

Karyn Olivier: Time to Go Home

Dunn and Brown Contemporary

- Max Kazemzadeh -

Silver and gold and crumpets, sugarplums and articulated narratives were willfully omitted in this year's winter exhibition at Dunn and Brown Contemporary. Little bits of silent magic, however, did float into the vacuous, almost reticent interior of the space through the iconic presence of five at once familiar yet thoughtfully mutated and distorted found-object fabrications. While these works pose as Minimalist sculptures, "interactive objects," "relational constructions" and "altered spaces" prevail as more appropriate terms to describe the potentially kinetic, near-touchable works by Trinidad-born artist Karyn Olivier. Olivier's creations are not mere objects; rather, they are interfaces between the artist's childhood and our collective cultural past.



Karyn Olivier, *Seesaw*, 2005

Steel

37 inches x 40 feet x 13 1/2 inches

The nature of each of Olivier's nostalgic interfaces recalls a time and place where social interaction introduced a new and complex emotional reality overseen and sometimes imposed upon by parents and educators. Isolation, separation, disconnectedness and exclusion are all potential ingredients in this mixing pot; they often appear during the disorienting period of social discovery as children are "socialized" and begin to explore new techniques of communication. Olivier, who studied psychology at Dartmouth, ostensibly attempts to magnify such emotions as layers of perception, re-appropriating and physically distorting mnemonic icons as in the elongation of an adult-sized, steel playground staple to forty feet in *Seesaw*. Functioning as a simple lever, a common seesaw embodies emotive and

perceptual associations such as play, interaction, control, elation, performance and spectacle. Olivier lifts and extends this playground requisite, distancing the players from one another to create a kind of remote intimacy.



Karyn Olivier, *Tether-ball*, 2005
Installation view

Tether balls, steel, powder, adhesive
10 x 6 feet (diameter)

In *Tether-ball*, similar strategies are employed via the mutation of a common, two-person competitive game. While Olivier is not concerned with the details of the game of tetherball itself, she does seem interested in exposing the phenomenological attraction surrounding playground games as identifiable, interactive, behavioral/social systems. Here, more than fifty tetherballs have been sprayed with adhesive and powder and attached to a pole in the gallery space, causing the once soft spheres to appear like heavy stones. Resembling cannonballs, the collective mass and perceived weight of these orbs force viewers to deal with their physical presence as dense, suspended objects posing a danger similar to a Richard Serra sculpture. The game has been rendered unplayable and the play space unapproachable. With subtle allusions to Newton's Cradle and structural formations like a dress, tree or umbrella, *Tether-ball* is an aberration, disconnected from a potentially active interface. The works in this exhibition are successfully aligned with its theme, *Time to Go Home*. Interfaces exist in an almost abandoned state, as do empty school playgrounds soon after parents retrieve their children. There is a melancholic starkness and aloneness surrounding each piece that in some way amplify the moment of encounter.

Myron Krueger, in a 1977 essay called *Responsive Environments*, said the viewer in an interactive environment "is actively involved, discovering that his limbs have been given new meaning" and that "he does not simply admire the work of the artist; he shares in its creation." Olivier's earlier works like *Untitled (Studio inside Studio)*, *Success Ladder*, *Whispering Domes and Bench (seating for one)* welcomed and encompassed the viewer into constructed and transfigured spaces. They engaged in the manner Krueger suggests interactive work should—physically and psychologically—directly affecting hierarchical perceptions of space and forcing viewers to reflect on their position in relation to others. In comparison, the works at Dunn and Brown seem subtler, more distant and lack the sense of immersion that so successfully activated Olivier's previous site-specific installations.