

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Artist Alison Saar, historic S.F. publisher create unique edition of Octavia Butler's 'Kindred'

By Jessica Zack
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Alison Saar shows the artwork she made for the slipcases of the new edition of Octavia Butler's novel "Kindred" in San Francisco.
Yuri Avila/The Chronicle

Internationally acclaimed sculptor and mixed-media artist Alison Saar is comfortable working with a wide range of materials — salvaged wood, pottery shards, hammered tin tiles and an eclectic assortment of found objects, from vintage sugar sacks to antlers.

"But I've always been a carver," Saar told the Chronicle. The 68-year-old artist explained that she loves the immediacy and expressive potential of wood or

linoleum carving, which require few tools. “The way you can feel every mark the blade has made and... bring an image out of the darkness.”

That process, she added, “felt just right for this project.”

The project she’s referring to is her latest collaboration with San Francisco’s historic Arion Press, a stunning new collectible, handcrafted edition of the classic 1979 novel “Kindred” by Octavia Butler. The first copies will be ready for delivery on Saturday, June 22, which would have been Butler’s 77th birthday.



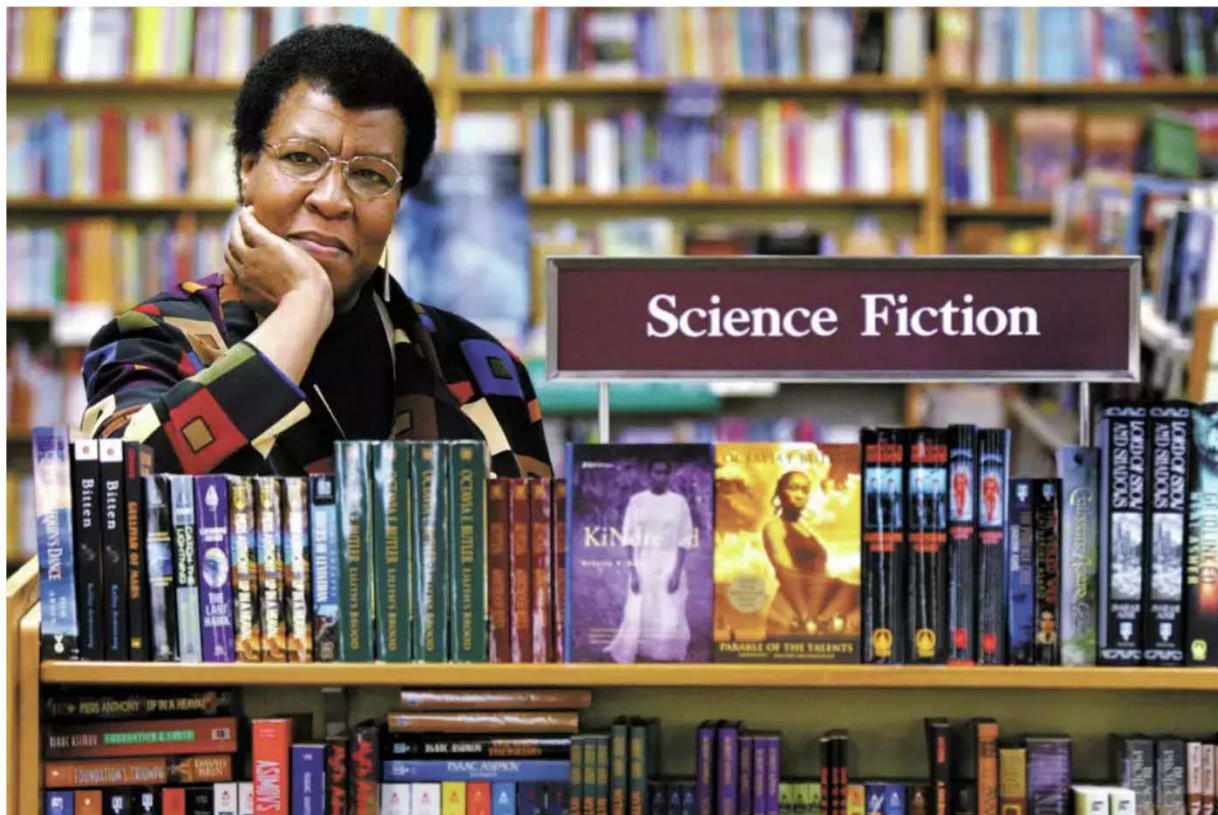
Alison Saar shows the frontispiece for the new edition of Octavia Butler’s novel, “Kindred.”
Yuri Avila/The Chronicle

