



CHAKAIA **BOOKER**

AUSPICIOUS BEHAVIOR

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During the first week of November 2016, the UT School of Art participated in the EAB (Editions Artists Book) Print Fair in the Tunnel in Chelsea, New York City. I had installed prints from our Artists-in-Residence portfolio in our assigned booth which was adjacent to the EFA Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop booth that was featuring the prints of Chakaia Booker. I met the artist there and discussed the possibility of an exhibition sometime in the future. Essye Klempner, Program and Exhibitions Manager at the Workshop, supported this idea and subsequently kept in contact. Two years later, an exhibition of Booker's prints and sculpture was organized in conjunction with Chakaia Booker's invitation to be the keynote speaker at the Mid South Sculpture Conference hosted in Knoxville by our School of Art's Sculpture program. She and Justin Sanz, Master Printer at the EFA Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop, were also invited by our Printmaking program to work with students in the production of new prints. Three of these prints are included in this exhibition titled *Auspicious Behavior*.

I would like to acknowledge D. Dominick Lombardi for his insightful essay and Justin Sanz for his comments on working with Booker. I am grateful to the EFA Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop for its support of this exhibition and the loan of the prints. Mike Berry and Eric Cagley are recognized for their expert mounting, framing, and installation of the exhibition. Sarah McFalls and Eric Cagley are recognized for their overall coordination of this exhibition project and with special appreciation to Sarah for her editing skills and Eric for the catalogue design.

Finally, *Auspicious Behavior* would not have been possible without the full support and generosity of the artist herself. Chakaia Booker, on behalf of our university community and of the other university communities where this exhibition, *Auspicious Behavior* will travel, we thank you for sharing your art with us.

SAM YATES, DIRECTOR
UT DOWNTOWN GALLERY, KNOXVILLE, TN

AUSPICIOUS BEHAVIOR

PRINTS
+SCULPTURE

CHAKAIA BOOKER

Auspicious Behavior Throughout

I first came to know Chakaia Booker's sculptures in 1996 when I was scheduled to write a review for the *New Art Examiner* of her upcoming exhibition at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, NY. As this was a major venue for Booker, I decided to conduct preliminary research and to familiarize myself with her work. This consisted of me viewing Booker's work included in two exhibitions: one at the Queens Museum of Art at Bulova Corporate Center and a second held at Max Protetch Gallery in New York City. I was thoroughly impressed with her work right from the start. Her fresh new way of building gripping layers of depth and meaning built upon modern and contemporary art tendencies really struck a chord with me. I wrote in my review: "Booker works this detritus in much the same way that Pollock once used his materials, making her fluid, sinuous "strokes" with sections of tires instead of dripped paint. The controlled automatism of her painting technique has a painterly quality, garnering the immediacy of an abstract Expressionist...". I also felt at that time that there was an underlying sense that Booker was challenging the realm of pre-existing iconography with her choice of materials. Her primary sculptural element, cut repurposed tires, commands immediate respect from anyone who has ever fabricated anything by hand, and the symbolism, the tires with their various treads, is a weighty reference to a specific cultural component in the form of traditional African scarification. It is also important to note that her use of junked tires has distinct socioeconomic meaning alluding to issues of racial inequality that Booker carefully and courageously builds into her powerful messaging. Ultimately, one must look to Booker's art for the ways in which it challenges our acknowledgement and understanding of all forms of oppression.

As objects of art, Booker's sculptures are profoundly different visually and materially from other work I know. In a recent review for the July 2018 issue of *Green Bench Monthly* of the exhibition *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today* at The Museum of Fine Arts in St Petersburg, Florida, I wrote of Booker's contribution: "El Gato (2001), a rubber tire and wood sculpture that is totally textural and profoundly present, simultaneously challenges and captivates the viewer with waves of wild shapes and fluid gestures." Booker's forms, her ability to focus our attention equally on the things she creates, as well as the space that they command, is at the heart of her success.

In addition, there is a regalness to their presence. The sculptures command a space somewhere between ceremony and circumstance. Even in her most traditional formats, such as her large rectangular works, there remains an incredible amount of material transformation as our eyes travel across seemingly endless texture and tonal changes that build and recede across every ridge and range. And in the end, it is art that makes us see all things differently, it gives us a chance to feel something new from a different angle, place or state of mind and, in that respect, Booker's art is unsurpassed.

More recently I have become aware of her prints, a series of works that evolve much the same way as her sculpture. The prints utilize texture and tonal changes to put forth a visually charged narrative. Like her sculptures, there is much in the prints that relates to modernist tendencies that challenge our understanding of spatial relationships as Booker relays her reflective and reactive thinking. Booker's approach employs a complex method of collaged print techniques that pushes the formal potential of print media. In addition to visual tensions she creates with tone and texture, she introduces strategically placed swaths of color in some of the prints, and at other times she employs a more overt suggestion of the figure to direct the narratives. This, in some ways, is a bit of a departure from her more abstract iconography, yet these two-dimensional works remain linked to the sculptures in their raw, relatively energetic approach to technique, while this new avenue of expression can further explain her feelings about the intricacies and the complexities of the human condition.

D. DOMINICK LOMBARDI

Printing with Chakaia Booker

I have had the pleasure of collaborating with Chakaia Booker since 2010. My relationship to Chakaia has evolved from printer's assistant to Master Printer, curator, dealer, and friend throughout this time.

After nearly a decade of working closely with Chakaia, one thing that I note, is her constant dedication to her work and her inspiring presence in our community printshop. Though an internationally acclaimed artist, she always finds time to build up those around her; from sharing opportunities, well-seasoned advice, and her incredible kindness.

Printing for artists has opened up my skill set and ways of seeing that would not have been possible through solely making my own artwork. Every artist has their own values and aesthetics and as a collaborative printer, I must adapt my own sensibilities to see differently in order to accomplish the artists' vision. When working with Chakaia, her ideas are very strong and infinite, yet she allows room for the random and unpredictable when bringing them into reality.

Chakaia's approach to sculpture mirrors her works on paper; a meticulously compiled process with similar use of composition, texture, and dimension. It challenges the two-dimensional work into an imagined, and realized three-dimensional space. Every pass, under the thousands of pounds of pressure of the printing press, furthers the bond of paper compositions to substrate sheets, with multi-color chine collé that is hand-painted, woodblock and lithographically printed. In prints, Chakaia explores further depths of transparency and color, often giving them translucency and more vivid palette.

Chakaia looks to push the traditional format of printmaking: through her carefully collaged and re-assembled chine collé pieces and the maximum use of techniques, including the embossment of woodblocks which often requires multiple passes through an etching press. These techniques combined, add an extra layer of dimensionality and a sculptural quality to her prints, that only an artist like Chakaia can envision.

As I have observed Chakaia's investigation of composition, dimensionality, and texture, it is my belief that she asks the viewer to be visually immersed within the work. The subtleties of color and striking contrast draws the viewer into further exploration of hidden worlds of relationships of parts to the whole, as a time-based experience.

JUSTIN SANZ, MASTER PRINTER
ROBERT BLACKBURN PRINTMAKING WORKSHOP

About The Essayists

D. DOMINICK LOMBARDI is a visual artist, writer, and art critic, the U.S. editor of *dArt International Magazine*, and a curator. He is currently represented by Kim Foster Gallery in New York City and Prince Gallery in Copenhagen. He was an art critic for *The New York Times* from 1998 to 2005 and his writings and reviews have also been published in *ARTES*, *The Huffington Post*, *ARTslant*, *Art Experience NYC*, *Sculpture*, *Sculpture Review*, *d'ART* (U.S. Editor), *Art in Asia* (South Korea), *Art Papers*, *Art Lies*, *ARTnews*, *New Art Examiner*, *Art New England*, *NYARTS Magazine*, and others.


