



Born in Trinidad and Tobago, **Karyn Olivier** had her first solo exhibition in 2002 and has since been featured in Marfa Ballroom's *You Are Here*, at the Sculpture Center in New York City, in P.S.1's *Greater New York* and the Studio Museum's *Frequency*. She has also exhibited at the Soap Factory in Minneapolis, the Dallas Center for Contemporary Art, and the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland. Recipient of the Louis Comfort Tiffany Biennial Award in 2003, she was recently awarded an Individual Artist Grant from the Cultural Arts Council of Houston and Harris County, and a 2005–2006 residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Her work is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Olivier received her MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art.

Karyn Olivier

59 SOUTH (TEXAS) BILLBOARD

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Never mind the overheated rhetoric of today's art market, where unique works are traded at astonishing prices and value is determined by sales. Karyn Olivier provides a thoughtful corrective. Born in Trinidad, raised in Brooklyn and trained in psychology and ceramics, she embraces the nonprofit realm by offering her sculptures and installations to the public as gifts.

Consider *Winter Hung to Dry* (2003), an extended length of clothesline sagging under the weight of the heavy outerwear tossed over its center—a heap so limp it looked as if a refugee from a colder climate had discarded it in the night. Or *It's Not Over 'Til It's Over* (2004), a silent carousel-for-one installed in New York's Socrates Sculpture Park, the platform revolving so slowly it seemed to be at a standstill. An old-fashioned mahogany coffee table—its legs pared down and its polished surface serving as the base of what appeared to be a supporting column—was one of the more attention-getting entries in the 2005 *Greater New York* show at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center. "Often I think of public space and how our perception of it shifts every time someone new enters it," Olivier says. "Coffee tables don't really function in our society, so I wanted the piece to become literally part of the room."

Based on both personal experience and collective memory, Olivier's formalist theater of the absurd may be marked by isolation, yearning or melancholy, but what her disorienting architectural manipulations best express is an affection for human folly. And she appears to have hit a nerve.

Since 2003—only two years after earning her MFA at the Cranbrook Academy of Art—she has been invited to create work for a dizzying array of prestigious exhibitions, the sort of 'weathervane' shows that let

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

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

art-world cognoscenti know which way the wind is blowing. Venues have included New York's Studio Museum in Harlem, the Blaffer Gallery in Houston, Texas, Ballroom in Marfa, Texas, and the Wanas Foundation in Sweden, to name a few.

That's quite a resume for someone who started out as an assistant buyer at Bloomingdale's. "Seven years ago I was making ceramic pots and wanting to be an artist," Olivier says. "Now I'm traveling and making art everywhere!" That includes Highway 59 South, out of Houston, the heavily trafficked expressway where, with support from Creative Capital, Olivier intends to replace the customary advertising on ten billboards with photographs of her own. She is currently seeking the sponsorship needed to keep them on view for 30 days.

Don't mistake this project as a reference to Texan Lady Bird Johnson's 'highway beautification' campaign of the 1960s. Olivier's photographs will depict the landscape usually hidden behind each billboard. She wants to confront passing motorists, she says, with "an unsettling and uncanny experience," in which a fictional proposition assumes a greater authority than the reality at hand.

The idea stems partly from René Magritte's 1933 painting-within-a-painting, *The Human Condition*, in which a canvas in front of a window replicates the landscape outside—another painting. But Olivier also cites the influence of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, two provocative works of fiction that similarly confront the mystifications and lies that both enrich and shatter the world of appearances. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, an artist whose early 1990s billboards poignantly evoked the thousands lost to AIDS, has also been an inspiration.

Olivier's *59 South (Texas) Billboard* should debut in late 2006 or early 2007. She plans to photograph each site during the morning rush hour commute. The actual landscape will vary from the image on each billboard as a result of the time of day the image is seen by drivers and the varying weather. "I want to see how each change affects the way people understand the pictures," she says, "when the landscape is no longer the same as it is in the image." Ultimately, she will make both billboards and documentary photos into a book. *

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