



Chakaia Booker

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DAVID NOLAN GALLERY

24 East 81st Street New York NY 10028 Tel +1 212 925 6190 davidnolangallery.com

Chakaia Booker: Public Opinion

Phil Sanders

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Public Opinion, Chakaia Booker's inaugural exhibition with David Nolan Gallery, showcases the artist's signature approach to abstraction developed over the last four decades. Booker, a fixture of the New York City East Village art scene since the early 1980s, is best known for her pioneering use of recycled rubber tires as a raw material for making abstract sculpture, often at a monumental scale.

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As an abstractionist, the essential elements of materiality, modularity, and movement are the key building blocks for all of Booker's works regardless of media. The pieces assembled for *Public Opinion* include bronzes, ceramic constructions, paintings, drawings, prints, as well as sculptures composed of Booker's now iconic rubber tires. Booker's work is often site-specific and site-responsive. *Manipulating Fractions*, last exhibited in Booker's solo survey, *The Observance*, at The Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami in 2021, has been reassembled and reinterpreted in response to the gallery's architecture and volume, weaving in and out of rooms. This iteration of the iconic and large-scale work highlights Booker's abilities to adapt materials and forms through a modular approach. The long running themes or meditations on human desire, struggle, perseverance, hope held back and hope realized present in Booker's earlier works made of rubber and steel, such as *Raw Attraction* (in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art), are continued with new works, *Conflicting Issues* and *Minimum Wage*.

Booker's primary material, rubber tires, is conceptually loaded, speaking to issues of environmental destruction, socioeconomic disparity, and access to technology while also relating to modes of transportation. Curators and critics have often linked the material to the artist's African-American heritage, which Booker acknowledges, adding that the material also speaks to the resilience of Africans in the diaspora, citing the difficulty in getting traction to move forward and upward versus spinning in circles.

Booker's titling keeps these multifaceted readings of the work open as exemplified with classic works, *It's So Hard to Be Green* (Booker's monumental contribution to the 2000 Whitney Biennial) and *A Moment in Time* (2004 work at Storm King Art Center), and new works included in this exhibition, *Self Absorbed* and *Fixed Scale*. These conceptual attributes combined with the intrinsic artistic elements of beauty, gesture, and sheer physical presence are why Booker was included in the seminal exhibition at the

About Chakaia Booker

Booker lives in New York City and her studio is located in Allentown, PA. She is the recipient of numerous awards, grants, and residencies including the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, The Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Booker's work has been exhibited throughout the United States, Europe and Asia, and is held in more than 40 public collections, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT; National Museum of African American History & Culture, Washington, D.C.; and the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.

The Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami recently published a monograph on the occasion of Chakaia Booker's 2021 retrospective, *The Observance*.

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List of illustrations

1. *Fixed Scale*, 2023
rubber tires and wood
77 x 41 x 14 1/2 in
(195.6 x 104.1 x 36.8 cm)

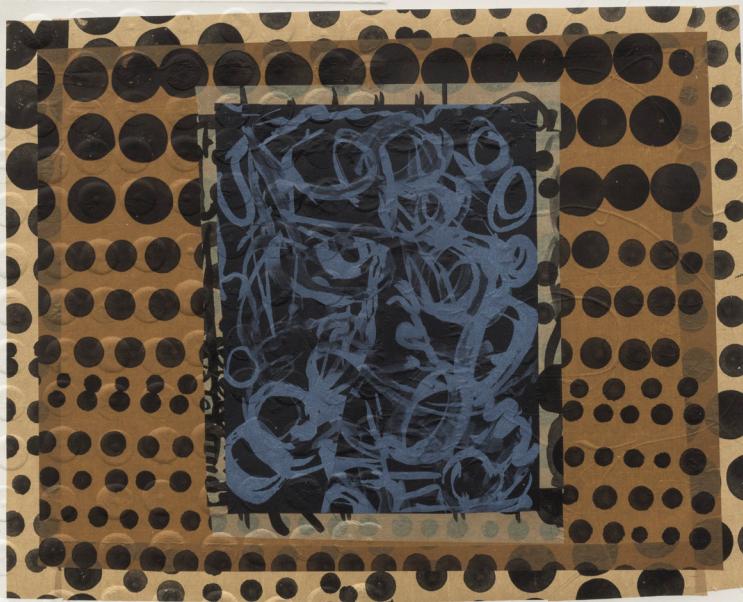
2. *Self Absorbed*, 2023
rubber tires and wood
43 x 97 1/2 x 7 in
(109.2 x 247.7 x 17.8 cm)