As an artist, he has an extensive exhibition record both nationally and internationally. Reviews of his work have been published in *ARTES Magazine*, *culturecatch.com*, *ARTnews*, *NYARTS Magazine*, *The New York Times*, among many others.

Since 1978, Lombardi has served as curator for over 60 noteworthy exhibitions in New York and throughout the United States.

JUSTIN SANZ is a Brooklyn-based artist who exhibits locally and internationally. His work is in the collections of the Library of Congress, The New York Public Library, The Spencer Museum, Davis Museum, and various private collections. He currently works as an educator, Master Printer, and Workshop Manager at the EFA Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop in NYC.

About the EFA Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop

EFA ROBERT BLACKBURN PRINTMAKING WORKSHOP is a non-profit, New York City co-operative printmaking workspace that provides professional-quality printmaking facilities to artists and printmakers of every skill level. Committed to inspiring and fostering a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse artistic community, the workshop is dedicated to the making of fine art prints in an environment that embraces technical and aesthetic exploration, innovation and collaboration. Begun in 1948 with one lithography press, Robert Blackburn's workshop was shared with artist-printmakers, including Will Barnet, Jacob Lawrence, and Romare Bearden, and pioneered new printmaking techniques. While still maintaining his workshop, in 1957 Blackburn became the first Master Printer for Universal Limited Art Editions where he collaborated with and introduced printmaking to artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Helen Frankenthaler, and Robert Motherwell. In 2005 the workshop was purchased by the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts and continues to maintain the goals of its late founder and namesake Robert Blackburn.



CHAKAIA BOOKER
IN AND OUT

DECORDOVA SCULPTURE PARK AND MUSEUM

We are proud to present *Chakaia Booker: In and Out*, the largest solo exhibition of the artist's work mounted in a museum to date.

This exhibition builds on our longstanding commitment to sculpture, but is larger in both scale and ambition than any previous sculpture show organized by the Museum. It reflects the primacy of sculpture to deCordova's mission, and is another step towards our goal of becoming one of this country's preeminent sculpture parks.

I am grateful to Senior Curator Nick Capasso for his vision and fervent commitment to this exhibition, to sculpture as an art form, and to deCordova as an institution. This show happens to coincide with Nick's

FOREWORD twenty-year anniversary at the Museum, and I think it a fitting tribute to his time here to have sculpture take over our galleries, terraces, and rooftop in such a stunning way.

DeCordova is particularly grateful to Trustee Cathy England for her unflagging support of deCordova's mission and exhibitions through her personal philanthropy and that of the Lois and Richard England Family Foundation, and to Marlborough Galleries for their support of the exhibition catalogue.

And above all we thank Chakaia Booker—an artist who personifies the spirit of creativity, experimentation, and collaboration to which all of us at deCordova aspire.

DENNIS KOIS DIRECTOR

DECORDOVA SCULPTURE PARK AND MUSEUM

First and foremost, I would like to thank Chakaia Booker. I have admired her work since the early 1990s when deCordova borrowed one of her earliest outdoor sculptures, *Dialogue with Myself*, for display in our Sculpture Park. I feel privileged to work with Chakaia, and I am grateful for both her enthusiasm for this solo exhibition, and all the time and work she has devoted to this project. I also hasten to thank the Marlborough Gallery, and its President Pierre Levai and Director Janis Cecil. The Marlborough Gallery has been supportive of this exhibition in many, many ways, and Janis in particular has been a joy to work with in every regard.

Many others have played important roles in the success of this exhibition and its catalogue. At the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Curator Chris Cook, Collections Manager and Registrar Amy Duke, and Preparator Jason Myers walked me through their

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sculpture by Chakaia

exhibition *RubberMade:*

Booker, and offered key

advice about the installation of giant, heavy sculptures made of steel and tires. This beautiful catalogue was designed by Jean Wilcox, who also recommended photographer Peter Vanderwarker. The fruit of their collaboration is a publication that shows both Chakaia Booker's work, and the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, to their absolute best advantage.

At deCordova, I offer my thanks to Director Dennis Kois, whose sculpture-centric vision for the future of this institution has made this ambitious exhibition possible. In our Curatorial Department, my work was supported and enriched by the advice of Associate Curator for Contemporary Art Dina Deitsch and former Koch Curatorial Fellow Nina Gara Bozicnik. Registrar Lynn Herrmann Traub, Preparator Brian McNamara, and Associate Preparator Eugene Finney relieved me of all worry as they delivered and installed a most demanding, and beautifully presented, exhibition. Extensive educational programming for *Chakaia Booker: In and Out* was created by



Curatorial Educator Emily Silet, with the assistance of Interpretation Intern Beth Dalal, and also Acting Director of Education Lynn Thomson and Education Assistant Laura Hoffman. Their efforts have helped to make the complexities of Chakaia Booker's abstract sculpture understandable and enjoyable for a wide range of audiences. Thanks also to Director of External Affairs Laurie LaMothe, Director of Institutional Giving Julie Stubbs, and External Affairs Coordinator Susie Stockwell for all their fundraising and marketing efforts.

I owe special gratitude to Koch Curatorial Fellow Lexi Lee Sullivan, who edited this catalogue and assisted me with nearly every aspect of the exhibition. Her devotion to the project, attention to detail, enviable interpersonal skills, and truly tireless work ethic impressed me daily, and insured smooth operations and high quality. Lexi also managed the valuable research and editing work of Curatorial Assistant Jennifer Schmitt, and Curatorial Interns John Letizi and Kathleen O'Brien.

Chakaia Booker would like to thank two people at the Lafayette College Art Department who were instrumental in the planning and fabrication of her new artwork, *No Feeding*: Jase Clark, Printer, Experimental Printmaking Institute; and Lew Minter, Director, Media Lab.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to deCordova Trustee Cathy England and the Lois and Richard England Family Foundation for their long-term dedication to this Museum and its exhibition programs. Their support of *Chakaia Booker: In and Out* underscores their commitment to deCordova's long-term strategic goal: to become a national center for the exhibition and study of Modern and Contemporary sculpture.

I am honored to dedicate this exhibition catalogue to Cathy England.

NICK CAPASSO SENIOR CURATOR



Over the last decade, Chakaia Booker has become one of this country's most important contemporary sculptors. Although active as an exhibiting artist since the mid-1980s, Booker grabbed the attention of the art world at New York's 2000 *Whitney Biennial*, for which she created her magisterial sculpture, *It's So Hard To Be Green* (p. 29) a twelve-by-twenty foot black tangle of cut-up and reassembled rubber tires.¹ This massive relief was the culmination of years of experimentation with what has become her signature material, and confirmed that the artist has something serious going on—not only with tires, but also with the almost 100-year old tradition of abstract sculpture. This solo exhibition, *Chakaia Booker: In and Out*, is neither encyclopedic nor a strict chronology of the artist's sculptural output, but rather an attempt to lay out and examine the major themes in the artist's oeuvre to date: her remarkable range of creativity in sculpture, drawing, and photography; her intrepid engagement with the full spectrum of sculptural formats (freestanding, relief, on pedestals, indoors, outdoors); and her play with size and scale, from the intimate to the colossal. This catalogue essay focuses on the qualities that make Booker's sculpture unique, and contextualizes her work in the history of abstract sculpture.