Saar made 14 original linoleum block prints to illustrate Butler’s famous time-traveling tale. Its protagonist, Dana, a 26-year-old Black writer in 1970s California, is transported back to a plantation in 1815 Maryland where she must rescue a white ancestor to ensure the survival of her lineage. It’s a genre-defying work (Butler rejected its categorization as “science fiction”) that grapples with the terror of enslavement, as well as resistance, resilience and “the ways in which

the scars of slavery can never fully be healed,” the artist said, naming themes that animate much of her own work as well.

“I’ve always been interested in slave narratives and how they relate to contemporary times,” added Saar, the daughter of famous assemblage artist Betye Saar and painter and art conservator Richard Saar. “I think the book kind of set me on course for the type of work that I do today, which looks at the past to talk about issues in the present.”

Saar recalled reading “Kindred” for the first time not long after its release while in her 20s, before starting grad school at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. “It felt so new and different from what Black writers like Toni Morrison and others were doing at the time,” she remembered. “Her curious speculative fiction explored the world in such a compelling way that made sense to me as someone interested in spirit and magical realism.”



Science Fiction writer Octavia Butler poses for a photograph near some of her novels at University Book Store in Seattle, Wash., on Feb. 4, 2004. Butler, considered the first black woman to gain national prominence as a science fiction writer, died Feb. 24, 2006.

JOSHUA TRUJILLO/AP

Eighteen years after her death from a fall outside her home near Seattle, at just 58, Butler continues to inspire and intrigue. “Kindred” was adapted into a [Hulu series in 2022](#) and, the first science fiction writer to receive a MacArthur

Fellowship, she is the sole Black science fiction writer to be collected and republished by the Library of America. Her 1993 apocalyptic novel “Parable of the Sower” is now regarded as prescient for addressing global climate change and economic collapse.

Saar first collaborated with Arion and poet Evie Shockley last year on a [limited-edition linocut](#) broadside illustration of a slave girl holding an uprooted cotton stalk to benefit the abortion-access nonprofit Brigid Alliance. Since then, the San Francisco publisher and letterpress printer has been eager to work with Saar on a book project of mutual interest.

“We floated a number of ideas, and discovered the one we both had on our shortlists was ‘Kindred,’” said Arion Creative Director Blake Riley. “It felt like a great match” between the two African American Angeleno artists who share cultural and aesthetic sensibilities, he explained during a recent tour of Arion’s impressive 14,000-square-foot facility tucked off 14th Avenue in the Presidio.



Megan Gibes, lead bookbinder at Arion Press in San Francisco.

