

Chakaia Booker
Public Opinion

May 5 – June 23, 2023

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.

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, 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. 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 as it relates 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 required for survival for 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 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.

Modularity is essential to understanding Booker's work, whether in sculpture, painting, or printmaking. The ability to build textures, movements, and forms through repetition not only creates 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 are how Booker pulls the audience in, encouraging viewing in the round. Booker's work is visually lyrical, revealing itself over time, instigating conversation. —*Phil Sanders*

Born in 1953 in Newark, New Jersey, Chakaia Booker received her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from Rutgers University in 1976 and her Master of Fine Arts from the City College of New York (CUNY) in 1993. Booker studied a variety of disciplines including African dance, ceramics, weaving, basketry and tai 'chi. These practices have shaped her innovative artistic practices in sculpting, painting, collage, and photography, using materials such as rubber, plastic, ceramic, and bronze. Known for her elaborate and ornamental sculptures created from used and discarded construction materials, such as rubber tires that Booker defines as "abstractly African", the artist merges ecological concerns with explorations of racial and economic difference, globalization, and gender. Her powerful work across diverse mediums has brought forth the transformation of discarded tires and stainless steel into complex assemblages.

Booker began integrating scrapped construction materials into large, outdoor sculptures in the early 1990s. Her artistic process is enormously physical, from transporting the tires to reshaping them with machinery. Slicing, twisting and weaving this medium into radically new forms and textures, Booker gives the industrial materials an anthropomorphic quality. Focusing on the experience of being Black in America, her rubber tire works encompass various interwoven elements that are in conversation with each other. The varied tones of the rubber parallels human diversity, while the tire treads draw upon African scarification and textile design. The visible wear and tear on the tires mirrors the physical marks of aging.

Similar to the construction of her woven works is Booker's personal aesthetic, which turns her body into a moving piece of art. Booker views herself as "a sculpture through her tasks of dressing, sewing, cooking, and other daily activities", as she considers them to be art forms in their own rights. In the 1980s, Booker created wearable sculptures that serve as an imaginative space in which chi, or life energy, is emanated through the flow of materials. The wearable sculpture, which includes a headdress, is made with various African textiles, wrapped on top of each other with hanging strips of draped fabric to create movement. The sculptures are powerful constructions that command attention, at once fanciful and solemn.

Her works stand as testimony to art's transformative impact. Chakaia Booker's abstract sculptures stem from a tradition in modern art of using found objects and industrially fabricated materials recalling artists as diverse as Mark Di Suvero, Louise Nevelson, and Marcel Duchamp. Her commitment to being a performing work of art in constant flux coinciding with her power to challenge restrictive institutions demonstrates Booker's ability to be an engaged, all-encompassing artist of vicissitude.

Booker's works are contained in more than 40 public collections and have been exhibited across the US, in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Booker was included in the 2000 Whitney Biennial and received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2005. Recent public installation highlights include Millennium Park, Chicago (2016-2018), Garment District Alliance Broadway Plazas, New York, NY (2014), and National Museum of Women in the Arts New York Avenue Sculpture Project, Washington, D.C. (2012).

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