

Hughes, Sally Eaves. "Maren Hassinger," *The Brooklyn Rail*, 14 July 2021.

## BROOKLYN RAIL



Installation view: *Maren Hassinger*, Dia Bridgehampton, New York, 2021. © Maren Hassinger. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation.

Maren Hassinger's new work, commissioned for Dia Bridgehampton, frays the boundaries between artistic genres by circling back to a formative material, process, and politics of her five-decade practice: fiber. The artist's investigation of this medium began in 1970, when she enrolled in Bernard Kester's newly minted Fiber Structure graduate program at the University of California, Los Angeles, after being rejected by the sculpture department. During the heyday of anti-form, Post-Minimalism, and Process art, her studies came at a moment when textiles moved away from a primary relationship with the wall and towards sculptural space. Kester encouraged his students to consider fiber as structural order and gathered together works by experimental artists including Magdalena Abkanowicz, Sheila Hicks, and Claire Zeisler in his groundbreaking 1971 exhibition *Deliberate Entanglements* at UCLA Art Galleries.

A breakthrough moment occurred for Hassinger when she picked up a piece of wire rope while searching for material at a salvage yard in downtown Los Angeles. "I realized that it had the capacity to have everything that you ever do to metal done to it, but you could also treat it like fiber," she recalled.<sup>1</sup> Hassinger adopted wire rope as a pliant linear element, twisting, unravelling, and gathering the industrial material together to be installed on walls, floors, ceilings, and in the outdoors. In the process of unmaking and the accumulation of individual strands, her metallic works began to resemble bristling and balletically poised organic forms. After completing her graduate degree, Hassinger remained in Los Angeles until 1984, when she moved to New York to be an Artist-in-Residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. With her exhibition at Dia Bridgehampton, Hassinger makes a timely return to Long Island, where she lived in the 1990s while teaching at Stony Brook Southampton. Her new, site-specific work *The Window* (2021) features two wire-rope sculptures installed outdoors, as well as a series of suspended and printed fabric panels in the first-floor gallery space of Dia Bridgehampton.

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Outside the gallery walls on the lawn, clusters of galvanized steel cables form two upright sculptures standing nearly seven feet tall. Uniformly twisted ropes unspool at either end with hundreds of rippling, zinc-coated strands bundled together like sheaves of grain. Bristling and gracefully bent, the forms appear as solitary columns opening to the foliage above. Simultaneously handmade and manufactured, they retain an interpretive pliability, firmly rooted in both nature and industry. Hassinger's works spring up like weeds in stark contrast to the carefully maintained and constructed lawns of suburban America—and the Hamptons in particular. Here, Hassinger's sculptures trouble the essential divisions between organic and artificial. Steel, like fiber, is a natural material after all, an alloy of iron and carbon mined from the earth. Eventually, the metal will rust, come apart, dissolve, and be absorbed back into the ground.

With her new sculptures, Hassinger returns to the form of a bush, which she used first in an exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1981, and again 10 years later at Long Island University, C. W. Post Campus in Brookville, New York. Appearing delicate, they are in fact abrasive, hard, and sharp. Highly expressive, they are "angry bushes" created "to intimidate, to infringe, to threaten," as Hassinger noted in the LACMA show's brochure. They reflect "the turmoil of contemporary urban reality where one feels a sense of confusion—a decline in the order of things, a profound sense of loss, vulnerability, and lack of 'centeredness'."<sup>2</sup>

The indoor installation at Dia presents a series of images picturing a field of wire sculptures, printed on fabric panels that are suspended from nearly invisible filaments, organized in a grid. The archival photograph from which these images are drawn is of *Circle of Bushes* (1991), the sculpture Hassinger sited on the grounds of Long Island University. Though the installation consisted of five bundles planted at 21-foot intervals, the image focuses on a single bush, with one more partially visible in the background. 30 years later, Hassinger invites viewers to move through and with her installation in a passage of tactile and visual choreography. Trained as a dancer, she foregrounds a phenomenological activation of the installation space. The diaphanous silk chiffon fabric she has chosen responds to the movement of bodies as they pass by, the panel surfaces textured with plisse folds and frayed edges. The image itself is sized to the dimensions of the gallery's sole exposed window, through which the outdoor sculptures can be seen. A frame or portal, the window connects the serial field across space.

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Printing the image of her wire sculptures on the weave of fabric itself, Hassinger makes an overt connection between the material structure of her abstract forms and her training in fiber arts. In *Fray: Art + Textile Politics*, Julia Bryan-Wilson insists that fiber has not only been "used to advance political agendas but also to indicate a procedure of making politics material."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, fiber is prevalent within the histories of both capitalism and organized resistance. Today, it is embedded in the interlocking systems of environmental change and global manufacturing, outsourced and performed by a devalued labor force. In the process of unmaking her manufactured wire ropes and weaving them together by hand, Hassinger exposes the bodily effort that goes into industrial production: mass-manufactured goods are often made by hand. Refusing easy academic binaries, her work also troubles the gendered and racialized associations of both craft and Minimalist practices. Early in her career, Hassinger stated that she was concerned with the loss of nature. Dense with multiple meanings, *The Windowtakes* on even broader material and political connections today, stretching the categories of art, craft, and industry.

1. Maren Hassinger, "Maren Hassinger Wants to Bring People Together", interview by Paige Katherine Bradley, *Garage*, October 13, 2019, [https://garage.vice.com/en\\_us/article/59nkxd/maren-hassinger-wants-to-bring-people-together](https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/59nkxd/maren-hassinger-wants-to-bring-people-together).
2. Maren Hassinger, *Maren Hassinger: On Dangerous Ground* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, May 1981).
3. Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art + Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 7.