The Rubber Meets the Road

Chakaia Booker's tire sculptures debut this month, the edgiest in a series of public art exhibitions downtown. But can the program be sustained?

BY RENEE WILMETH

Perhaps the best thing the city's newest public art exhibit has going for it is that it will be made of tires—recycled tires. Some Hoosiers will recognize the humble retread as a connection to racing history, while others will find virtue in sculpture made of something that would otherwise end up in a landfill. Still, as plentiful as worn rubber might be, you'd be surprised how hard it is to come by the right kind of tires—bias-ply tires—rather than the steel-belted radials sculptor Chakaia Booker normally uses. The shredded shards of steel she usually incorporates in her sculptures weren't considered "public friendly," so city engineers and the Arts Council of Indianapolis found a safer approach. While bias tires without the steel belts will make her intricately woven abstract sculptures safely touchable, whether the large-scale creations will be truly public-friendly remains to be seen.

More abstract than the work of the last two public artists, Tom Otterness and Julian Opie, most of Booker's sculptures are strikingly beautiful: black, strong, and nearly unrecognizable as recycled tires. But as a medium, the otherwise worthless discarded rubber seemed natural to the New Jersey–born Booker. In the 1980s, Booker lived and worked in New York City, and one thing they had in abundance, she says, were car fires—which meant old tires left behind. After the burned-out hulks cooled down, she would strip the blackened, pliable treads and incorporate them into her work. Using "the tire itself as an icon," she began cutting, folding, shaping, and weaving strips of rubber into elaborate shapes. Now nationally known, Booker sculptures appear in museums and collections across the country. She has created major exhibitions for Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis and Storm King Sculpture Park in New York. Her Indianapolis exhibition is scheduled to open July 22 and run through April 1, 2009.

Booker's nine abstract sculptures will be the third in the Public Art Indianapolis series following the roly, satirical figures of Otterness in 2005 and the flashing pop-art–inspired work of Opie last year. Many residents thought Otterness's representational work—people or animal-based characters—was family-friendly, while others felt Opie, using nontraditional glass and electronic media, attracted a new generation of fans. The decision to approach Booker was a calculated one.

"Curatorially, I made the recommendation wanting to increase the visual literacy of the community one notch at a time," says Mindy Taylor Ross, director of public art for the Arts Council. "Although it might be a slightly larger notch between Opie and Booker." In choosing artists for public exhibitions, Ross makes recommendations to a 12-member curatorial advisory committee that includes several local artists and contemporary-art curators

HEAVY WEAR Chakaia Booker, shown here in her New York studio, begins each day by "sculpting herself"—dressing in outfits that reflect her work.

from the IMA, iMOCA, and other local museums. Final decisions involve city officials and the Department of Public Works, which assesses the long-term viability of the pieces. [*Editor's note: Wilmeth sits on the board of iMOCA.*]

Perhaps the most public-friendly aspect of these temporary downtown exhibitions is that they're mostly funded by private money. In fact, so little money flows from the city to art in Indianapolis, cultural organizations have had to be creative themselves. Working with foundations like the Lilly Endowment, which is funding the Booker sculptures through a grant to the city's Cultural Development Commission, arts leaders have created a private-public funding model unique to Indy—one that other cities strapped for cash are looking to duplicate.

And while those same arts leaders have expressed concerns about Mayor Greg Ballard's perceived lack of interest in sustaining the arts funding that began under his predecessor, everyone involved with the Booker exhibition is confident her work will be a hit. Public-friendly, if you will.

IF YOU HAVE ANY DOUBTS about Indy's past commitment to public art, you don't have to look any further than Monument Circle. Commissioned in 1888, the Soldiers and Sailors Monument took 12 years to build and rang in at a cost of $600,000, paid for through a combination of private donations and local government money (about $14.7 million in today's dollars). Add the War Memorial, various plazas, and the Canal project, and one could argue that as a city, we've been promoting public art for a long time.

But in 2001, demonstrating a desire for cultural and economic development that would attract young professionals, then-Mayor Bart Peterson appointed the Indianapolis Cultural Development Commission to build tangible cultural tourism and public arts programs. Funded by seed money from the Lilly Endowment and the Capital Improvement Board (which collects taxes on restaurants and hotels, and rents on spaces like the Convention Center and Conseco Fieldhouse), the ICDC partnered in 2004 with the Arts Council of Indianapolis to create a Public Art Master Plan. In 2005, the public art program debuted its first work, *Tom Otterness in Indianapolis*, after Otterness's successful outdoor installations in New York City. The following year brought us U.K. native Julian Opie's *Signs*, featuring lighted figures and images dancing on downtown streets. But questions remain, especially in the wake of the new mayor's election: Is all this dedication to public art really a benefit to the public? How can a tough, rubbery, imposing work like a tire sculpture promise to be public-friendly?

