

Don't Tread on Me: Sculpture by Chakaia Booker

Solo Exhibition Series

Throughout her career, Chakaia Booker has explored the expressive possibilities of unusual materials. She is best known for her work with discarded automobile tires, which she cuts into pieces of varying length, width and shape—and fastens onto wooden or metal armatures. She builds indoor and outdoor sculptures ranging in scale from intimate wall pieces to large public works.



Serendipity 1998
rubber tires, wood, steel
Loan courtesy of the artist

NATHAN MANILOW
SCULPTURE PARK

Governors State University
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Solo Exhibition Series

Booker culls rich effects from her material. She slices and folds tires into small teardrop and tray shapes, diamonds, daggers and more, then attaches dozens of identical pieces onto the armature to make rhythmic patterns and textures. To activate the surface, she mounts some tire fragments with the tread facing outward. She may bend fragments backwards to show the tire's smooth, somewhat shiny interior. The artist uses automobile, truck, motorcycle and bicycle tires, whatever is available. Manufacturers change their products every year, she says, which means that she constantly gets new treads and textures to work with. The colors vary too, particularly on the inside, from different shades of black to subdued yellows, purples, greens and blues.

Booker's work recalls textile, which was her first material. As a child, she learned sewing from her aunt, grandmother and sister. When she grew older, she altered her own clothes to accommodate her height and long arms. Later she began to make wearable art pieces and sculptures, adding discarded bones and wood scraps into them.

In the 1980s, she decided to make public sculptures and sought a material that would be durable outdoors. Tires were cheap and easy to find. Friends helped her load them onto trucks and carry them to her studio. She sees her use of tires as a personal statement on humanity's relationship to the environment and our responsibility for contaminating it.

Don't Tread on Me: Sculpture by Chakaia Booker consists of three outdoor pieces—**Serendipity** (1998); **Meeting Ends** (2005); and **What's Not** (2009). These works come from different times in her career and suggest her creative range.

Serendipity, the earliest piece, is an enclosure-like construction, twelve feet high, made of long wooden blocks that the artist has covered with stretched lengths of tire rubber and held together with long steel bolts. Booker has called **Serendipity** "a composition" instead of a construction because its transparent walls bell out at the viewer and its structural supports lean to one side. **Serendipity** draws on the forms of architecture, but has no practical use except as art.

Behind the main portion of **Serendipity** sits a much smaller structure whose meaning becomes clear when the piece is viewed from above. Looking down into the quadrangle, the artwork is like a question mark and the artist stated in

Serendipity 1998
rubber tires, wood, steel
144 x 720 x 24
(dimensions variable)
Loan courtesy of the artist





Meeting Ends 2005
rubber tires, stainless steel
80 x 50 x 47
Loan courtesy of the artist



the catalog for her 2004 show **Jersey Ride** that the word serendipity "is about finding something accidentally and then having it turn into something valuable."

Meeting Ends, the most African of the three pieces in **Don't Tread on Me**, is a pedestal sculpture that suggests a traditional ceremonial staff. Roughly nine feet high including its concrete base, it's an expressive tour de force.

At the bottom of **Meeting Ends** are short folded tire strips, tread facing outward, that make clustered teardrop shapes with an active surface. Above this, Booker has fastened lozenge-shaped strips of tire—they look like feathers—to the steel armature. Coming from somewhere within this rhythmic mass are long pieces of tire interior that fold in and out, displaying their corduroy-like surface as they catch the light. Booker attaches arc-shaped pieces of tire body above this, which seem to almost move and recall dreadlocks. Topping off the sculpture are short lozenge-shaped strips attached to the armature so they point in all directions, a bit like the exuberant Black hair styles called twists. **Meeting Ends** is installed outside the gallery where Governor's State University displays its Pacific Island art collection, to make a connection between art forms of the past and the present.

Visible across the lake is **What's Not** (2009) a frame-shaped piece on steel legs that connects chronologically with Booker's 2008-09 exhibition of ten outdoor sculptures in Indianapolis, Indiana.

With the Indianapolis exhibition, Booker's work became more complex and less narrative. The frame assumed greater importance as the sculptures became more linear and the artist gave greater attention to surface. There are specific reasons for these changes.

Booker normally works with steel-belted tires that have wires embedded in them. As long as the tire is cut off straight, the wires are too and the sculpture can be touched. If wires protrude, they can hurt people. Since the exhibition was planned for downtown streets with much pedestrian traffic, the artist played it safe and used tires without steel belts.

