

QUID PRO QUO

Artists-in-Residence 2005-06

Rashawn Griffin Karyn Olivier Clifford Owens

The Studio Museum in Harlem

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KARYN OLIVIER

Gregory Volk

In a fast-paced, burgeoning, increasingly hectic art world, one encounters all sorts of idiosyncratic works by talented young, or fairly young, artists. Far more rare, however, is to encounter works that humanly matter, works that, while visually engaging and sometimes mindful of pressing cultural and political concerns, delve into some of the more tangled and hopeful, lovely and frightening, elements of the psyche and soul. That's precisely what **Karyn Olivier** accomplishes with her work, which spans both indoor and outdoor sculpture, architectural interventions and photographs. Olivier's formal inventiveness and keen intelligence are admirable, but what's even more admirable is the complex humanity her works exude. To put things simply: Olivier's work is excellent to behold, and it also provides lasting insight and assistance.

Consider *Seesaw* (2005), in which a forty-foot long steel seesaw juts through much of a gallery's rectilinear space. It's a riveting, Minimalist-inflected sculpture, but it's also functioning playground equipment that can be used by two people, usually with a mixture of hesitation and exuberance, ungainliness and grace. Because this sculptural seesaw is so long, one's "playmate" seems very distant indeed, as if on a far horizon or sequestered in her or his own private world. Connection and alienation, togetherness and startling solitude, pure physicality and complex psychology all coalesce. This is also one of numerous times when Olivier accesses a girlish arena of playtime and fun, but for decidedly adult purposes of questioning both our drive toward and distance from others. Consider as well Olivier's *Bench (seating for one)* (2003), a hefty, freestanding brick wall that cuts diagonally across the exhibition space and reaches only part of the way up to the ceiling. This wall-as-a-sculpture doesn't really close anything off. One can walk around it and look over it, and it has a spare, geometric elegance. Still, it intrudes on the space, makes things claustrophobic, and it's got scary connotations of being walled off, walled in or imprisoned. A simple metal bench attached to one side of the wall lets a visitor sit down and rest, but this is



Karyn Olivier, *Monkey Bar*

conflicted repose. Sitting like that, the viewer is peacefully alone, but perhaps also implacably lonely. She or he is also literally separated from others by a brick wall, which is what life feels like sometimes, whether this involves uncertain encounters between strangers or suddenly strange encounters between people who have been together for years.

Many of Karyn Olivier's works evoke non-art objects so routine and familiar that under normal conditions we'd hardly give them a second thought. However, these mundane, everyday objects are subtly yet decisively transformed, and thereby invested with powerful metaphorical import. *It's not over 'til it's over* (2004), which was originally installed outdoors at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, New York, is a home-



Karyn Olivier, *Seesaw*

made carousel complete with a bright blue, tented top and red and yellow trim. Unlike normal carousels, however, this one has no prancing horses, lions, ornate benches, calliope music or blinking lights. Instead, it features a single simple chair, which one can sit on as one is whirled around in a slow circle, five minutes for one revolution, to be exact. The communal excitement of carnivals and amusement parks swerves into a curiously solitary experience, which can be anxious, precarious, contemplative and joyous, and probably all of these at once. Olivier's stripped down, rinky-dink carousel evokes sadness and loss, but it also has an aura of stubborn magic and wonderment. And rather than transporting one into a carnivalesque elsewhere (Olivier is originally from Trinidad, and has a deep affinity for Carnival) it invites one to experience richly, and from all angles, exactly where one is now.

A carousel designed for only one rider is one example of the way Olivier constantly scrambles distinctions between public and private. A recent cast-concrete sculpture at the Wanås Foundation in Sweden, *Toilet* (2006), is largely abstract but also suggests a row of rudimentary, perhaps ancient, outhouse toilets, and you can't get much more private than bathroom activities. For *Fort with Centerpeace* (2003), Olivier built a thick-walled room out of sheetrock in the middle of an exhibition space. The exterior of the structure was imprinted with photographs of Olivier's living room, turning her living room

