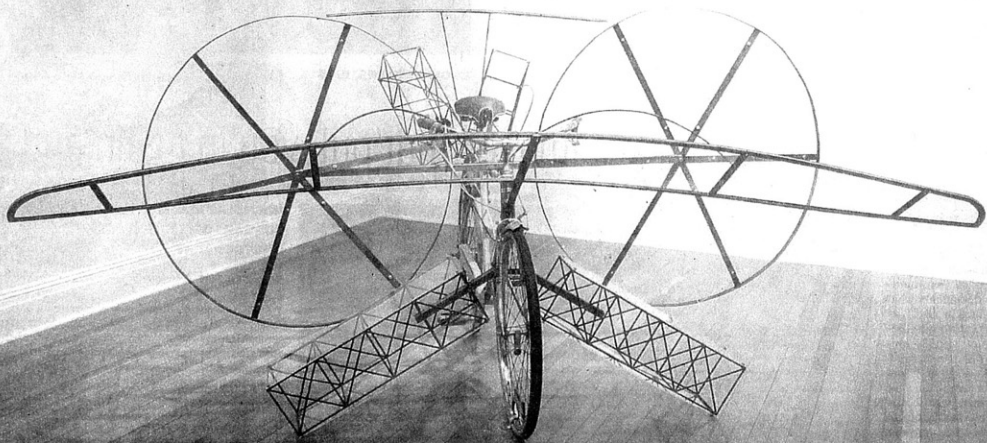


VIEW | ART

Artist makes adult creations from childhood icons



Photos by Mike Venso | Laumeier Sculpture Park

By David Bonetti
POST-DISPATCH VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

It's an old idea: Human creativity derives from play. In her conceptually beautiful and intellectually rewarding show at Laumeier, New York-based artist Karyn Olivier mines the imagery of childhood play but suggests that the road to adult creativity is blocked by obstacles that must be overcome or put to creative uses.

Three of her sculptures are variations on familiar playground fixtures: monkey bars, the slide and tetherball.

"Monkey-bar," a handmade armature carved from poplar, looks more like a rack for drying laundry than a structure intended for climbing. An inverted V, it ends only 4½ feet off the floor in a peak. A child frustrated by lack of climbing potential could use the tentlike space as a shelter, creatively subverting its function, a metaphor for what the artist does.

"Double Slide" is a surrealist *objet* of the type you'd expect from Magritte. Two real slides face each other, their bottom halves replaced by a U-shape length that would return the slider part way up the opposing slide. But what if two sliders let go at the same time, only to collide? Is sliding a metaphor for freedom — and its limits?

"Tetherball" weighs down a playground game with excess. Olivier transforms the game composed of a single ball attached to a pole with the addition of dozens of balls, all covered in concrete dust, making play difficult, if not impossible. Could she be suggesting that too much wealth and weight stifle play, hence, stifles creativity? Perhaps she's making a comment about the current state of American art.

The tour-de-force piece here — the

work I like the best — is "Bike." In our culture, a bicycle is a toy associated with childhood, but in most of the world it is a tool associated with adult work, with getting from one place to another.

In any case, Olivier has transformed an ordinary bicycle into a fantastical creature with glass wings, tails and an extravagant windshield. Looking like a comic mechanized flying insect, it derives from Leonardo's engineering experiments, while offering a metaphorical image for art and its aspirations. But will it ever be able to take off?

Other works here suggest a frustrated functionality.

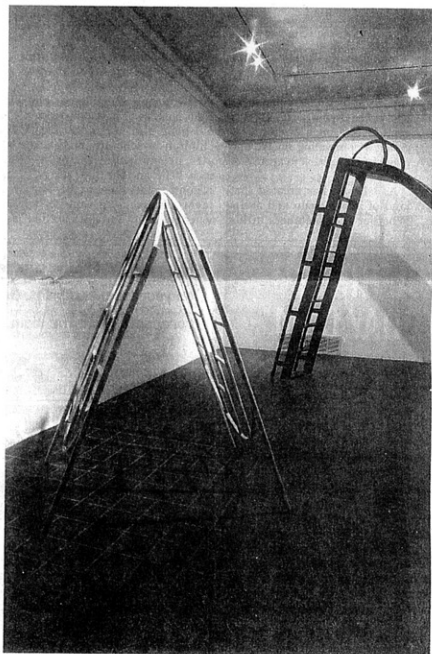
"Toilet" is a nearly 23-foot-long construction that abstracts an outhouse "nine seater." Exhibited in a white-wall gallery without connecting plumbing, it is definitely not to be used.

"Winter Hung to Dry" might be the show's most metaphorically rich work. Someone's winter clothes — the artist's? — are draped in a pile over a metal rope strung from one gallery corner to another. If they were wet and needed to dry, this would not be the way to do it. But the multicolor garments suggest something richer: a life that will never dry out, the life of an artist.

Olivier's work is clean and neat. There is nothing extraneous to it. As psychologically rich as it is in implication, it derives from minimalism, the postwar era's most austere formal expression.

The artist, who was born in 1968 in Trinidad and Tobago and educated at Dartmouth and the Cranbrook Academy of Art, is adept at dealing with a restricted vocabulary to express complex psychological and cultural ideas. At the start of a career, she is an artist to watch, and it is boon to the St. Louis audience that she is showing here.

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'KARYN OLIVIER: A CLOSER LOOK'

Where: Laumeier Sculpture Park, 12580 Rott Road, Sunset Hills
When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, noon-5 p.m. Saturday-Sunday; through May 13
More info: 314-821-1209 or www.laumeier.org

"Monkey-bar" is in the spotlight in front of "Double Slide."