

frequency



THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM



Karyn Olivier

Whispering Domes, 2001

When I was young, I attended a private school—tiny, strict, British-style, housed in an old mansion, a near-cinematic trope of its own making. Most kids entered in kindergarten and stayed through the ninth grade; these people you grew up with in a strange interpersonal space as private and intimate as your family's, yet simultaneously in the social arena governed by the mores of the "public" world. The disciplinary rules were somewhat odd. Though there were the standard punishments of being kept in at recess, having extra assignments, etc., nothing struck more fear into the hearts of we children than the threat of being sent to "the bench." Outside the principal's office there was an old, ornate, dark mahogany bench—heavy, oversized, looming to a child. But of course it was, in fact, just a bench—a simple, banal form made ominous by function: for particularly egregious infractions, a teacher would utter the dreaded command to "go to the bench," and the offender would have to leave class and, quite literally, go to the bench to sit. The hallway in which it was situated was one through which kids and teachers

alike had to pass multiple times a day, the conduit between the upper and lower schools, the way to the lunchroom, the means of egress at the end of the day. Any student seated there would be visible, step-by-step of that passing, to essentially the entire school over the course of even an hour; seconds dragged by as each person witnessed your private humiliation made public. However arbitrary and ridiculous it now seems, to this day I can recall how effective this tactic was. The banal and uninflected act of sitting became a loaded act of exposure, the term of stillness a means of containment. This early lesson in spatial disorientation is likely familiar to many. I imagine most can easily recall similar inversions of private and public, the absurdly exaggerated displacement of familiar towards an unfamiliar end, of making meaning in a space merely through how it is occupied.

Memory is a funny thing—it emerges where you least expect and changes the shape of your world as surely as if it were constructed there of material things: rough, solid, present. The things you know are nothing more than shed skins of memory, cas-



ings, trappings, that which protects and makes space and then is discarded. Enter the gallery now, where Karyn Olivier's work *Bench (Seating for One)* (2003) is placed. A looming brick wall blocks the space and also implies containment, a separation of space into unknown but clearly distinct arenas. It stands like a minimalist sculpture transposed into quotidian materials, cutting across the floor and mutely but aggressively becoming an active object, turning the anonymous white cube of the gallery into a living thing. In front and behind, exposed and hidden, private and public become tangible elements of the architectural configuration. Those not deterred by its harsh surface and looming presence might notice that it doesn't quite create an enclosure, but allows the intrepid viewer to round its sharp corner and see what it holds there. A simple, single metal plane protrudes from the wall, slim but sturdy, seating for one. Dare you sit? The act of physically engaging with the piece transforms it utterly. Perched there, you face the wall, blank and white. Sent to the bench, excluded, a form of punishment in being extracted from the social space of other visitors on the other side of the wall. Or it could be a gift, a privilege of a private space inserted into a public one, a space of contemplation, free from the evaluation of others' eyes. The brick against your back can be protection and safety as surely as it stood sentinel from the other side. Someone else peeks around the corner tentatively, sees you there and backs away. It belongs to you now, for no other reason than that you occupy it.

This coexistence of spatial dichotomies is character-

istic of Karyn Olivier's mixed-media work: public mingling with private, alienation and architectural division simultaneously creating areas of intimacy and connection, restricted access vying with intimate interaction. Often referencing minimalist forms, Olivier draws the work into the vernacular realm through use of materials or site-specific references, as in her photographs of mirror-image plan houses that recall Gordon Matta-Clark's dissected houses (though in Olivier's images, the reflected forms are "found objects"). A simple rope stretched across a gallery is laden at its center with a pile of all of the artist's clothing, transforming one's path through the space and giving weight (literally and physically) to this near-invisible dissection of movement. As with *Bench*, displaced function and blocked perception that call attention to the assumed qualities of known sites become central in a piece such as *FortWith Centerpeace* (2003), a reconstruction of the artist's living room in a glary space, but only viewable from overhead. Her *Whispering Domes* (2001) imply secrecy, private access and solitude, but viewers who choose to enter find themselves in a gently meditative space that often forces unusually close interaction with another person, also inside, also engaged. Perhaps most critically throughout Olivier's work, space becomes an action, alive. This is meaning through presence, transformative and temporary; this is, in the end, meaning for real.

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LEFT: *Bench (Seating for One)*, 2003

RIGHT: *Ridgewood Line (BQT Ghost No. 6064)*, 2004