BEYOND TIRES

The subtitle of the show, like Chakaia Booker's work, bears multiple meanings. *In and Out* refers most overtly to the placement of the sculptures, both in the Museum's indoor galleries as well as in adjacent outdoor terraces and out in the fields of the deCordova Sculpture Park. It also acknowledges the predominant role of tires—hollow, pneumatic objects—as well as the ways in which the artist manipulates them. On a purely visual level, Booker is obsessed with mass and void, shape and space, and the articulation of extrusion and penetration across the surfaces of her sculptures. *In and Out* further echoes the sexual themes that are found in many of the sculptures, which are intentional and frankly unavoidable with all the jabbing, squirming, poking, and throbbing across surfaces expressed with holes and protrusions. Additionally, the exhibition's title is an admittedly poor, though sincere, homage to Booker's quirky, multivalent, double-entendre titles.

Much has been made of Booker's ongoing use of rubber tires, and rightly so. The artist's devotion to this unconventional and idiosyncratic material has led to her acclamation as the "Queen of Rubber Soul," a moniker that the artist has, for the most part, gracefully accepted. In fact, the largest portion of the critical discourse

around Booker and her work has centered almost exclusively on the tires and their implications. Her exhibitions have been called *RubberMade*, *Mass Transit*, and *Jersey Ride*.² Reviews of her shows bear headlines like “The Michelin Woman,” “Where the Rubber Meets the Razor,” and “Artful Retreads.”³ All this tire talk has been both illuminating and limiting, but well worth revisiting given the significance of the material in Booker’s work and the public’s fascination with it.⁴

Why tires? Initially, in the early 1990s, Booker began incorporating tires into her work because they were available, durable, and cost-free. For many years the artist had been scavenging stuff from the streets, parks, trash heaps, dumps, and salvage yards in and around New York City. Her art, indeed her personal attire, has been grounded in the repurposing of discarded materials since her earliest attempts at art-making. According to Booker, she turned to tires because she

...wanted to make outdoor sculpture, to expand my ideas, to increase my scale, so I had to find new materials...I liked how they could be adapted, how I could make different shapes out of them, how they could be indoors and how I could bring them back outdoors.⁵

Soon, though, the artist found that the tires—car, truck, motorcycle, and bicycle, as well as inner tubes—transcended mere utility and formal possibility. They began to determine much of the content of her work. This eccentric easy-to-get but hard-to-work material spawned a fascinating and extensive set of associations. To date, critical discourse around Booker’s choice of tires has focused on three major issues:

Tires are industrial. They are products of the tremendous automotive industry that has defined the American economy and much of our culture for over a century. Tires are ubiquitous, urban, gritty, and dirty—a material both Modern and Contemporary. They also imply labor—not only the industrial manufacture necessary to produce them, but also the artist’s toil in collecting them, cutting them up, and reworking them. Booker’s sculptures reveal hard work, and lots of it.

Found tires are recycled tires. Booker’s personal artistic reuse of this consumer and industrial waste product will certainly not save our planet from its ongoing inundation with zillions of obstinately non-degradable tires, but her practice does serve as a positive metaphor for rebirth and renewal. Old, nasty, crappy junk is newly appreciated for its intrinsic beauty of color, shape, pattern, and texture. Objects scarred and worn become reincarnated as works of art. This aspect of Booker’s

practice is particularly resonant to environmentalists, so much so that the artist has been acknowledged as an eco-feminist.

Tires are black. Booker strongly identifies with her African-American culture and heritage, so with her elevation of tires comes a symbolic ennobling of identity. It is worth noting, however, that tires are actually dark grey and reflect a sizable range of tones, with bits of color occasionally present in sidewalls, steel belts, and lettering. These visual qualities are carefully considered in the composition and fabrication of each sculpture. But cultural conventions see both tires and this African-American artist as black, so for many writers race necessarily plays into Booker's choice of material. Underscoring this association are the many curious parallels between the repeated geometric patterns in tire treads and similar patterns manifest in historical and contemporary African body art, textiles, and architecture.⁶

But tires are not everything. Likewise, bronze does not circumscribe the meaning of Auguste Rodin's sculpture, and steel is by no means the only issue worth considering in the interpretation of David Smith's work. Just as important as the tires is what Booker does with them. These are not tires per se, but tires radically transformed. In fact, after spending any significant amount of time with Booker's sculptures, the pronounced identity of the tires begins to retreat, and other visual and emotional qualities begin to thrust into one's awareness.

Booker works with tires by selecting them, cutting them into large or small pieces, and then reassembling them onto structural armatures of wood or steel, so that in most cases the supports are completely concealed, or expressed as a base. The tire parts are arranged into surface patterns by a difficult and time consuming process that can involve cutting, chopping, slicing, shredding, twisting, folding, dangling, sequencing, screwing, and other actions. Often, several different patterns co-exist and play across the sculpture's surfaces, and are even more varied than the palette of pattern in the tire treads themselves. Booker's ingenuity at creating multiple surface patterns seems boundless, and ranges from the tightly repeated and controlled to the seemingly wild and chaotic.

This process is akin to stretching skin over muscle and bone, and the shapes and arrangements of the tire pieces strongly suggest the organic structures that appear on the surfaces of living things: skin, scales, plates, hair, bristles, spines, spikes, feathers, pustules, pores, orifices, bark, leaves, tendrils, roots, and vines. Booker's patterns also refer to inorganic things closely associated with the body,

like clothing, armor, adornments, and upholstery. *It's So Hard To Be Green* feels like a great flayed hide. *Mixed Message* might be a tropical plant gone mad. (*Wrench*) (*Wench*) II (p. 22) wears a slinky sheath. Booker thus breathes life into tires. Anonymous, mass produced, cast-off, abject garbage is transformed and resurrected into multiple simultaneous signifiers of life—with sensuous bodies and skins, implied organic movement, and a presence both biological and industrial. Sometimes this is subtle, like the bristly texture that overlays the rigid geometry of *No More Milk and Cookies* (p. 33). In other cases the biomorphism is far more overt, and results in objects that resolve into monstrous creatures, like *Hybrid* or *Meeting Ends* (p. 24). Ultimately, the repeated suggestions of biology evoke sexuality. Jorge Daniel Veneciano, currently Director of the Sheldon Museum of Art at the University of Nebraska, has written most extensively on the sexual aspects of Booker's work, and sees in her sculpture an ongoing dialogue between the male and the female, "...a dynamic tension-and-self-confusion within the figurative phallic-vaginal construct...Works become hermaphroditic, she-males in rubber drag. They lure and they threaten, seduce and aggress."⁷

Art historically considered, this masterful attention to the multiple expressive potentials of surface is Booker's greatest contribution to the art of sculpture, and what makes the appellation "Queen of Rubber Soul" beside the point. Simply put, Booker has internalized the formal lessons of 20th century Modernist and Post-Modernist sculpture, and has moved on from bone to skin. The consideration of surface was a mere surface issue, as it were, for much of Modernism. For the most part, Modernist sculpture is smooth, whether it's the bronze of Henry Moore, the wood of Louise Nevelson, or the steel of Carl Andre. During the 20th century, surface articulation was dangerously akin to the hated naturalism and mimeticism of 19th-century academic sculpture, anathema to all true Modernists. Modernist sculptors swore fealty to form and structure, and preached the doctrine of Truth to Materials. Creative energies were devoted to revealing the mysteries of mass and void, and volume and space. Pettifogging about with what lay atop the mass was just plain wrong.

