

Little, Colony. "Maren Hassinger's Poetic Gestures for Dealing with the Painful Past and Present," *Hyperallergic*, 17 May 2018.

## HYPERALLERGIC

### Maren Hassinger's Poetic Gestures for Dealing with the Painful Past and Present

"If you are of African descent and your ancestors were part of the slave trade, you have issues which are alive today."

Colony Little



Maren Hassinger, "Love" (2008/2018), installed as part of *Maren Hassinger: The Spirit of Things* at Art + Practice, Los Angeles (image courtesy Art + Practice, photo by Joshua White)

LOS ANGELES — Between 1916 and 1970, six million African Americans fled the rural south during the Great Migration. Besieged by violent, racist Jim Crow laws that permeated political, religious, and social institutions, black families faced difficult decisions to uproot themselves to secure better futures. Traveling by train, bus, and car, migrants were fueled by a determination described by art historian [Kellie Jones](#) as "nothing less than black people willing into existence their presence in modern life." By all accounts the Great Migration was a silent, leaderless revolution whose travelogues have been lost to time, and for subsequent generations the deeply personal circumstances that were catalysts for their exodus are largely unknown. For many, the desire to start anew came at a price of leaving the past behind; as a result, these stories became long-held secrets.

This tension with the past and how it surfaces in the present is captured in [Maren Hassinger's](#) solo exhibition at Art + Practice, *The Spirit of Things*, in Los Angeles. The show, which spans nearly five decades of Hassinger's career in performance, sculpture, and video, distills her vast body of work into a tightly edited, visual exploration into unresolved familial relationships and the emotions that surface when secrets are unearthed or remain shrouded in darkness. As Hassinger explained in an email to Hyperallergic, "I'm interested in people knowing that regardless of one's present position — privileged or poor — if you are of African descent and your ancestors were part of the slave trade, you have issues which are alive today."



Maren Hassinger, "Birthright" (2005), video (color, sound), 12:52 min, video still (image courtesy the artist and Art + Practice, filming and editing by Donna Conlon)

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In a documentary-style video called "Birthright," a camera follows Hassinger on a search for information about her paternal grandparents who migrated from Louisiana to Los Angeles during the Great Migration. Hassinger travels to Louisiana to meet with an estranged uncle who shares details about the artist's father, and as he slowly unravels these complicated stories, he discloses several family secrets. The 12-minute video is an emotionally disorienting, heart-wrenching look at a family tree whose roots are suddenly exposed. Hassinger reveals unresolved family trauma that ultimately sheds light on the complexities of her relationship with her father. "Now I better understand the man who was at times extremely angry and I forgive him. And in this understanding and this forgiving I can move forward," the artist said over email. Interspersed between the video's interview clips are close crops of Hassinger's hands as she twists strips of torn newspaper. For her, the act of moving forward manifests in this cathartic, meditative manipulation of paper. In "Birthright," the strips are a proxy for the bits of information she gathered from her uncle, and as she twists them together we see her begin to transform the information into something new.



Maren Hassinger, "The Veil Between Us" (2007/2018), installed as part of *Maren Hassinger: The Spirit of Things* at Art + Practice, Los Angeles (image courtesy of Art + Practice, photo by Joshua White)

The result of this process appears in other works in the gallery. In "The Veil Between Us," Hassinger fabricated a long curtain using hundreds of similarly twisted strips of newspaper woven together in a tapestry that represents the barriers we place between ourselves and others. At the entrance, in a large, round sculpture titled "Wrenching News," Hassinger has manipulated sheets of the *New York* and *LA Times* and assembled them into a mandala. The piece was originally created in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, but particularly resonates today. By tapping into our shared fatigue of a 24-hour, nonstop news cycle and transforming it into a therapeutic symbol of the universe, Hassinger guides viewers out of the despair that's triggered by painful current events.

Hassinger previously used the mandala at the Landing Gallery in 2017, exhibiting one made from inflated pink, plastic shopping bags. The color was used in earlier works including her 1982 "Pink Trash" performance in South Los Angeles, where she replaced debris with pink paper in a blighted neighborhood. Through the mandala, Hassinger manipulates commonplace objects and transforms them into sentimental mementos.



Installation view of *Maren Hassinger: The Spirit of Things* at Art + Practice (image courtesy of Art + Practice, photo by Joshua White)

In *The Spirit of Things*, Hassinger returns to the plastic bags in a poetic installation that alludes to the emotional journeys of "Birthright" and "Wrenching News." A short, narrow corridor at the entrance of the gallery is lined with hundreds of the bright, pink bags, each filled with air and a single love note. Collectively they deliver a potent reminder about what's possible when we find the space to heal and move forward.

Maren Hassinger: *The Spirit of Things* continues at *Art + Practice* (3401 W. 43rd Place, Los Angeles) through May 26.