Arts leaders admit most of their measures for an exhibition's success are anecdotal, relying on media reports, PR mentions, and individual feedback. So, perhaps the most compelling data that public art has a measurable benefit to the community comes from the economic sector. In 2007, a

HITTING THE ROAD Booker has been busily working on "Take Out," one of nine sculptures that will soon grace downtown street corners.

study of 156 cities by Americans for the Arts reported Indianapolis arts groups and their audiences contributed more than $468 million dollars to the local economy and accounted for $51.8 million in state and local tax revenue. Arts organizations in Marion County only receive $2.5 million in city-county monies, all of which is distributed through the Arts Council of Indianapolis. Yet in one year, local arts organizations generated $21 million in local tax revenues. If you're inclined to take these numbers at face value, the city enjoys a substantial return on its investment. Factor in additional tax revenues to the state, and that $2.5 million in funding results in a $51.8 million windfall.

If you subscribe to the theory that public art creates a cultural awareness that makes people want to move here, population data is equally positive. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's March 2008 report, Indianapolis showed a 1.5 percent growth, more than any other city in the north or Midwest, adding nearly 25,000 residents between July of 2006 and 2007.

Greg Charleston, president of the Arts Council of Indianapolis, believes there's a correlation between the city's growth, the formation of the ICDC, and its citywide commitment to public art in 2001. It's a theory with which fans of Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, would agree. Florida believes strong arts programs attract scientists, entrepreneurs, educators and other young professionals, which he calls the "creative class." This group is critical to sustaining a city's long-term economic growth. "If they're not finding a vibrant community, they're going to move out," Charleston says. "And that's not an option we're willing to accept."

THE SURPRISE ELECTION last fall of Mayor Greg Ballard caught the arts community by surprise. Mayor Bart Peterson had always been a strong supporter of Indianapolis' arts organizations and was frequently seen at openings, concerts, and exhibits across the city. After his election in 2000, he helped increase arts funding from a miniscule $1 million in the Parks Department budget to $1.5 million—still miniscule, but slightly

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTS COUNCIL OF INDIANAPOLIS

less so. More importantly, Peterson was visible, a champion lending importance to the arts with his presence and helping arts leaders leverage foundation grants and private money.

But last year, as voters focused on property taxes, a crime wave, and a police department in disarray, Peterson lost his reelection bid to Ballard, a former Marine lieutenant colonel who promised law, order, and a balanced budget. After Ballard's pre-election talk about cutting what he viewed as unnecessary spending, his quotes in a November *Indianapolis Business Journal* interview didn't comfort anyone in the arts community. As far as he was concerned, he stated rather bluntly, if it came down to funding "another piece of art" or another cop on the street, he'd easily choose to fund public safety. Not surprisingly, arts leaders were deeply concerned. As the extent of the city's financial crisis has become apparent, even the relatively insignificant $1.5 million in arts money—about one quarter of one percent of the overall city budget—seems in jeopardy. Estimated city-budget shortfalls could run as high as $40 million.

According to the mayor's office, Ballard isn't willing to make any specific commitment to the arts yet, but obviously wants to put Indianapolis on the map. "The mayor wants a city that is internationally recognizable," says Marcus Barlow, Ballard's spokesman, emphasizing everything from cultural festivals to international economic development. He doesn't mention the arts, however. While the city budget has yet to be finalized (funding for 2009 will be discussed in August), the mayor contends there will be some arts funding in the budget. What he won't say is how much.

"When Mayor Ballard was elected, everyone said 'Well, there go the arts because a Republican Genghis Khan just got elected into office,'" Barlow says. "But that's not the case at all." However, he's quick to add that the mayor still believes the city is facing a huge budget crisis. "Everyone will be affected," he says.

Tough budget proponents look at public art exhibitions such as Booker's and say that arts funding needs to be

cut. However, since that $2.5 million in public money for the arts is earmarked specifically for educational and outreach programs, cutting arts funding might not put much of a damper on the public art series. What it would affect directly are programs such as Herron's popular Saturday School or the Philharmonic Orchestra of Indianapolis' free Concerts in the Park series.

