

Abudu, Kojo. "Artist Maren Hassinger Mourns Our Lost Connection With the Natural World," Frieze, 29 October 2019.

Frieze

Artist Maren Hassinger Mourns Our Lost Connection With the Natural World

The post-minimalist based her abstractions on one predicament - 'I don't know where I come from and I don't know where I'm going'

Kojo Abudu
29 October 2019



Maren Hassinger, On Dangerous Ground, 1981, wire rope. Courtesy: Susan Inglett Gallery, New York and Tiwani Contemporary, London

Behind each of Maren Hassinger's sculptures and drawings stands a multitude of invested hours. Often knotted, woven and twisted, and at times written upon, her works attest to the infinite possibilities of hand-intensive artistic labour. Hassinger's art is a slow art, one whose meditative quietude subtly counters the rampant, environmentally-destructive logic of late capitalism. The New York-based artist's first solo exhibition outside the United States, 'Passing Through' at Tiwani Contemporary, probes the predicament on which she based her abstractions – 'I don't know where I come from and I don't know where I'm going.'

In a pair of wall sculptures, fibrous strands of wire rope evoke wavy hair or spiralling branches. Titled *On Dangerous Ground* (1981), the works trace the artist's ongoing interrogation of industrial materials, which began during her days as an MFA student in the Fibre Structure programme at UCLA in the 1970s. Hassinger's sculptures might be seen as elegies for the disappearance of nature in public space, their paradoxical form an attempt to negotiate the divide between nature and culture. The de-industrialisation of the United States since the work's production, coupled with the proliferation of digitized economies, imbues these sculptures with a contemporary meaning – as not just mourning the loss of a connection with the natural world, but also with any materially-rooted conception of reality.

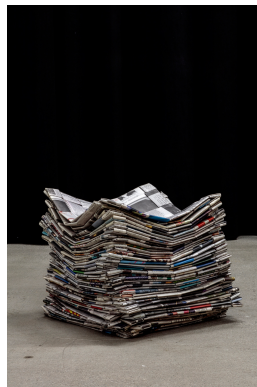
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Maren Hassinger, 'Passing Through', 2019, installation view. Courtesy: Tiwani Contemporary, London

The elegant waves of Hassinger's densely-packed wire rope sculptures reverberate with the uninterrupted flow of her delicate, cursive handwriting. In four A4 drawings at the gallery's back corner, she repeatedly inscribes certain words, her scrawls evoking the sublimity and dynamism of the natural environment both in form and meaning. 'Ocean', 'savannah', 'wind' and 'whisper' fill the entirety of each page in rows and columns. Echoing the aesthetic of concrete poetry, Hassinger pays careful attention to the spatial organization of letters on paper – a formal sensibility that harkens back to her sculptural practice. Meanwhile, the seemingly endless repetition of the words shows a minimalist and conceptualist affinity for seriality. Yet Hassinger subverts the de-personalized, mechanical aesthetic through her manual inscriptions. We can almost hear her calmly and rhythmically pronouncing the words, again and again, each time with a different intonation.

In the sculpture, *Consolation* (1996), bits of wire rope are transformed into 100 reed-like formations, each unit appearing identical while maintaining a unique configuration. Perhaps what these works envision is a kind of common humanity, but one which acknowledges difference instead of erasing it.



Maren Hassinger, *Sit Upons*, 2010, *New York Times* newspapers. Courtesy: Susan Inglett Gallery, New York and Tiwani Contemporary, London; photograph: Joshua White, Los Angeles, CA

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Hassinger's post-minimalist impulse reappears in other sculptures. In *Hand in Hand* (2019), copies of *The New York Times* are shredded, twisted and wrapped to form a circular wall piece. Such deceptively simple interventions convert the newspaper from a product of mass media into an object of collective consciousness – the circular shape bearing universal cultural significance as a symbol of unity and continuity.

If observing the printed pages in *Hand in Hand* felt like listening to a chorus of whispering voices, encountering *Fight The Power* (2017) was like listening to the louder, radical leader of said chorus. In the latter work, Hassinger paints the title – an ode to the iconic Public Enemy anthem – in bold black ink on newsprint. An architectonic sculpture, hung atop two adjacent walls, it is at once a gathering call and a symbolic contestation of power, as if anticipating the climate change protests that recently occurred across the globe.



Maren Hassinger, *Consolation*, 1996, wire and wire rope. Courtesy: Susan Inglett Gallery, New York and Tiwani Contemporary, London; photograph: Adam Reich, New York

Viewers also encounter low-rise stacks of woven newspaper placed on the gallery floor. Titled *Sit Upons* (2010), their top surfaces are dented, encouraging us to sit, rest, convene and converse. At each turn, Hassinger situates us in our densely interconnected natural and cultural ecologies. Her quietly powerful works are faithful reminders that there is only one world, and we must work (and think) collectively to protect it.