Booker, while directly confronting this 100 years of surface neglect, is of course heavily indebted to her Modernist forebears. She stands on the shoulders of giants, and the formal concerns in her work have evolved directly from the primary concerns of 20th-century abstract sculptors. Her constant attention to in-and-out relationships, in both the structure and surface of her work, extend a long tradition of formal play



that began with the Cubist-inspired sculpture of Alexander Archipenko and extended through the work of Henry Moore (fig. 1), Barbara Hepworth, Lee Bontecou, Martin Puryear, and a host of others. Her recurring attention to biomorphism and abstract evocations of the human figure reflect an art historical lineage that traces from Pablo Picasso (fig. 2), Julio Gonzalez, and the Surrealist *personnages* of the 1920s and 1930s, through David Smith and Richard Stankiewicz, to the host of contemporary sculptors who create hybrids of humans, animals, plants, and machines.

Booker herself acknowledges the direct influence of both Mark di Suvero and Louise Nevelson:

Mark di Suvero's work has an enormous presence and movement in metal as do his earlier works in wood and rubber. The way his work intertwines and moves within itself stimulates me...Louise Nevelson's use of discarded materials and paintings of artworks in solid black create complex dialogues.⁸

Booker's more non-objective work, both small and large, frequently echoes the thrusting geometries and architectonic compositions of di Suvero's sculpture (fig. 3). And her large-scale relief sculptures and devotion to monochrome shapes—and their shadows—echo the best of Nevelson's work (fig. 4).

Anonymity, 2007

Fig. 1

Henry Moore

Reclining Figure, 1938

Green Hornton stone

35 x 52 1/4 x 29 in

(889 x 1327 x 737 mm),

520 kg sculpture

Reproduced by permission of

The Henry Moore Foundation

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Shhh, 2006

Fig. 2
Pablo Picasso
1966 Public Building
Commission of Chicago
All Rights Reserved



The ever-present tires, so firmly identified with this artist, also emerge from a specific art historical context. In the late 1960s and 1970s, a generation of sculptors sought to break free from the aesthetic and critical stranglehold of Minimalism. They worked to reinvigorate sculpture, which had fallen victim to a *reductio ad absurdum* of rigid hard-edged geometry, symmetry, and sleek uninflected industrial surfaces by introducing materials new to the practice of sculpture: felt, lead, gut, neon, rubber, plastics, vinyl, resins, etc. This new tendency, practiced by artists like Robert Morris (fig. 5), Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, Richard Serra, (among many others), was called Process Art, Eccentric Abstraction, Post-Minimalism, and Post-Modernism more generally, but whatever the label it did not stray too far from traditional Modernist practice. Abstraction was a given, and truth to materials held sway, so much so that the composition and the content of these sculptures were almost wholly determined by the sheer physical properties of each substance. Process Art opened a floodgate of material possibilities, and contemporary artists now freely use whatever comes to hand or mind. Chakaia Booker has been a direct beneficiary of this expanded regard for unusual materials, and of the attendant spirit of formal exploration determined by the characteristics of a single chosen material.



No discussion of Booker's sculptural lineage is complete without mention of John Chamberlain. During the late 1950s, Chamberlain began to create abstract sculpture from crushed automobile parts, welded together in dynamic, colorful compositions (fig. 6). At the time, these works were well-received as three-dimensional counterparts to the two-dimensional energies of Abstract Expressionist painting, and the artist worked in this way for many years. Chamberlain's sculpture is an important antecedent to Booker's, in its long-term engagement with an unusual cast-off, found, industrial (automotive) material ultimately transformed into energetic abstract compositions. But for Chamberlain—like Moore, Picasso, di Suvero, Nevelson, and Morris—structure is the predominant formal issue, not surface. Upon the foundations of twentieth-century sculpture, Booker builds surface, and explores its possibilities like no other artist. On one level her sculpture is syncretic, but on another level entirely her own.

In addition to Booker's place within the history of abstract sculpture, it is also worth mentioning significant instances in which she pays homage to the medium's greater history. One of her most important early works, *Untitled (Male Torso that Left His Path)* (p. 35), is among the artist's most clearly referential sculptures. This monumental writhing mass overtly represents a man's muscle-bound midsection, complete with a thrusting phallus. Here Booker partakes of the time-honored traditions of both the partial figure, which began with the Renaissance veneration

Holla, 2008

Fig. 5

Robert Morris

Untitled (version 1 in 9 parts),
1968/2002

Felt, 103 x 85 x 44 in
(261.621 x 215.9 x 111.76 cm)
The Janet and Simeon Braguin
Fund. 2003.76.2a-q

Yale University Art Gallery,
New Haven, Connecticut, U.S.A.
Photo Credit: Yale University
Art Gallery / Art Resource, NY
©2010 Robert Morris / Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York



Conversion, 2006

Fig. 6
John Chamberlain
Hudson, 1960
 Iron and painted steel
 28 x 29 x 10 in
 (71.1 x 73.7 x 25.4 cm)
 Photograph Courtesy of
 Allan Stone Gallery, NY
 ©2010 John Chamberlain/
 Artists Rights Society
 (ARS), New York

of Classical ruins and found Modern expression in the works of Rodin and Constantin Brancusi, and the reclining figure which has roots not only in the ancient art of the West, but also in Buddhist and pre-Columbian sculpture. *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman even called Booker's sculpture "an interpretation of the Belvedere Torso," a Hellenistic sculpture excavated in Rome in the early 15th century that helped spark the revival of Classical art.⁹ And more than one writer has related *It's So Hard To Be Green* to Rodin's masterpiece of relief sculpture, *The Gates of Hell* (1880-1890).¹⁰ Both are big, black, chaotic, and charged with a powerful dread.

