



THE ARION PRESS

FIVE *Q*UESTIONS
with Artist Alison Saar



For Arion Press' latest title, *Kindred*, Los Angeles sculptor Alison Saar created 14 original linoleum cuts that profoundly render the 1979 novel by Octavia E. Butler. The story centers on Dana, a Black woman living in 1970s Los Angeles, and her time travels to a plantation in the pre-Civil War South. She is transported to the past to save her ancestors and returned to the present when her own life is in danger. As the first peeks at *Kindred* are unveiled, Saar shares details on the development and creative process behind the book.

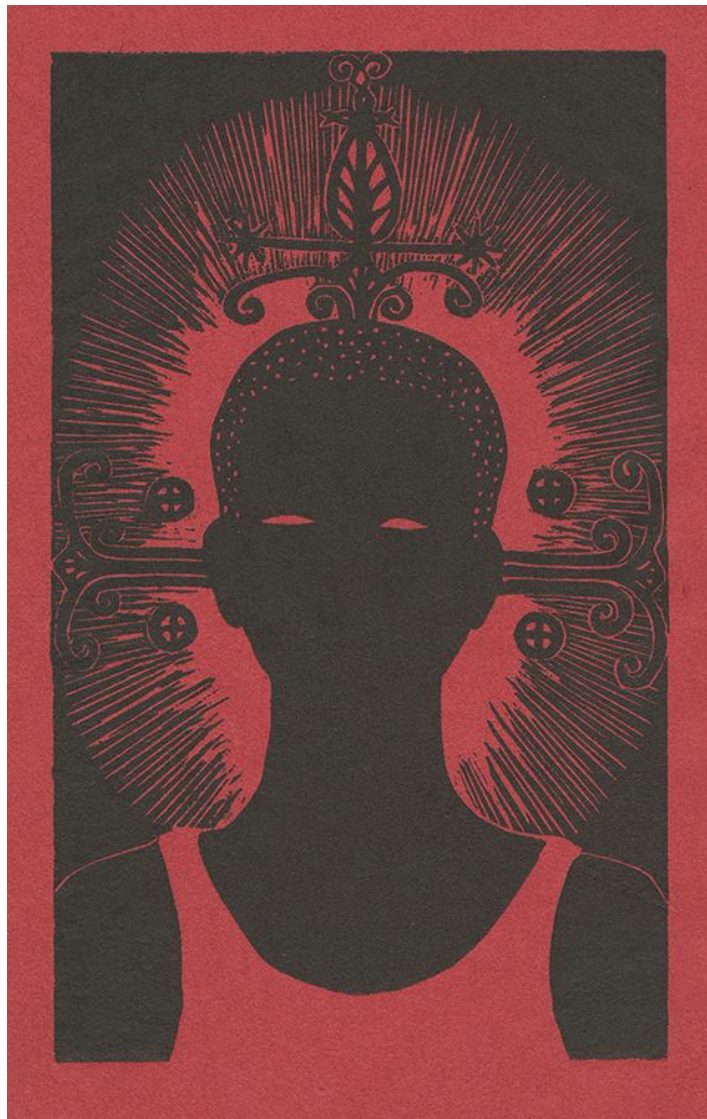
Q1.
How did the *Kindred* project come about?

I'd been aware of Arion for a while. My mother has a copy of Jean Toomer's *Cane* that they published [in 2000], with woodblock prints by Martin Puryear. I always loved that book and cherished this idea that it was a collaboration in some sense. The author had long since passed, but it's a really amazing work in terms of that balance, that dance between this Harlem Renaissance text and this contemporary artist. So I was flattered when Arion invited me to work with them. They asked if there were books or authors that I would be interested in, and I immediately went to Octavia Butler. *Kindred* is a text that has been republished a lot, but I was interested in creating a beautiful, elegant book of this really poignant story because nobody was doing that per se. I was excited to have something that would be treasured—an artwork that had a space in a library, that would be timeless.



Q II.
What drew you to *Kindred*?