In what's become known as the "cops versus art" debate, almost everyone agrees—it's not an either/or issue. "To be a competitive city with a high quality of life, you have to do both," Ross says. With the caveat that public safety will come out on top, Barlow concurs: "I think we'll see that Mr. Ballard can walk and chew gum at the same time."

IN PERSON, the African-American Booker seems soft-spoken, almost shy, and looks much younger than her age of 54. Even wearing an elaborate apron or a headdress with flowing rubber tendrils, she seems anything but flamboyant. Booker's early work involved sewing, weaving, and pottery. After earning an undergraduate degree in sociology at Rutgers in 1976, though, she moved to New York and began sculpting, later working in large formats using discarded objects like ceramic shards, fruit peelings, and her now-trademark rubber tires. Booker completed her MFA from City College of New York in 1993, all the while continuing to gain recognition for her work—including a piece in the *Twentieth Century American Sculpture* exhibition at the White House in 1996.

Many art critics believe Booker's career began in earnest when she was selected for the 2000 Whitney Biennial—a national exhibition of the country's top up-and-coming contemporary artists held every two years. Since then, she has created solo shows at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, the Neuberger Museum of Art, the Akron Museum of Art, the Marlborough Gallery in New York, and the Jersey City Museum, not to mention those two shows at the nation's premier outdoor sculpture parks—Laumeier and Storm King. In 2004, *The New York Times*

called her "one of the most innovative sculptors at work in America." She begins each day "sculpting herself," creating elaborate wearable art as a context for her larger work.

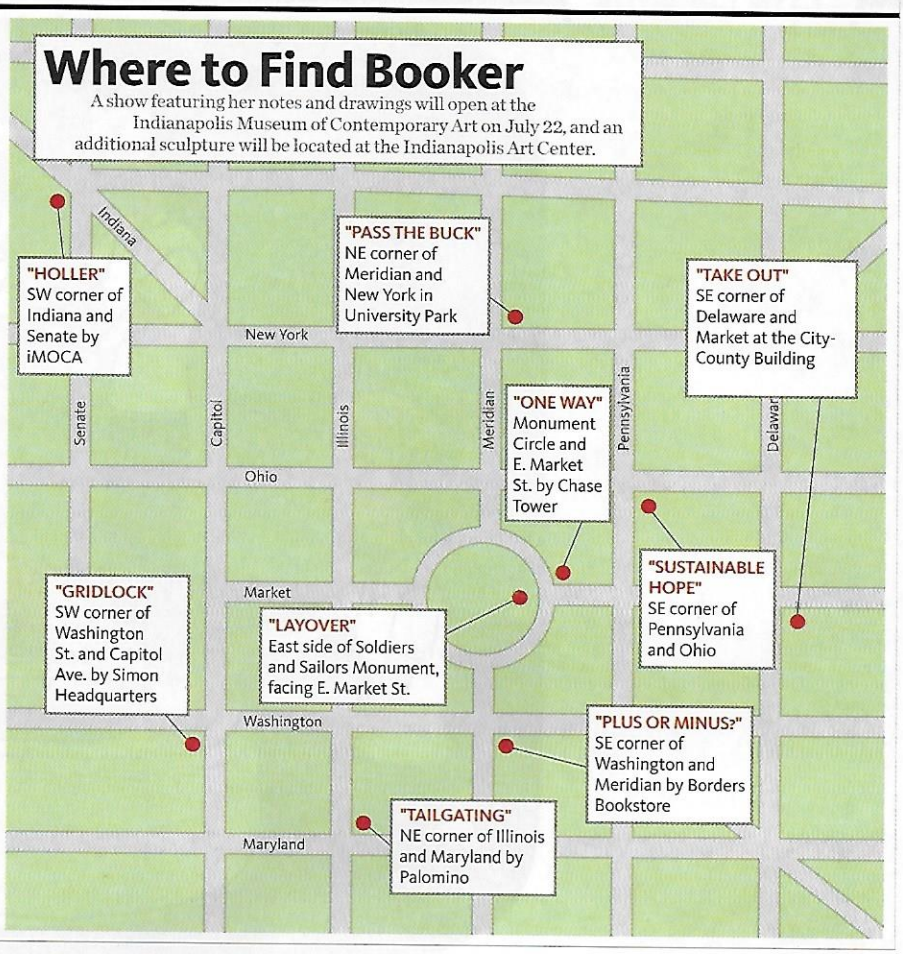
As you encounter Booker's show *Mass Transit* this month, you'll see references to race, religion, environment, and history. You'll learn about the legacy of Madame Walker and Indiana's part in the Underground Railroad. You may even find yourself wondering if sometimes, a tire is just a tire.