Yuri Avila/The Chronicle

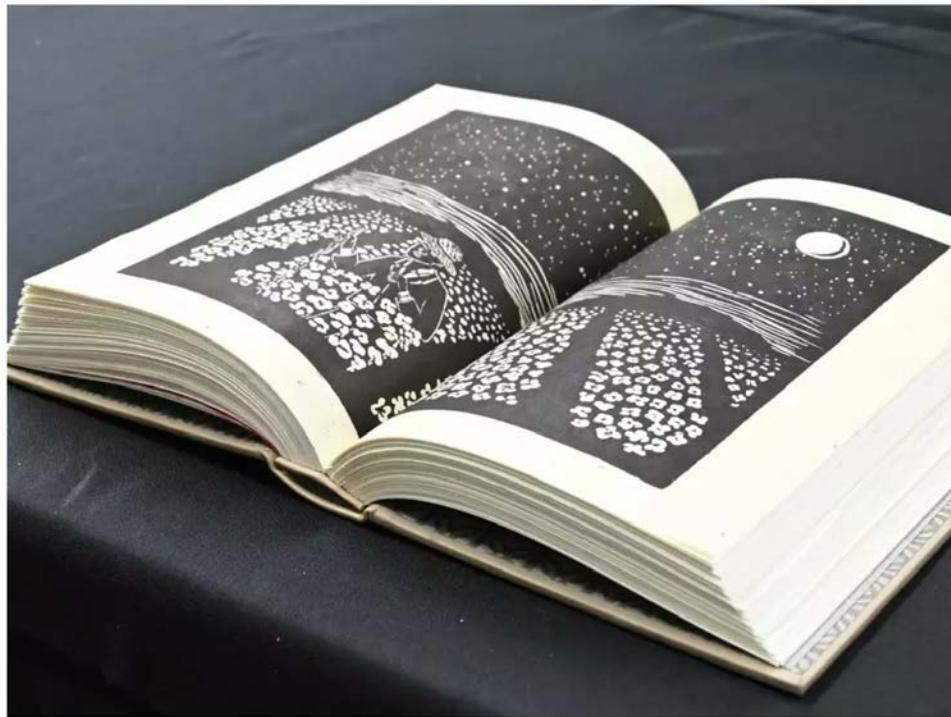
As Riley walked through the two-story building, he explained the labor-intensive design and fabrication process that goes into every Arion book. Every year, the press partners with established artists like Saar to create three handcrafted limited literary editions. “Kindred” is the first of just two publications in 2024 since Arion is preparing to move to a new space in Fort Mason this fall.

“Every aspect of the production cycle is crafted by hand on site,” Riley said, “which enables us to go back and forth with the artist and make adjustments along the way.”

A team of seven worked for approximately four months to produce just 210 of its Fine Press editions of “Kindred,” and the 40 of its Deluxe editions that come with a Saar print, totalling more than 5,000 hours of human labor, Riley said.

Everything is done on site, from handsetting the type (Arion has a foundry to create lead alloy custom metal typefaces) to prototyping the binding. The Deluxe edition — costing \$4,100, or \$3,280 for Arion subscribers — has a single red linen thread hand-sewn into its centerfold image. Its leather spine is made of blond deerskin.

“Some of the skins still had bullet holes in them,” said Riley. “They’re rough, but they provided the more rustic look and feel we wanted. We knew we didn’t want something as fine as calf skin.”



Double-page centerfold print, made by Alison Saar as part of a new edition of Octavia Butler's novel is seen in San Francisco on Thursday, May 30, 2024.

Yuri Avila/The Chronicle

Saar and Arion chose a lightweight, semi translucent gampi fiber paper for “Kindred,” which the artist said “looks like cotton that still has some seed and stem in it, the kind of leftover, rougher cotton that enslaved people would be allowed to keep to make their own clothes.”

Saar’s linocuts for “Kindred” are formally beautiful, but she explained that they are also necessarily graphic because they illustrate scenes in a novel about the depravity of slavery. There’s a hanging, bleeding slit wrists and a severed arm — “a sacrifice to the past,” said Saar, who was inspired by the book’s opening scene in which Dana wakes up in a hospital bed missing her arm. She felt it was important to not shy away from the novel’s graphic imagery, “especially in light of the political climate where there’s this whitewashing of history and even crazy denial, like people saying absurd things like slaves had it good. We need to continue to push against these things.”

One of Saar’s favorite images in the book is its blood-red frontispiece of Dana cast as the West African deity Legba, the guardian of the crossroads between the past and the present.

“It’s hard to get a really beautiful, saturated red in the printing world,” she explained, “so we felt fortunate to find this gorgeous Japanese paper. It’s visceral and feels kind of like a warning: If you can’t take this page, don’t read further, because we’re not treading lightly here.”

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/entertainment/article/alison-saar-sf-arion-press-19486209.php>