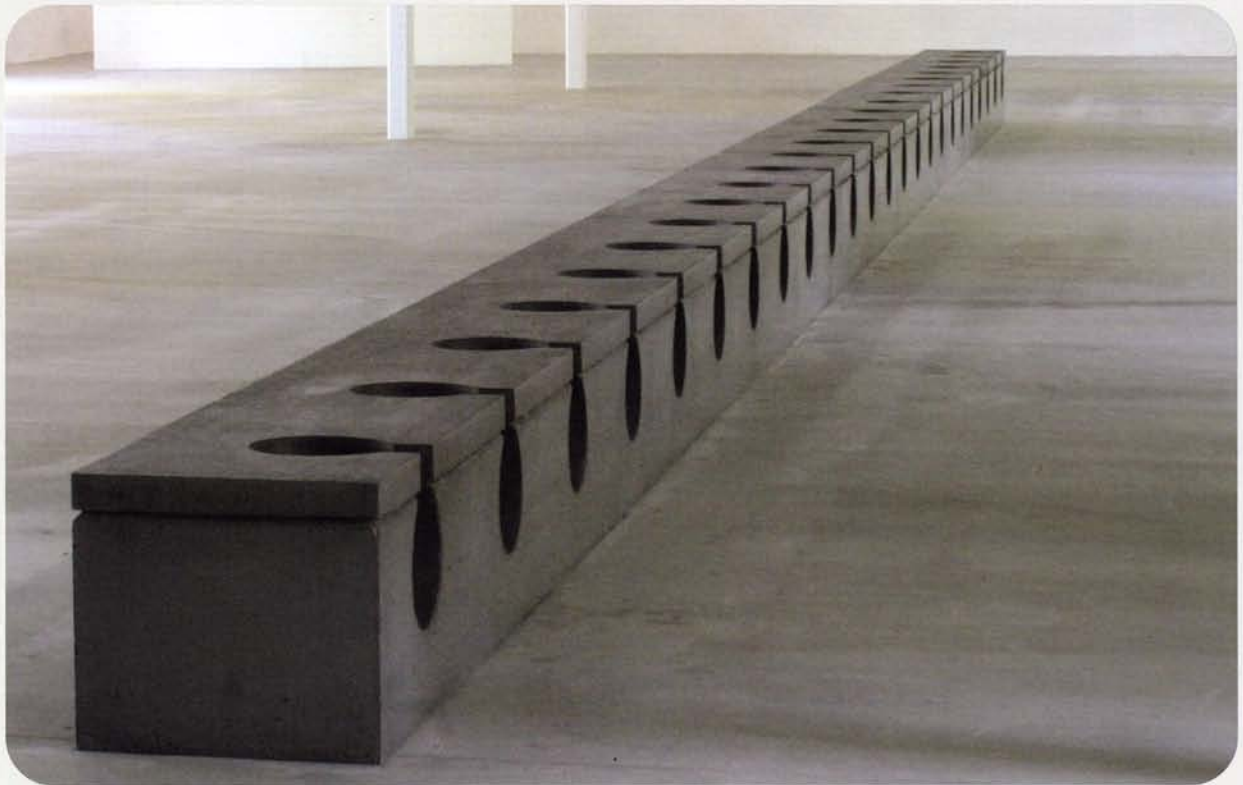
inside out, in effect, and making a public spectacle of her private space. Simultaneously, all of Olivier's around-the-house stuff—her books, photographs, computer, furniture, knick-knacks and mementoes—begins to look like glossy advertisements in fashion magazines.

Two of the three sculptures Olivier is exhibiting at The Studio Museum in Harlem, like *Seesaw*, transform standard playground equipment into eccentric and evocative forces that have far more to do with inward psychology than robust athleticism. *Monkey Bar* (2005), suggests the metal contraptions kids love to climb and

