Krafcik, Hannah. "Process and destiny at the Cooley Gallery," *Oregon Artswatch,* 12 March 2024.

OREGON ARTSWATCH
ARTS & CULTURE NEWS
orartswatch.org

Process and destiny at the Cooley Gallery

"Las Vegas Ikebana" celebrates five decades of friendship between Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi. On view are individual works, collaborations, and ephemera that reveal the richness of their creative intertwining.

MARCH 12, 2024 | HANNAH KRAFCIK

Installation view of Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi, Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, Portland, Oregon. Photo by Mario Gallucci

Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi packs a mind-boggling amount of artwork into the single-room space of the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College. Performance documentation, sculptures, archival notes, collages, portraits, and videos subsume all the gallery walls, anchoring different points in history from the 1970s to present day. This material tells the story of two cross-disciplinary artists, Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi, illuminating the nooks and crannies of their solo and shared practices over the course of five decades.

"This is our process. This is our calling." said Nengudi during their artist talk at Reed College this February 17.

"And our destiny," Hassinger added.

Hassinger and Nengudi met in Los Angeles in 1977 and forged an imaginative relationship that persisted through periods of close proximity and distance, spurring each others' drive and daring to create sculpture, mixed media, performance, and much more. The title of their exhibition, *Las Vegas Ikebana*, comes from a concept they developed together in the late '80s—"Las Vegas" refers to the outlandish city, and the "Ikebana" ("way of flowers") refers to the delicate Japanese art of flower arrangement. Hassinger and Nengudi channel both: levity and gravity; playfulness and intentionality.

In a corner of the gallery hangs one of Nengudi's older sculptures, *R.S.V.P. X* (1976/refabricated 2014). This work was formed with brown pantyhose pulled in various directions and weighted with sand and rose petals. It conjures so many connotations and referents: Black womanhood, the feminine fulcrum of discomfort and resilience, spatial attention stretched thin and reaching multi-directionally, feelings of containment and precarity—and, of course, absurdity.

Hassinger's work takes a different approach to similar themes. At the gallery entrance, I found one of her sculptures hanging on a wall, *Splintered Starburst (On Dangerous Ground)* (1981/2023), where wire rope weaves through an inconspicuous center of metal grating. The wire unwinds and spokes in all directions, like an entity of restraint untethering itself from its function, fiber by fiber. And in the nearby black and white photo *Tree Duet, II, 5617 Vicente Blvd. Los Angeles* (1977), Hassinger gestures among twisting tree branches propped up around her in a studio.

While this early work by Nengudi is stretchy and ballasted, Hassinger's is twirled and spiraled—both reach out toward the unknown.

Certainly, their collaboration has been full of unknowns, "what if we's," and experiments that seemed to come less out of retaliation toward the dominant trends of the art world and more out of the necessity to make work, especially in the face of life's overwhelming challenges—Hassinger's divorce; Nengudi's responsibility to care for her children and ailing mother at once.

The two kept up an exchange of phone calls and writings and harbored notebooks by their bedsides so that they could write down ideas to share with one another. In a letter on display from Nengudi to Hassinger (1985), I read, "Thank you, thank you for that check. It went straight to the bank." In a letter from Hassinger to Nengudi (1991), I read, "Dear Senga, Thank you for the blessed rose petal. Just what I needed." Their commitment to the repetition of correspondence reads like the striking of flint over and over in order to spark a fire, to ignite their next project.

Hassinger and Nengudi also cultivated their early interest in dance and performance by training in the lineages of dancers Lester Horton and Rudy Perez. This seeded their eventual performance practice together: In the video of the performance *Alive* (1980), Hassinger and Nengudi—both wearing long pointy finger extensions—locked hands with their collaborator Franklin Parker. Later on in the performance, they kissed their own arms and hands.

Accompanying this video, I noticed the phrase "kissing yourself" amongst a display of their "Dancer notes," scraps of ideas spitballed on paper from the same year. Dancing and aliveness, aliveness and friendship—all came in concert here.

I visited the Cooley gallery on February 17, the same day as their artist talk, for *See-See Riders*, a performance choreographed by Nengudi that took its title from a blues song of a similar name. It was performed by longstanding collaborators Keyon Gaskin and Sidony O'neal as well as a surprise guest—who, I learned, jumped in the performance at the eleventh hour—Dr. Leslie King-Hammond. The performance unfolded on a wooden seesaw at the center of the exhibition, with Dr. King-Hammond in the middle, Gaskin on one end and O'neal on the other. Dr. King-Hammond offered touches to Gaskin and O'neal by the tips of her gentle fingers as the two slowly tipped the seesaw up and down in a gesture of intergenerational reciprocity. Hassinger and Nengudi watched on from the side.

At the end of the performance, Nengudi spoke about how collaboration is a generative balancing act, always underway, always in process. Hassinger and Nengudi, I suspected, must want us to feel this sensation of tensegrity in our bodies—for this appears to have held them in collaboration, kept them going, throughout the greater portion of their lives.