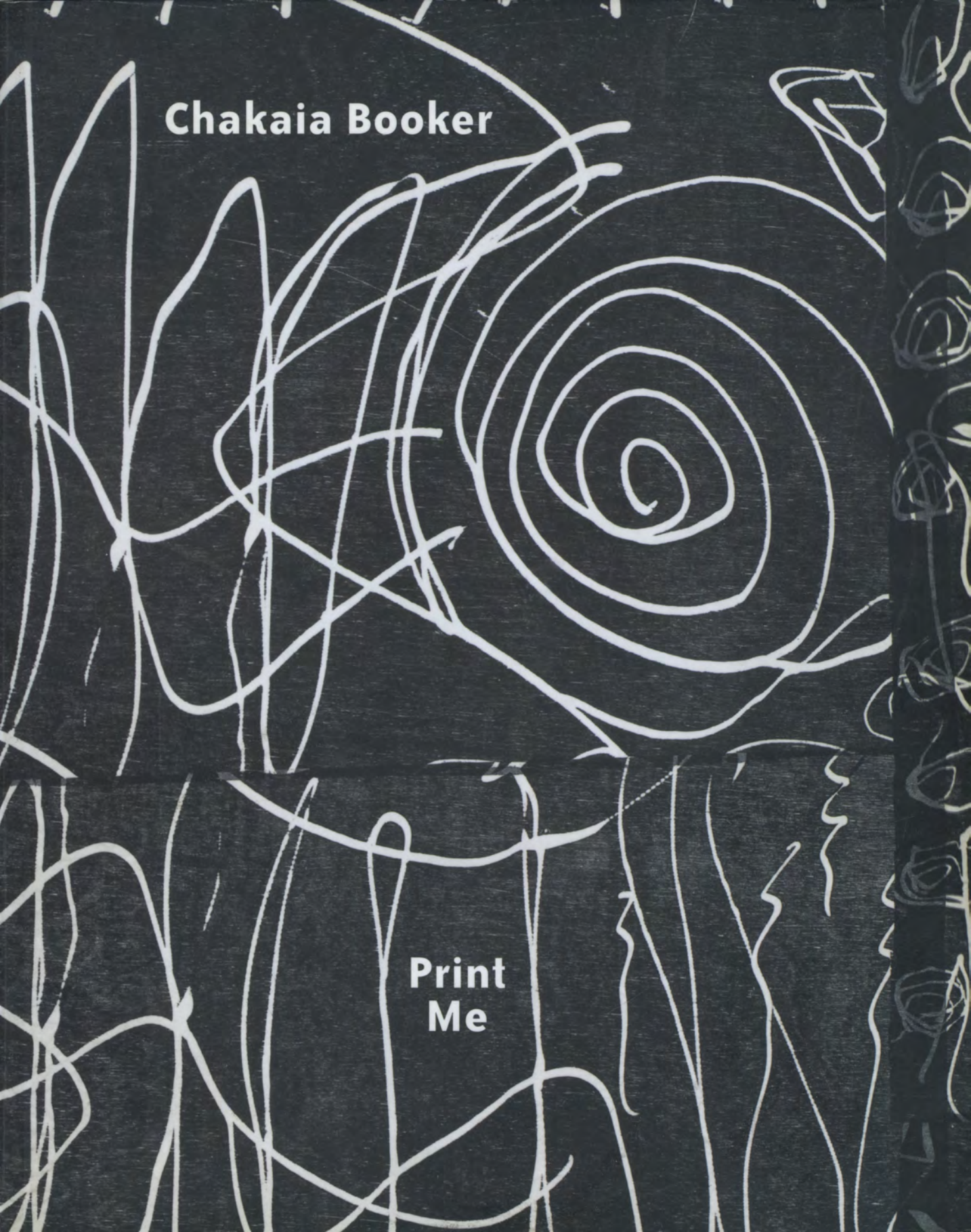
And both are narratives. Rodin's *Gates of Hell* is based, very loosely, on imagery and ideas from Dante's *Inferno*, which do not literally illustrate the epic poem, but attempt to elicit the emotions of the damned and those facing damnation. The story is constructed not so much from the text, but from the psychological reaction of the viewer. This transfer of meaning from an *a priori* literary source to the present imagination of the beholder via the creativity of an artist is absolutely key to understanding the waning of academic art in favor of Modernism, and Chakaia Booker embraces it fully. Despite creating sculpture that is often abstract in the extreme, Booker insists that her "art is storytelling, but the story is open, fluid, mysterious."¹¹

It's So Hard To Be Green does tell a story – or rather, several ineffable stories, communicated with sculpture rather than words, and open to multiple interpretations. Its title, a humorous play on lyrics from Kermit the Frog's famous song, *Bein' Green*, indicates that for Booker, part of the story is about racial identity and ecological consciousness. The artist first heard the song performed by Ray Charles on the popular TV series, *The Cosby Show*, while she was constructing the ambitious and complex sculpture. This particular episode was focused on the trials of youngest daughter Rudy as she struggled with the responsibilities of growing up, so for Booker *It's So Hard To Be Green* is also about coming of age as an artist.¹² Other parts of the story might be about the Gates of Hell—Rodin's, Dante's, or Lucifer's. Still other parts are the feelings evoked by the elements of the sculpture itself – its overwhelming size, its aggressive swirl of tires, its conflation of the organic and the technological, its beautiful chaos. But the story is ultimately yours. Chakaia Booker just sets the stage.

NICK CAPASSO SENIOR CURATOR

NOTES

1. Maxwell L. Anderson et al., *Whitney Biennial 2000*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2000), 65.
2. Christopher Cook, *RubberMade: Sculpture by Chakaia Booker*, exhibition catalogue (Kansas City: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008); *Chakaia Booker: Mass Transit*, exhibition brochure (Indianapolis: Arts Council of Indianapolis, 2008); *Chakaia Booker: Jersey Ride*, exhibition catalogue (Jersey City: Jersey City Museum, 2004).
3. Kelly Crow, "The Michelin Woman," *Wall Street Journal*, 26 July 2008, W2; Benjamin Genocchio, "Where the Rubber Meets the Razor," *New York Times*, 17 May 2009, 10; Julie Cope Saetre, "Artful Retreads," *Indianapolis Star*, 13 July 2008, 7–9.
4. The most extensive discussion of Booker's use of tires is Christopher Cook's essay, "Don't Tread on Me," in *RubberMade: The Sculpture of Chakaia Booker*, 13–23.
5. Quoted in Lilly Wei, "Queen of Rubber Soul," *Art News* 101, (January 2002), 90. Booker has also remarked that "the material is not so important in and of itself. There are infinite possibilities in materials, and every time I approach the material I find new ways to have a dialogue or conversation." Quoted in Valerie Cassel Oliver, "A Conversation with Chakaia Booker," in *RubberMade: Sculpture by Chakaia Booker*, 76.
6. Booker is quick to add that the patterns found in tire treads are echoed in fine and applied arts across global cultures. Interview with Chakaia Booker, May 8, 2010. The most extensive treatment of cultural blackness in Booker's work is Lowery Stokes Sims's essay, "Seeing Chakaia Booker's Sculpture," in *Chakaia Booker*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Marlborough Chelsea, 2009), n.p.
7. Jorge Daniel Veneciano, "No More Milk and Cookies: The Disillusionment of Chakaia Booker," in *Chakaia Booker: No More Milk and Cookies*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Marlborough Chelsea, 2003), 3. This sexual fetishism links Booker's work closely with Surrealism, whose sculptors were among the few Modernists interested in the evocative nature of surface: witness Meret Oppenheim's *Objet (Le Déjeuner en fourrure)*, her infamous fur-covered teacup, saucer, and spoon.
8. Quoted in Jan Garden Castro, "The Language of Life: A Conversation with Chakaia Booker," in *Chakaia Booker: Jersey Ride*, 29. About Nevelson, Booker has also said, "Her belief in the transformative power of the artist to realize works of art from discarded materials is a belief we share. Her work and mine are related in that we both use found objects, minimalist qualities such as materials and color, repetitive patterns, and relief forms." Quoted in "Three Artists Reflect on Louise Nevelson: Chakaia Booker, Mark di Suvero, and Ursula von Rydingsvard," in Brooke Kamin Rapaport, ed., *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson: Constructing a Legend* (New York and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), n.p.
9. Michael Kimmelman, "Turning an Alley into a Showcase for Sculpture," *New York Times*, 22 September 1995, 22.
10. Cook, *RubberMade: The Sculpture of Chakaia Booker*, 22; and Wei, "Queen of Rubber Soul," 88.
11. Quoted in Wei, "Queen of Rubber Soul," 90.
12. Interview with Chakaia Booker, May 8, 2010. *Bein' Green* was written by songwriter Joe Raposo in 1970 for the children's television program *Sesame Street*. It was originally performed by Jim Henson as the puppet character Kermit the Frog.

The image is a black and white abstract drawing. It features a central spiral that winds inward from the right side. To the left of the spiral, there are several overlapping, elongated shapes that resemble leaves or petals, created with multiple overlapping white lines. The background is filled with various other white line patterns, including vertical scribbles, horizontal lines, and small circular motifs, particularly on the right side. The overall composition is dynamic and layered.

Chakaia Booker

**Print
Me**

In the Spring of 2009, when I visited Chakaia Booker's New York City studio to propose publishing a print project, I had a single goal in mind: making something flat. I never suspected that Chakaia, a celebrated sculptor known primarily for her large-scale works made from discarded rubber tires, had exactly the same thing in mind: let's make something flat.

