist's hands twisting paper, an image that shows up intermittently throughout the film. A voiceover explains that she will be interviewing a distant relative to trace some of her father's genealogy. What Hassinger discovers is complex, including a lynching, incest, love, interracial relationships and abandonment. However, at one point towards the end, there is a scene of her sitting at home with her teenage daughter and son. Hassinger is recounting what she has learnt when her son (who looks to be around thirteen years old) makes a joke about the complexity of the family tree and all three burst out laughing. It is a startlingly sweet maternal scene, affirming that even the most twisted strands of history don't impede finding joy. The piece ends with a single hand simply turning out a series of lights.



Maren Hassinger, still from *Birthright*, 2005, courtesy of the artist and Susan Inglett Gallery, New York

At the entrance the final room is a video of Hassinger's recent collaborations with Ava Hassinger (her daughter) on the left, and a long weaving of newspaper strands on the right. Typical of Hassinger's use of everyday materials, such as the pink shopping bags, this latter piece will become another of Hassinger's collaborative projects. Titled *Wrenching News*, wall text informs us that 'Hassinger transforms the newsprint of our shared – often painful – experiences of the world into something new and strong...[she] invites people of all ages to contribute to *Wrenching News* in a series of newspaper-twisting workshops' to be held at the

museum. The centre of the room is sparsely arranged with three large sculptures placed at some distance from one another. Each completed in 2021, these are vessels of varying shapes, and the beauty of their formal abstraction and scale immediately connects them with the earliest pieces in the first room.

History is selective and precarious – events are ignored, acknowledged, forgotten, sometimes remembered, sometimes not. While Hassinger had the early success of a solo exhibition at LACMA and had steadily exhibited her work, in a 1993 interview with performance artist Lorraine O’Grady, she talked about how ‘invisible’ the performances she and her fellow artists did in LA were, and about the financial difficulties facing her and other artists.³ A few years later, she became the Director of Sculpture at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). Now, thirty years later, Hassinger’s work is in collections of major museums throughout the country, and the Getty Research Institute acquired her archives in 2022. Some of this success may in part be due to the Pacific Standard Time (PST) exhibitions, ‘Art in LA 1945–80’.

Sponsored by the Getty Foundation, PST began an ambitious programme in 2011–2012. Sixty-eight shows were held in galleries and museums throughout the region with the stated purpose to ‘rescue an endangered history of L.A. art... create broad recognition of the international significance of art in Los Angeles’.⁴ Drawing attention to work that had originally not been given the consideration it deserved, and/or had been forgotten, PST generated a rash of essays, reviews and scholarship that helped draw attention to the Los Angeles area as a major art force in contemporary art. Hassinger’s work was included in the exhibition ‘Now Dig This Art’ at the Hammer Museum, and two, not entirely oppositional reviews, outline the precarity of history. The *Los Angeles Times* critic Christopher Knight wrote that California in the 1970s was a ‘pluralist explosion’,⁵ while Malik Gaines, in his *Arts Journal* review, notes the short span of memory. Gaines pointed out that ‘[T]he first African American artist to have a solo show at LACMA was Maren Hassinger in 1981, a fact that helps point to the exclusions that characterise the pre-1980 period of PST [exhibitions]’.⁶

³ See the text of an interview with Maren Hassinger by Lorraine O’Grady, in New York in March 1993, in the Hatch-Billops Collection, available at www.proquest.com/docview/2352573637/Z001825966/1, accessed 24 June 2026; see also the Camille Billops and James V Hatch Archives at Emory University: <https://libraries.emory.edu/rose/collections/about-collection/camille-billops-and-james-v-hatch-archives>

⁴ The first PST in 2011 had three goals: to rescue an endangered history of art, making it accessible to future generations; create broad recognition of the international significance of art in Los Angeles; and create a new model for large-scale collaboration; see www.getty.edu/projects/pacific-standard-time-art-in-la, accessed 24 June 2026.

⁵ Christopher Knight, ‘Art review: “Under the Big Black Sun at MOCA”’, *Los Angeles Times*, 14 October 2011, www.latimes.com/archives/blogs/culture-monster-blog/story/2011-10-14/art-review-under-the-big-black-sun-at-moca, accessed 17 July 2026

⁶ Malik Gaines, ‘City after Fifty Years’ Living: L.A.’s differences in Relation’, *Art Journal*, Spring 2012, vol 71, no 1, pp 88–105, www.jstor.org/stable/23279671, accessed 24 June 2026



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That short memory may be especially true in the United States now, with the Federal government's current, conscious effort to erase so much of our history.⁷ And as a corrective, that is what makes retrospectives such as Hassinger's at BAMPFA significant. Viewing Hassinger's work adds to our understanding of contemporary art during the latter part of the twentieth century. 'Living, Moving Growing' not only exhibits some of the best of post-formalist abstraction, but it also shows the artist's practice: the connections she makes in performances with our social and ecological environment, images of her as a parent, and her consistent desire to work with others. Like the 2025 Ruth Asawa retrospective at San Francisco's MOMA,⁸ BAMPFA curators have rounded out an artist's life in ways that artists and historians need to see. Oddly, as I was writing this review on the computer, an email from a philanthropic organisation called Artist Trust popped up on my screen. Its header read: 'Art is the most honest history we have'. It could be true, but it is only as true as art that is seen and remembered, making retrospectives like this – along with their catalogues – all the more important.

Frances DeVuono is an art writer, artist and former Associate Professor of Art at the University of Colorado Denver. She was a Contributing Editor for *Artweek*, and her reviews and articles have appeared in magazines such as *Art in America*, *Arts*, *Art Papers*, *Sculpture Magazine* and *New Art Examiner*, among others, as well as here in **Third Text Online**. She lives in Berkeley, California.

⁷ See the review of the 'Monuments' exhibition (23 October – 3 May 2026) at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA and the Brick, Los Angeles in **Third Text Online**, 24 November 2025, www.thirdtext.org/devuono-monuments

⁸ 'Ruth Asawa: Retrospective' originated at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), travelled to The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and Fondation Beyeler in Riehen/Basel, over 2025–2027.