

JUXTAPOZ

Art & Culture

Kim Dacres

Roll of Thunder, Hear Me Cry

Interview by Charles Moore // Portrait by Alex Berliner

Born and raised in the Bronx by Jamaican parents, Kim Dacres considers her artistry a luxury—not to be taken for granted. Growing up, the abstract sculptor, who works with disassembled tires reconfigured using screws and braiding techniques, assumed she'd become a doctor or a lawyer, yet her mother, an expert in do-it-yourself projects, and her repairman father, took their daughter to Home Depot so often that she too began to integrate spare parts into her life. That said, it wasn't until she enrolled in Williams College, where the artist studied Political Science, Studio Art, and Africana Studies, that she considered a career in the arts. Inspired by young adult books such as Mildred D. Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, as well as classics from the likes of Audre Lorde and Toni Morrison, and John Grisham's and James Patterson's thrillers, there's a sense of ruggedness that permeates Dacres's work—a haunting take on race, gender, and the pressures with which marginalized communities far too often grapple. Her use of found materials makes perfect sense, in this way.

Dacres can recall clearly the first time she incorporated tires in her work, abandoned roadside objects handpicked on long drives. While enrolled in an undergraduate metalworking class, the artist remembers taking in a lone tire on her way to school. She pulled over, found the rubber had completely unraveled from the rim, and thought the object resembled a figure curled up in the shoulder. And so she placed it in the backseat, committed to personifying tires in all her work, reassembling them in a stunning, chilling, nearly dreamlike fashion. Today, the Harlem-based sculptor layers these objects—the tires most often found from vehicles and bicycles—to build sculptures inspired by real people, creating muscle, bone, skin, and even hair from the source material. Dacres finds solace in the lack of softness in her work, noting that the very materials she uses are so often taken for granted until they rupture, experiencing wear and tear beyond repair. So many people, she emphasizes, take people of color for granted in this same fashion—reflecting, Dacres emphasizes, how society treats Black people in the US and around the world. So often, she notes, communities might fail to think about the pressures—the burnout and stress—marginalized groups experience. Using tires, rubber and metal sculptures of varied sizes come to life, showcasing the range of emotions people of color face, helping to redefine viewers' perception as a result.

Charles Moore: So where are you from originally?

Kim Dacres: I'm born and raised in the Bronx. My parents came from Jamaica in 1984 and moved to the Northeast section of the Bronx, little Jamaica up by White Plains Road, Baychester and 233rd.

Since your trajectory as an artist didn't start off traditionally, going through the institutions and doing a BFA and MFA, when did you start making art?

Well, this whole "being an artist" thing is a luxury. When I was growing up, I thought I was going to be a lawyer or at least a similar "acceptable" profession. As a kid, I was always putting things together, whether it be working with fabrics or stuff around the house. My mom was always a big DIY person, so going to Home Depot was a regular Saturday trip. And my father was a repair man of household appliances, so reusing parts or knowing how to put things together was instilled in me early on.

When I got to college, it was my first time really having any formal art classes. We had one elective art class when I was growing up in the Bronx in middle school. It was a year that they were bringing music and art back to schools, and my school was one of the ones that got one of those programs. I've always been a creative, but I didn't really get the freedom to start thinking about art until I went to Williams. Art usually comes with an extra studio fee and the scholarship I had at my high school didn't allow for those extra art classes—we just couldn't afford it. But when I got to Williams, the courses were included in my financial aid packages.

I originally thought I was going to be a lawyer, but I was always interested in film and photography. I started taking drawing courses, because you had to, and when it was time to take the film courses and photography courses, they weren't available that semester. Woodworking and metalworking it is. I ended up really liking sculpture; it's like a big puzzle and it just felt right. I think because, growing up, I always helped my mom lay down some tile, carpet, or paint a wall or tackle something, it just felt like a nice, natural transition.

What are some of your favorite books? What books whose ideas you still go back to or think about?