That visit was the start of a three-year collaborative exploration of printmaking, during which Chakaia produced an impressive body of nearly one hundred unique monoprints and four editionable prints. Our collaboration in the print studio sparked the development of new printmaking techniques and a nearly limitless stream of questions. Is this possible? Can we go bigger? Can we edition this? How much more can we get? Our only answer: let's find out.

For an artist renowned for three-dimensional work, making something flat may seem an odd path to take, particularly given the ready access to editionable sculptural media in New York City. But Chakaia had already worked on a few sculptural relief editions, and had not found the visual landscape between 2-D and 3-D particularly compelling. As an artist, she wanted to push her creative potential and visual language into the realm of the unexpected and, for her, that meant flat. The two-dimensional world of printmaking was a blank space on the map that she was eager to explore.

The work that Chakaia made during her three-year residency, a portion of which is reproduced here in this book, resulted from a unique collaboration between Chakaia, myself, the staff, the many interns, and the vibrant community of artists at the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop.



Contemporary fine art printmaking has evolved out of the highly technical craft tradition of commercial printing, which is focused on serving our culture's need to accurately reproduce ideas and disseminate information. Our daily exposure to this type of printing is overwhelming. Prints are all around us. Our newspapers, magazines, money, and even this book were made through the traditional reproductive approach to printing.

Artists working in fine art printmaking use traditional and commercial techniques, knowledge, and expertise developed over the last five hundred years as a tool to further their own conceptual and art-making goals. In the 1940's and 1950's Robert Blackburn and the artists at his Printmaking Workshop championed, to great acclaim, a budding and innovative approach to the medium; a *print as you go* approach that challenged the traditional reproductive philosophy permeating printmaking's history.

This different approach requires a philosophical shift away from reproduction. Instead of taking an existing idea (or image) and breaking it down into simple reproducible components, the 'print as you go' method allows the process of printmaking to influence the development of an image and an idea. The materials become active participants in the art-making process, and the conceptual approach to the work becomes less linear, more fluid, and more 3-dimensional.

Working in this way is more closely related to an artist's private studio practice than to the traditional reproductive craft of printing, and may particularly resonate with sculptors given their familiarity and comfort with creating parts that can be layered and combined in myriad ways, taken apart, and re-combined again and again.

Employing printing techniques to create a new image opens up endless possibilities, and often results in unique, single images, or in unique, edi-

tionable images. The term *multiple original* was first coined to refer to an image developed through the process of printing that happens to be editionable by virtue of the reproducible nature of many printing techniques – in other words, an original work of art in multiple form.

Fine art prints, many of them multiple originals, are made with the same techniques that create all of the mass produced printed items consumed in our daily lives. The difference is that fine art prints are typically printed by hand with far less mechanization, and are always created with the artistic and conceptual goals of the artist foremost in mind. In my shop, we work with an *art first* philosophy that frees our printers and artists to think beyond the confines of traditional printmaking processes strictly applied, encourages innovation, and often results in the creation of new printing techniques. Our primary goal is never to engage in a specific print process per se, but to facilitate the creation of art; art that just happens to be a print.

Collaborative printmaking is a leap of faith. The artist must trust that the printer is flexible and capable enough to evolve or invent techniques demanded by his or her artistic goals and able to interpret those goals through the printmaking lens while staying true to the artist's vision. Likewise, the artist must be open enough to embrace the potential inherent in the differences between his or her primary studio practice and what printmaking can offer.

OPPOSITE LEFT: **Take Out.** 2008

Rubber tire and stainless steel

130 x 88 x 36"

Courtesy of Marlborough Gallery and
the artist (Photo by Frank Espich)

OPPOSITE RIGHT: Chakaia Booker's

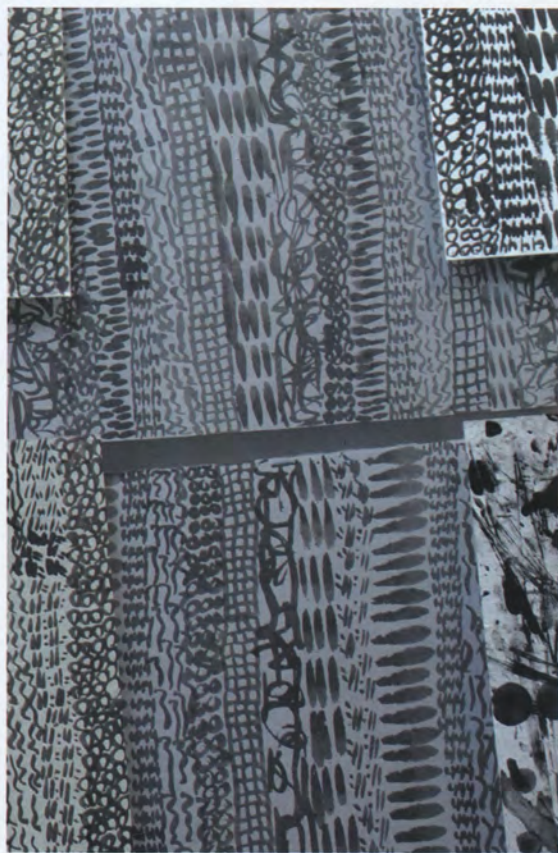
hand-painted sheets at RBPMW.



A *collaborative printer* is a professional printer who uses his or her technical knowledge and expertise to work in collaboration with an artist toward a defined conceptual goal. In this context, as in my collaboration with Chakaia Booker, the artist/printer need not have any prior experience with printmaking or printmaking techniques. That knowledge and expertise is provided by the collaborative printer, producing an artwork that is the unique result of a true collaboration. Both the artist and the printer bring their skills together to create something that neither could have made on his or her own.

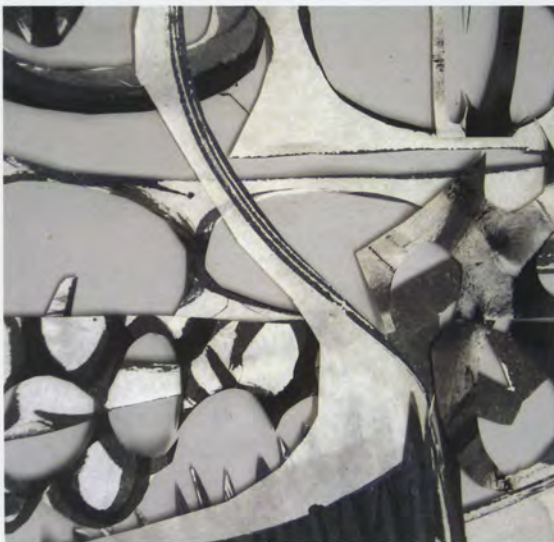
The modern field of collaborative printmaking, pioneered by Robert Blackburn, was developed through this new way of thinking about and making prints. Today, we collaborate with artists at the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop with the same focus on creative freedom that defined Blackburn's innovative vision for the field of printmaking.

Chakaia's background as a sculptor, cutting and layering rubber, as in the tire sculptures for which she is well known, helped to make her a natural for this 'print as you go' approach to printmaking. Traditional approaches to etching, lithography, monotype, and chine collé were far too static for Chakaia. She kept searching for more movement, less rigidity, more options, more opportunities to create and to let chance play a role in the work. As printers, we had to adjust our expectations and preconceived ideas about how to make a print to find a new way of working that resonated with Chakaia's robust studio practice. Consequently, the field of printmaking evolved as it expanded to accommodate her creative needs and, in so doing, opened new doors for Chakaia to grow artistically.