3. *Inflected Message*, 2021
stoneware clay and sawdust
pit firing
21 x 14 x 14 in
(53.3 x 35.6 x 35.6 cm)

4. *Romantic Repulsive*, 2002
cast bronze
25 x 29 x 14 in
(63.5 x 73.7 x 35.6 cm)



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5. *Minimum Wage*, 2022
rubber tires, metal, and wood
26 x 32 x 22 in
(66 x 81.3 x 55.9 cm)

6. *Conflicting Issues*, 2023
rubber tires and wood
26 x 36 x 24 in
(66 x 91.4 x 61 cm)

7. Untitled, 2022
lithography and multilayered
chine collé collage with
embossment
21 1/4 x 29 1/4 in
(54 x 74.3 cm)

Cover:
Manipulating Fractions, 2004
(made in sections)
rubber tires, stainless steel,
and wood
dimensions variable

Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Epic Abstraction: Pollock to Herrera*, placing the artist rightfully in the company of influential and uniquely identifiable abstractionists Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Ellsworth Kelly, Carmen Herrera, Helen Frankenthaler, Thornton Dial, Louise Nevelson, and Cy Twombly.

When working on prints and paintings, Booker's modular approach carries through. In the graphic works, Booker's mark making in woodcut, lithography, or screenprint is the beginning of the process. The printing process allows for single marks to be repeated, cut out, relocated and recontextualized by separating each mark from the locked format of the matrix from which it was printed. There are parallels visually with the tire tread patterns and shape repetition of the rubber sculptures in the prints and the paintings. Printmaking has offered Booker a new catalog of patterns and gestures from which to construct two-dimensional works. Booker has pioneered a new branch of the intaglio process known as chine collé. Chine collé in its traditional form is an intaglio printing method developed to adhere thin, often translucent papers to a support paper while printing a base image. It provided color contrasts and greater drama within a traditionally black and white image. Booker reinvented this simple process to serve her own creative desires making the most of the processes unique abilities to increase the transparency of layers, blending marks, colors, and materials into one another, a direct contrast to collage which is more about opacity, and coverage through its layering. Booker often activates the surfaces of her works on paper through embossment, using her carved blocks to create raised white lines on white paper, a direct visual foil to black rubber tire treads.

Modularity is essential to understanding Booker's work, whether in sculpture, painting, or printmaking, where the same image construction principles are applied across media. The ability to build textures, movements, and forms through repetition not only creates

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rich, tactile, and seductive surfaces, it draws parallels to industrialization, textiles for fashion, and cultural homogenization; hallmarks of the American middle class and American dream. In this way Booker's abstract works, in art historical terms, live between the gestural and repetitious world of Jackson Pollock and the constructed architecture of Louise Nevelson with an inventiveness reminiscent of fellow abstractionists Sam Gilliam and Thornton Dial. Modularity solves creative problems of achieving a large scale with

work and allows for near infinite possible variations on a theme. This approach to making frees a single mark or segment of a pattern from being locked into a single location or context. For Booker, modularity is liberating and integral in developing rhythm within a work and within its viewing. The flow and movement inherent in each piece is how Booker pulls the audience in, encouraging viewing in the round. Booker's work is visually lyrical, revealing itself over time, instigating conversation.