swing on, but something is seriously amiss. This set

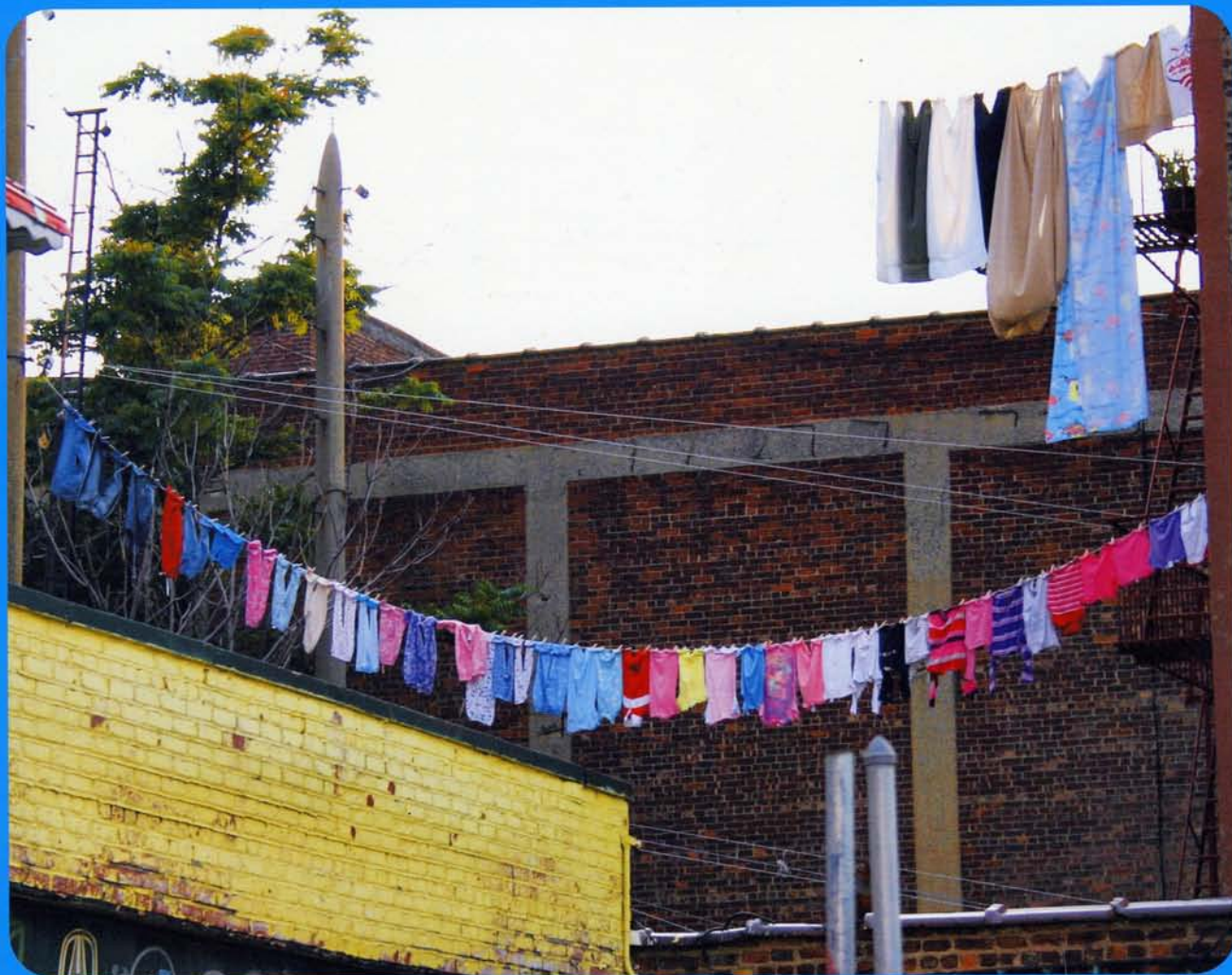
of monkey bars is not overhead, but is an inverted "V"-shaped structure standing on the floor. Kids can't climb on it, it seems vaguely broken and mutant, and it's made not of durable metal but of breakable wood. Midway between a utilitarian object and pure abstraction, it's partly playful, disturbingly fragile, and in the midst of its whimsy you get a nagging sense of impending danger. *Doubleslide* (2006), is a hilarious yet oddly poignant riff on playground slides. Two identical slides face one another and meet at the bottoms. For one person, this freak slide would be no problem, but if two people slid simultaneously from opposite sides there could be a frightful collision. Then again that's what we're always doing; we're always looking for loveliness, taking risks and colliding with one another, sometimes with splendor and sometimes with trouble and pain. Both of these striking works reveal that Karyn Olivier is an excellent object maker, but what's more impressive is how her objects have a peculiar ability to tap into levels of the psyche where the abiding mysteries are—our aspirations and limitations, our interest in and difficulties with others, our inevitable losses and our lingering aptitude for joy and delight.

Gregory Volk is a New York-based art critic and curator who contributes regularly to *Art in America* and other publications. He is also an associate professor in the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.



Top: Karyn Olivier, *Jesus*

Bottom: Karyn Olivier, *Toilet*



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