Chakaia's studio practice revolves around the cutting, combining, and re-combining of found materials and her sculptures are developed freely through planning and listening to her own creative voice. Her freedom with her tools and materials allows her to approach the processes of monotype, chine collé, and woodcut in much the same fashion, without being burdened by the tradition of relief printing.

While in our studio, Chakaia painted on thin Asian papers with gouache, watercolor, and film ink. She cut wood blocks with any tool available to her: drills, chisels, grinders, literally "anything that will cut," while searching for ways to maintain the distinctive rhythm and flow typical of her marks. We then printed her blocks in black or white ink on a variety of papers, and coated the back of those impressions as well as her hand-painted papers with archival, water-reconstitutable glue, effectively turning the printed and painted sheets into something akin to a traditional postage stamp. Once the impressions were prepared in this way, Chakaia cut and tore the papers, composing and recomposing, layering the collé pieces at will, much as she would cut, compose, and layer rubber tires in her sculptural pieces.



Chakaia treated the printed and painted sheets like patterns, fabric, or found objects, searching out the marks, gestures, and colors anew that she needed for each particular image. The static printed marks, repeated again and again as they were printed on several sheets of paper (as in a traditional edition), were liberated from their repetitive context as Chakaia simply cut and tore them out. Each mark could now be used in a seemingly infinite number of gestural combinations. Some of Chakaia's images came together in just a few days; others were created from pieces or scraps of prepared paper that she collected over a year or more.

Once Chakaia settled on a composition, a dampened sheet of heavy rag printing paper was placed on top of the coated collé pieces and passed through an etching press at high pressure. The water in the printing paper reconstituted the glue while the pressure of the press ensured a permanent bond. The process of chine collé executed in this way retains a greater translucency and a more seamless quality than would be achievable through a traditional collage, and also provides for a freer, more immediate method of composing and recomposing an image. I like to refer to this method as sculpture with a 2-D outcome. The resulting prints are unique and beautiful images that could be made in no other way, by no other artist.

The Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop is a diverse cooperative community environment, and bits from one project can often find their way into another. Conversations at the communal lunch table, prints by other artists in the drying racks, the introduction of new materials, and watching and listening to each other work all combine to influence each artist who spends time in the shop. For Chakaia, seeing the materials used by MF Husain – a renowned Indian artist known for his bold use of color – during his time in the studio rekindled her

interest in working with color. For an artist known for her use of black rubber this represented a dramatic shift for her audience, but a natural progression for Chakaia.

Exploring new techniques with Chakaia and taking risks with familiar print processes has been a unique and rewarding experience. As a collaborative printer, it is a rare treat to have the opportunity to work with an artist who is not only capable of, but also compelled to redefine how we look at traditional techniques.

Art often functions as a cultural mirror, showing us who we have been and who we are today. These works of art typically look to the past to contextualize the present, or project a certain view of the present as a tool for shaping our past. Although these cultural mirrors are important for understanding who we are as a society, I find more compelling the rare works of art that are unconcerned with what we already know. The artists making this work are not concerned with telling us where we have been, where to go, who we are, or who to be. They do not necessarily tell us anything. Rather, they are conversational. They ask us questions. Artworks focused on asking us who we will become cause us to re-evaluate what we understand to be true. They are future focused. The depth of meaning of our private experience with art is directly related to the depth of our participation. When we repeatedly engage with works of art that are focused on asking us questions, and we respond with our own perspective, we are contributing to the evolution of culture.

OPPOSITE: Close up of Chakaia Booker's materials before printing.

RIGHT: Chakaia Booker at RBPMW.

I ask the artists I collaborate with these two questions more than any others when thinking about the viewer's experience and the artist's goal for his or her work. What do you want it to do? How do you want it to feel? These questions help keep the focus on the responsibility of art as a cultural mirror or as a contribution to the evolving cultural conversation. The images Chakaia has created in print, shown here in this book, draw you in. They evolve with you. They ask you to participate. This publication's aim is to make the work accessible for viewing and encourage participation in a conversation with the artist and our culture.



“ Using only two colors of ink, black and white, I decide what other tools to use; the different weights of paper, the wood blocks, the hand-painted papers, scissors, the press: all of these are my tools. After addressing the flow of the paper, the movement of the textures and looking at what’s present, I’m able to start building.

I save all the proofs and the cutoff edges that are produced as I’m working in the print studio. This material is important as it creates so many different shapes and forms, some deliberate and some from the cut. ”

“ Anywhere you travel, you travel with who you are. You become a type of search engine for collected information that you bring through the door. When working in the print studio, I’m not leaving my past in my other work. It’s all the same: the layering, the weight, the textures, the movement. Those are my basic concerns when I’m working.

The more pieces collected, the more freedom you have to go in with a particular intention. However, then you’re confronted with a multitude of choices. Just like in the sculptures, there can be preset focuses: Is it going to be on the wall? Free-standing? How big is it? The size of the paper is a starting point, but it always grows in the process. ”

“ The beauty of it after it's printed is the effect of the colored papers, which produce a blend of colors and textures as they are embossed. In the same small space, you can have a variation of things that you wouldn't have thought possible.

For example, even though the cutouts are flat, they work off each other and you are seeing the color that is coming through. Although there's not a lot of physical depth, you get a sense of dimension through the visual depth. The embossment is another element activating the surface of the paper. At a certain distance you can't see the embossing. To experience that effect, you become involved with the physicality of the piece. ”

“ When you think about sewing or starting a sculpture, you see that they both work in a modular format to create a larger idea. Sculpture is about smaller components assembled together to make the larger piece; it is about the diversity of material and imagery, and then layering and somehow putting them all together. ”

Phil Sanders is an artist, Collaborative Master Printer, and the Director of Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop (RBPMW), a program of The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts. He launched the exhibition space Blackburn 20|20 in 2009 as a project of RBPMW, and serves as the Director/Senior Curator of its programs and exhibitions. Sanders has worked as a Collaborative Master Printer since 1997, collaborating with hundreds of artists in fine art printshops around the world: Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE), West Islip, NY; Trillium Graphics, San Francisco, CA; and David Krut Print Workshop (DKW), Johannesburg, South Africa.

Sanders has taught at Stanford University, San Francisco State University, and Penland School of Crafts, and has been invited to conduct lectures and curate exhibitions at national and international academic and cultural institutions including Museum of Modern Art, NY; Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, CA; Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Canada; School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; Otis College of Art and Design, CA; Harvard University Law School, MA; Dundee Printmakers, Scotland; and Frans Masereel Center, Belgium.

Sanders received a BFA in Studio Art, with a focus on printmaking, a BA in Art Education, and a Minor in Art History from the University of Florida. He studied woodworking at Penland School of Crafts, and received the Printer Training Program Certificate from the Tamarind Institute of Lithography. Sanders' work has been exhibited nationally and internationally in both solo and group exhibitions, and is contained in the collections of Yale University Art Gallery, University of New Mexico Fine Art Museums, Canson Inc. Corporate Collection, and Arizona State University, among others.

As an artist, printer, and educator, Sanders actively pursues the development of the field of fine art printmaking through all of his professional endeavors including printer training, technical innovation and education, web-based educational videos and demonstrations, curating exhibitions, and writing both technical and critical texts on contemporary art and printmaking.

Sanders founded PS Marlowe Inc., an art projects publisher and creative services consultancy firm in 2009. PS Marlowe works to empower and evolve its clients' creative pursuits for the positive development of culture.