Ross thinks that the public is ready for the works, although she knows you're not going to understand everything right away. But art, she says, is about creating discussion—and both Booker and the Arts Council believe dialog is one of the most important aspects of any public art program.

We wanted people to have a variety of "levels of entry" for this show, Ross says. "If nothing else, even if they sort of dismiss it on an artistic level, at least people can look at it and say, 'You know, it's the racing capital of the world.'" ●

Where to Find Booker

A show featuring her notes and drawings will open at the Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art on July 22, and an additional sculpture will be located at the Indianapolis Art Center.



Change of Art

If you were stuck sitting near me at a dinner party last summer, you probably heard my rant about the art exhibit on display downtown. I didn't like it, and I told anyone who would listen. Like so many matters of taste, this one was a little personal.

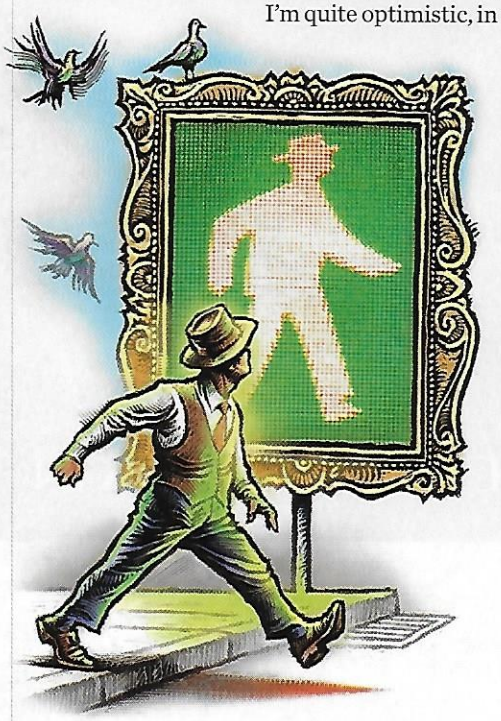
It's not hard for me to remember when the stuff—10 pieces by British artist Julian Opie collectively titled *Signs*—was first installed, because it almost got me run over by a pickup truck. My unfavorable opinion began forming immediately.

It was a sunny lunchtime. The steps of Monument Circle were packed with folks enjoying their break, and I decided to walk south on Meridian. As I approached the crosswalk at Washington Street, I noticed a large illuminated figure against a black background—an animated LED representation of a man strolling. He beckoned me to do the same. How thoughtful of the city, I thought, to put a large WALK sign there, at one of the busiest pedestrian crossings in town. I strode with confidence.

I'm not sure if I saw the massive grill of the truck first or heard its horn, but I realized rather quickly that I was far too close to the business end of the vehicle. I leaped backward, out of harm's way, as the passing driver glowered. I had been duped into thinking the piece, Opie's *Bruce Walking*, was a traffic sign.

Funny thing, though—it wasn't my own brush with mortality, or the artist's reckless endangerment of my fellow citizens, that set me against the work. I just plain did not like it. To my eye, the sculptures relied too much on the visual vocabularies of signage—like, you know, WALK signals. Also—as best witnessed by *Sara Dancing*, the illuminated temptress gyrating at the corner of Illinois and Maryland streets—I thought Opie's work was sexed-up to no particular purpose.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not sour on the whole idea of our annual installations. I'm quite optimistic, in fact, about the exhibit scheduled to open this month around downtown—a set of new sculptures by New York-based artist Chakaia Booker, previewed in this issue by Renee Wilmeth ("The Rubber Meets the Road," p. 60). I have only seen Booker's work in photographs, but their often whimsical nature—coupled with the fact that she creates her sculptures out of old tires—makes them a good bet for a fond reception. Great cities contain public spaces that attract and rejuvenate us. Better still is when public space includes creative work to remind us that, even among our daily routines, there is room for beauty.



My jaywalking experience aside, I'm glad we have public art here. I'm even glad the Cultural Trail people bought one of Opie's works—*Sara*'s shimmying sister, *Ann Dancing*—and placed it at the foot of Mass Ave. But, pedestrians, you've been warned: It's not a sign telling you to boogie.

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