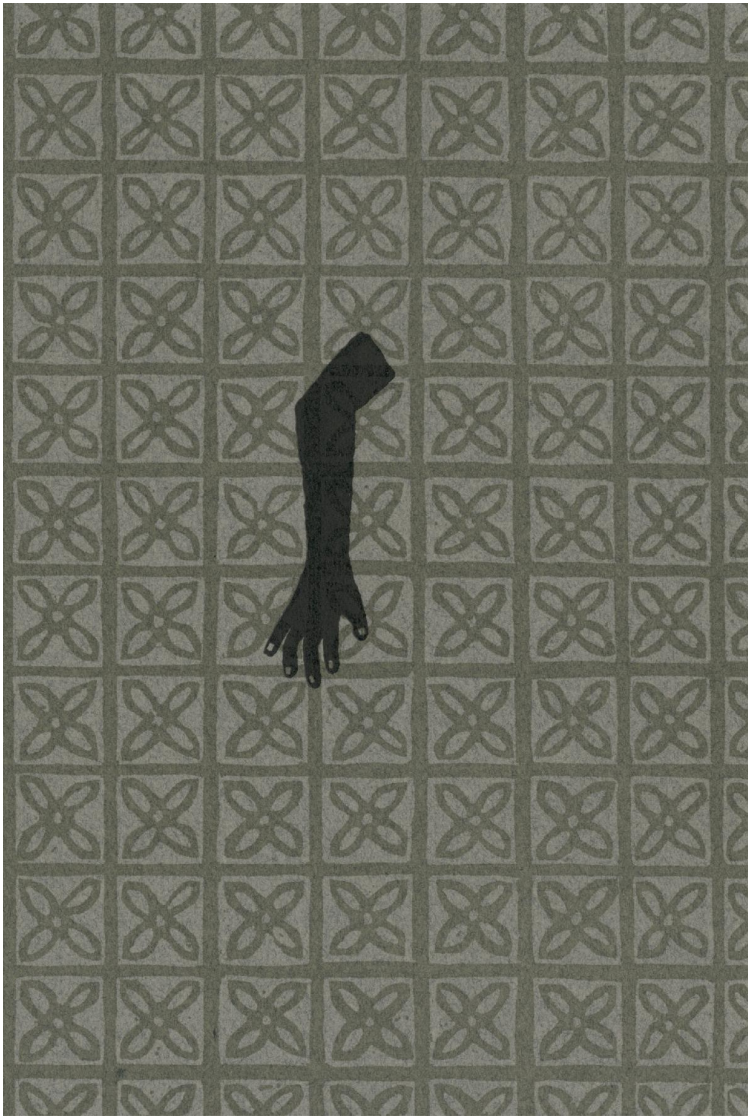
I first read it when it came out in 1979. It was very different from any other Black American literature I had read before. It was really exciting—and intense. I think I had forgotten how intense it was until I re-read it last year. I realized these are all going to be really dark, violent images. That was what was most challenging—to give into that. I finally surrendered and realized: It's a book of great violence and it's going to be a book of violent images as well.



Q III.

The front endsheet, depicting Dana's arm, is the first image readers encounter. What was the concept here?

There's a later image—where she's in the bathtub, nursing herself back in the present day after she was beaten in the past. For the background, I created a tile pattern. I thought it would be nice to tie that pattern in elsewhere, so we carried it onto the endpapers. On top of the pattern, we printed Dana's arm on the front endpaper and the rest of her figure on the back endpaper. The pattern goes through her, so it's almost like she's been drawn on the inside of the book. I love when I find old books and people have made their own drawings on the pages. When I find battered or discarded books that have beautiful linen covers and endpapers, I save them and do little oil paintings on them.



Q IV.

Can you talk a bit about your process, as well as how you worked with Arion?

I imagined still frames within a chapter or part of the story. Some of the images harken back to images I've done in the past. I did a series of prints about the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, and the image in *Kindred* of Rufus drowning harkens back to those images. As I was re-reading the book, I wrote notes as to what I thought were poignant sections that would translate well into images that were graphic, yet super simple and very stark. I carved all of the images out of linoleum and printed them. Then I sent digital files to Arion, who resized them so the scale is consistent and made polymer plates from them.



Q V.

What are some of the themes of your practice that are reflected in *Kindred*?

My work often references African diasporic gods and deities in the new world, and I saw Dana as this Elegua character. He's a traveler and a messenger, whose colors are red and black. On the frontispiece, she's printed in warm black ink on red handmade Japanese paper. The crossroads is the symbol of Elegua, so behind Dana you have not only the intersection of the literal two worlds—1970s California and 1800s Maryland—but also the intersection of the spiritual world and the real world.

With a lot of my work, the materials contribute to the narrative of the piece. For example, I've been doing prints on cotton-picking sacks and seed sacks. With the book, I was interested in materials that have some crossover with the text. Maybe the paper looks like it would have been from those times—a little warmer and natural, rather than bright and mechanical looking. The cover of the Fine Press Edition features denim-like panels that reference the cloth bag that is Dana's survival kit when going between the two worlds.

The covers have a tactile blind deboss, which I love because it can be read with the fingertips. And in a certain way, it can be experienced tactilely, which is really important to me as a sculptor.

You can add *Kindred* to your collection by registering for a 2024 Arion Press Subscription [here](#). Individual copies available for pre-order soon.

Photos by Nicholas Lea Bruno

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