SPEAKEASY

— CHAKAIA BOOKER —

JULY 11-NOVEMBER 4, 2016 | KNIZNICK GALLERY
BRANDEIS WOMEN'S STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER

Chakaia Booker's abstract sculptures made from automobile tires address cultural, gender and environmental issues through their physicality and suggestive forms. Booker's work is often monumental in scale, and she achieves a range of effects with the pliable material. The forms and textures she creates fluctuate from industrial and supernatural to expansive and figurative.

Discarded rubber tires come with immediate associations of excess and colossal waste, but as sculptural material their characteristics take on new meaning. The skin-like membranes with worn treads and patterned, burnt surfaces are exploited by the artist.

Her prints in this exhibition demonstrate a similar responsiveness to her process and materials and expand her visual language in two dimensions. She marks the wood-block surfaces with drills, chisels and routers, mimicking her sculptural practice. With the printed material, she arranges torn and layered shapes to create figurative and abstract forms.

Booker's intention is to create an open dialogue with the viewer, allowing the final form of her work to evade a singular reading. SpeakEasy refers to elusive territory, obscured potential and the surprising consequences of the artist's manipulation of materials.

SUSAN METRICAN

Rosalie and Jim Shane Curator & Director of the Arts

CHAKAIA BOOKER

BENDING THE MEDIUM

HALLIE RINGLE, ASSISTANT CURATOR, THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM

Flipping through the images of Chakaia Booker's sculptures in a glossy exhibition catalogue or book is a much different experience than viewing them in person. In the flesh, Booker's sculptures emit an odor that, to me, becomes part of the sculpture itself. I had the honor of including Booker's "Repugnant Rapunzel (let down your hair)" (1995) in "Salon Style" in spring 2015 at the Studio Museum in Harlem. When I first viewed the work, which is in the permanent collection of the Studio Museum, I was struck both by the smell caused by the rubber tire material, which 10 years

later is still detectable, as well as the visual weight of the layered and woven pieces of tire. Another challenge with reproducing Booker's work is the incredible detail and weight of the sculpture, which shifts from every perspective, each vantage point revealing the complex structures of the work.

Much of Booker's career has been dedicated to her sculptural practice, specifically manipulating found objects to form abstract, organic, twisted forms that both attract and repulse the viewer. Booker began working with tire

remnants in the 1980s because they were relatively inexpensive but also a means of addressing social and political concerns. Booker's material inspiration is often cited as the urban spaces of New York and New Jersey, where blown-out rubber tires are ubiquitous. Booker's work becomes increasingly relevant globally as, annually, around one billion tires are discarded worldwide. The sheer amount of tire detritus sourced by Booker can only lead one to wonder about the environmental impact of this material.

Booker's use of rubber is nuanced, extending far beyond environmental concerns into issues of labor and race. Her reference to rubber and production is twofold. First, Booker's own process is extremely labor intensive. Each of her sculptures demonstrates her commitment to working with the medium, whether it's cutting and assembling thousands of strips of found rubber tire, as in "Cross Over Effects" (2003), or forming complicated, intertwining forms in "Random Thought" (2012). Second, the extreme detail and precise application bring into focus the issues around the labor and production of rubber itself. Both historic rubber plantations and contemporary methods of rubber production are riddled with human rights violations,



including child and forced laborers. These controversies are embedded within the very material of the work. "When you're working with found materials," Booker says, "each one comes with its own purpose, history and use."¹

Booker works with tires, in part, for their connection to race. Within American culture, the varied and nuanced experiences of African-American people are often collapsed into a single identity. Booker considers the tires, with varied patterns and colors, to be akin to the reduction of African-American identities, as these materials are also viewed as a set, as homogenous. The residue left on the tire is the evidence of human use and production and viscerally connects Booker's material to the people who once used the rubber of the sculpture.

The titles and forms of Booker's works are no less evocative than the materials, often referring to genitalia and the body as means of discussing gender. Each of the pieces that compose Booker's sculptures has a unique surface created by tire treads or the wear and tear of use. These scratches and patterns are references to the wrinkles and marks of aging. Sculptures such as "Cross Over Effects" (2003) and "Male Referendum" (2003) contain clear phallic references, while "Crossed Vagina" (2001) and "The Nest" (2003) take the shape of female genitalia. As Jorge Daniel Veneciano writes in "No More Milk and Cookies: The Disillusionment of Chakaia Booker," "Works become hermaphroditic, she-males in rubber drag. They lure and they threaten, seduce and aggress."² The complicated structure of "The Nest" invites the audience in, beckoning them to examine each layer, yet, at the same time, it takes on an almost menacing presence as its tendrils extend into the gallery and the very space of the viewer.

This multisensory experience of viewing Booker's work isn't limited to her tire works; like the rubber sculpture works, her two-dimensional works on paper take different shapes from each vantage point. Booker's prints, although meant to be viewed in a more traditional way than her sculptural works, are as complex in person. Seen together in this exhibition, the prints take a clear place in Booker's oeuvre, not as a separate practice but as an extension of her sculptural work.

During Booker's time at the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop, she created nearly 100 unique prints. Booker's meticulous process extends to her prints. Some works, similar to her sculptures, contain small pieces of cut and torn prints layered to make the final piece. During the formation of these works on paper, Booker combines hand-printed and painted pieces of thin, delicate papers that become transparent during the printing process, allowing each layer to bleed into the next. As in her rubber pieces,

the body figures in some of her print works but, in this iteration, as genderless figures in motion.

Booker's practice continues to evolve, both in sculpture and print. During her time at the Blackburn Printmaking Workshop, Booker experimented with production processes, devising new ways to create work and make marks that



articulate the visual language of her sculptural works. In the same way, Booker forms sculptures out of unexpected materials. Her prints are made with an innovative printing technique, one that conforms to her improvisatory method of working. In proving that she can bend any medium to her will, Booker created a set of prints that dialogue with her three-dimensional work, both sharing the same sculptural syntax in fundamentally different ways.

1. Castro, Jan Garden. "The Language of Life: A Conversation With Chakaia Booker." *Sculpture Magazine*. February 2003.
2. Veneciano, Jorge Daniel. "No More Milk and Cookies: The Disillusionment of Chakaia Booker." *Chakaia Booker: No More Milk and Cookies: September 15-October 18, 2003*. New York: Marlborough Chelsea, 2003. 3

All works mentioned appear in the exhibition.



Chakaia Booker is best known for her monumental sculptures made from discarded automobile tires. She has become one of the most important American contemporary sculptors working today. Her work has been shown in group and solo exhibitions at numerous galleries throughout the U.S., including the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, the Newark Museum, the Neuberger Museum of Art, the Marlborough Gallery, MoMA PS1, as well as in the "20th-Century American Sculpture" exhibition held at the White House in 1996. She gained international acclaim at the 2000 Whitney Biennial with "It's So Hard to Be Green" (2000), her 12.5' x 21' tire wall sculpture. She has had recent solo exhibitions at Millennium Park and the 606 Bloomingdale Trail, both in Chicago, Sculpture for New Orleans, David Krut Projects, the National Museum of Women in the Arts and the Milwaukee Art Museum. Her work is included in the public collections of the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Storm King Art Center, the Queens Museum, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Jersey City Museum and many others. Booker received the Pollock-Krasner Grant in 2002 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2005. She earned a BA in sociology from Rutgers University in 1976 and an MFA from the City College of New York in 1993. She currently works and resides in New York City.