"Those tires were a different material for me," she said in an interview, "which translated into new ways of thinking about the sculpture—and building it. Every time I make new work, I try to find a different voice in what I've been doing. I see how I can keep pushing my work forward."



"Sometimes my changes are very subtle," she continued. "Also, depending on the piece, I must balance the form and the surface so the work speaks clearly. It's not like I can ignore my audience and just do things all of a sudden that only mean something to me."

Tires are a challenging material to work with. "If you're trying to put them into a particular position," says Booker, "you must hold on for dear life and get your elbows, knees and body into it. The tire can snap back and knock you out." To survive, the artist does yoga, practices Tai Chi and even lifts weights.

Chakaia Booker is an artist at the peak of her powers. Her work constantly refreshes itself as she works with materials that change in unpredictable ways whenever she comes to them.

— Victor M. Cassidy

What's Not 2009
rubber tires, stainless steel
110 x 64 x 34
Loan courtesy of the artist

Victor M. Cassidy has written for *Sculpture Magazine*, *ArtNet*, *Art in America*, *Ceramics Art and Perception* and other publications. He is author of five books, including *Sculptors at Work* (2011) for which he interviewed Chakaia Booker at her Allentown, PA, studio.



Chakaia Booker
Born 1953, Newark, NJ

Education

City College of New York (1993)
M.F.A. Sculpture and Ceramics,
New York, NY

Rutgers University (1976)
B.A. Sociology, Brunswick, NJ

Chakaia Booker has exhibited nationally and internationally. Her sculpture has been seen in over 40 solo presentations including at the National Museum for Women in the Arts, Washington, DC (2012-14), the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO (2008) and the prestigious Whitney Biennial (2000). She has been included in over 100 group exhibitions since 1998. Ms. Booker's work is included numerous private and public collections including The Studio Museum of Harlem, NY, NY; Queens Museum, NY, NY; Frederick Meijer Sculpture Garden, Grand Rapids, MI; and Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, MO.

Ms. Booker lives in New York, NY and maintains a studio in Allentown, PA.

Chakaia Booker will visit Governors State University's Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park (NMSP) as a Special Guest at *Carts&Cocktails*, Saturday, September 13, 2014. She will be a visiting artist at the campus September 15-17, 2014. Check the NMSP's website for details of her schedule.

Acknowledgements

Large-scale presentations such as *Don't Tread on Me: Sculpture by Chakaia Booker* are not undertaken lightly, nor do they happen without the support – both financial and logistical - of many individuals and organizations.

This is the fourth Solo Exhibition Series presentation which GSU's Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park (NMSP) has undertaken. We thank BMO Harris Bank and particularly Jeanna Bridges, BMO Harris Bank's U.S. Head for Diversity and Inclusion and also an NMSP Board member as well as Lisa Jarmozska, BMO Harris Bank Community Affairs Manager, for their continued, personal support of this program. The Solo Exhibition Series brings internationally recognized sculptors and their artwork to University Park for extended presentations. This enables our public – students, staff, neighbors, and visitors – to experience cutting-edge approaches to material and concept, enlarging their perspective of what sculpture and art might be.

Many thanks to Elaine P. Maimon, President of Governors State University and her administration for the encouragement and support it has shown over the past seven years.

The Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park is dedicated to the growth of the park and its programs. The members' vision, hard work, and willingness to give generously of themselves has helped fulfill the promise of our mission statement, "Set within the prairie landscape of Governors State University, the Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park serves its constituency with distinctive educational outreach and original programming - encouraging an interdisciplinary understanding and appreciation of sculpture and art in contemporary life."

Our many other supporters, Pathfinders and Bill Dodd Memorial Prairie Restoration Fund donors, continue to vote with their participation in our programming and activities. Thank you.

A long-distance shout-out to Rusty Freeman, Curator of Fine Art and his staff at the Cedarhurst Center for the Arts in Mt. Vernon, IL, is in order. They prepared **Serendipity** for shipping to the NMSP and Rusty acted as a gracious host during a reconnaissance trip made in the Spring of 2014.

Student sculpture assistants Chris Costello and, particularly, Peter Pagast worked effectively with Alston VanPutten, Chakaia Booker's preparator, in assembling **Serendipity** and in the preparation of the three works for exhibition to the public. GSU's Facilities Development and Management (FD&M) area continues to provide critical assistance in supplying equipment expertise and groundskeeping. Many thanks to Sajid Mian, Associate Vice-President and Kevin Barto, Director of Campus Services for their generosity of spirit.

And, many thanks to Chakaia Booker for her willingness to participate in this presentation. Your sculpture has changed the visual dialogue on our campus.

Geoffrey Bates
Director and Curator

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