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred D. Taylor. That series has always been my favorite book since childhood because it talks about the experience of Americans in the Jim Crow-era South from a young Black girl's perspective. It's been a while since I have seen or read a book that had that same degree of impact on me. That book is talking about all the things that resonate with us now—how can one book still be so relevant? I generally tend to gravitate towards young adult books because they speak more honestly about feelings and emotions sometimes than adult books. I generally like books about race and gender. Although I can't speak to my favorite books, I can definitely draw my favorite authors.

**Tell me about those.**

I always loved John Grisham; his books were always about law and power and how you subvert those items. James Patterson books too because they had Black protagonists in a particular series. But then, in high school, one of my favorite teachers introduced me to Toni Morrison and having to read, reread, and then reread her books again to understand what she was talking about. Love is my favorite book of Toni Morrison. And then I think the second would be her most recent one, *The Source of Self Regard*, because it was kind of like a manual for how you need to fortify yourself against the world. Audre Lorde too, for sure, one of my favorite authors.

Who do I always go back to? This is a strange part of the answer, but I always like encyclopedias and books that have world history and maps in them. That's a whole category of books, more and more when facts become arguable, which is ridiculous. I think I've been gravitating more to books that firmly stamp something in history. *The Black Book*, which has one main author and I think three others, is a good example. Toni Morrison wrote the forward of the recent re-release.

Before we get into your work, I'm just going back to Africana studies. I'm wondering if Benin Bronze sculptures ever came up in your studies?

Yes, absolutely. And they came up later, once I had already started to use tires in my work. I believe my professor at the time was either Frank Jackson or Ed Epping. They were like, "You should look into the Benin Bronzes." And it sent me on a whole other journey. Because even though my Africana studies focus was on race and gender, it was a minor. There's no "West African Sculpture" class, you could say. But through Henry Louis Gates's PBS series, I've been able to rewatch and go back and see the influences that I would have normally seen, just even in the Bronx. Every Black person I know has some sort of West African sculpture up in their house or something two-dimensional.

And so by watching that series and treating it as a class, I was able to identify that this is what this means in terms of experience. That's something that was absent from my education in college, but certainly something that I've been happy to be able to have the streaming resources available, where I can just go back and see the visual language of people's loss. And then also wonder, where does that fit in with my family's journey to this country? I don't know where my parents are from for the most part.

Or there is a full family tree lineage that I could draw on. The Benin Bronzes are just extraordinarily beautiful. I was talking to a friend of mine last night about the Sande society from Sierra Leone, and there's something about scars and beauty that I think is really—I'm touching on this in my work, but I just haven't taken a deep dive into how to articulate it through writing what they're naming. And certainly, when I look at those sculptures, they remind me of the beauty of school, going through an intense experience and a way to show that to other people.



Tell me about the first time you decided to use found materials, in this case tires, and create a sculpture.

I made my first sculpture out of recycled metal during a metalworking class at Williams. I made an abstracted face on the outside of the building. I used a tire as a tongue emanating from this collage metal welded face. When I found that tire, I was driving up to Williamstown, which is a lonely drive winding through the middle of nowhere. And once you get to a certain point, the journey there is just you and maybe one other car.

I was on my way up to school and I saw one and I stopped. The tire had completely unraveled from the rim and from the sidewall and was laying as this curled figure on the side of the road. I threw it in the back of the car to see what we could do with it. And after that, it just made sense because sheet metal or big welding is an expensive process. Even to some degree, working with wood can be expensive, but working with tires, I only needed certain materials or certain tools.

I needed a jigsaw and I needed screws. And I think, at the time, it was the most economical decision for me. Because I was in this art program and eating into my personal finances. I had a bunch of jobs in school, but not to necessarily buy my art materials. We had to be mindful of waste at Williams as well. So once I decided to use it as a tongue, and when we took the sculpture apart, I always kept that tire piece and started to make humanistic forms out of it, like heads and faces. The material was so attractive because, like I said, I did a lot at Williams, and I was very stressed and tired of being in a predominantly white institution and being a leader of color at a predominantly white institution.

The material just felt right. There was an artist in residence at the time—I can't remember his name. He was like, you should look at Chakaia Booker's work. I didn't until I had made a few more, and then I understood why he said I should have looked at her work earlier on when I was starting this process, because I had never seen anyone work with tires to that degree.

Wow. You mentioned something that just stuck with me, and I laugh every time I think about it. Tell me about collection season.

That's where I'm at right now: Collection season, where I spend most of my time just collecting. One of my favorite things is to go out and collect tires. The heavier parts of collection season happen in the first six months of the year, which means collecting during the wintertime. It's cold, but it gives me a routine that's helpful for my mental health. It's my time to look for all the treads that I love.

I collect all the tires and then I sort through them afterwards and match up different treads and different patterns. Collection season is a collection of all the lost tires that I encounter in my path. All the different punctures, screws and glass, and where the surface is worn away, and then noticing matching form and patterns: a degree of chance always happens. But I have a few favorite spots that I like to go to. There's always a lot of construction in Harlem, so there's always a fence to jump to look for bicycle tires.

I also go to a bicycle shop in Harlem; they know to expect me on Tuesday, right before trash day on Wednesday. And then the collection season has expanded. Gears and bicycle chains—friends have started to jump in and ask to drop off things at the studio. When it's time to work and time to build the sculptures, the last thing I want to do is go out to find more materials. They're already heavy and cumbersome. It's just easier to start collecting in a certain season.

Collection season really should be in the summer from June to September. That's when most folks are out on their bicycles and more popular. But that just puts me behind, so I have collection season at the top of the year, a new set of eyes.



It also seems like, in the summertime, people would be more prone to fix tires, as opposed to in the wintertime, when they might say, "This one's dead for whoever comes."

Yeah, but one of the things I saw from the pandemic was that I was getting the same number of tires as I was before the pandemic. I didn't expect that, but that makes sense because there's a lot more electric bikes and bicycles. They're still out there. And part of collection season is also being able to talk with folks in the shops; it's a chance to catch up with people and to see businesses go through the ebbs and flows of the season.

One of the things I think my heart likes about collection seasons at the top of the year when folks aren't necessarily outside on their bicycles is because they're not as busy, and I get to talk to them.

Obviously, in your most recent show, titles were influenced by family members. How do you go about titling your work in general?

The transition from working in schools was very difficult for me. I started off early in my career as a teacher, then I was the assistant principal, a middle school principal, and spent time as a professor. When it was time to part ways with education, there were a few friends who were saying, you're better than those spaces (not the children, the space); you have so much talent, you can do whatever you want. And I started to name the works after those people. My best friend lives two floors down from me in the same building. We've been friends since high school and I wanted to use her middle name, Zakiya. So I went through a few close friends, just like names of people, or my favorite nicknames for stuff, like cookie or buttercup.

**Enduring names.**

Enduring names that remind me to smile and remind me that they were the archetypes in my life that were very helpful because they were fellow teachers. They were advisors, they were protectors in some ways. I started to branch out and include members of my family, like Papa, Pops, Mama, Queen, Lillian, all these names related to my parents or my sisters, folks who are pillars in my life and keep me going every day. There's a downside sometimes to naming sculptures after people, because people are fallible. Everyone's relationships go through ups and downs. I like to use middle names because it's like the alter-ego over an individual or nickname.

They're usually named after folks I know, or after a certain idea like Patience and Fortitude. I try to translate that into a hairstyle or match aspects of the sculptures with the title. I want to make sure that the title matches up with the intricacy of the sculpture. Even if it's a longer lyric or if it's a nickname, or an idea or a concept, it must match. When you see the name, it helps you better understand the sculpture.

KimDacres.com // Photos courtesy GAVLAK Los Angeles | Palm Beach