

THE DAYS OF YORE

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interviews artists about the years before they had money, fame, or road maps to success, and inspires you to find your own.

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Karyn Olivier is a visual artist born in Trinidad and Tobago who grew up, and still lives, in Brooklyn, New York. Her work has been exhibited widely in the United States and abroad, including the Gwangju and Busan Biennials (Korea), The Museum of Fine Arts Houston, The Contemporary Arts Museum (Houston), the Wanås Foundation (Sweden), The Whitney Museum of Art at Altria (NY), P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center (NY), the Uferhallen (Berlin), the SculptureCenter (NY), and the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. Olivier has won a number of awards and fellowships,

including a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Award and grants from Art Matters the Public Art Fund, and the Creative Capital Foundation. She has also been an artist in residence at the Core Program (MFAH), Studio Museum in Harlem and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Olivier earned her B.A. from Dartmouth College and her M.F.A. from Cranbrook Academy of Art. She is currently an assistant professor of sculpture at Tyler School of Art.

Olivier's work is often large-scale and public and explores the spontaneous relationship between art and viewer. In the 2009 project *Inbound: Houston*, she replaced ads on thirteen commercial billboards along major Houston, Texas freeways with photographs depicting the landscape directly behind the billboards, creating a dreamlike vision of transparency/double exposure and reminding drivers what they would see were they not constantly blasted by advertisements. Her most recent project, *ACA Foods Free Library*, is a lending library featuring exclusively Caribbean authors which is integrated into the West Indian ACA foods market in West Hartford, CT.

When did you first become interested in pursuing art professionally?

I was always interested in art. I spent many afternoons of my childhood at the Brooklyn Museum. In grade school art was one of our subjects and I did well, but when I reached middle school and high school art was never offered again. Being an artist didn't enter my consciousness. Back then, art making seemed to be something that other people did—special people from some other place—certainly not the Midwood section of Brooklyn where I grew up. It wasn't until I was almost ten years out of college when I realized I should be

an artist.

Did you study art in college?

When I first got to Dartmouth I thought I wanted to be an engineer. I was always good at math, but my freshman fall semester of advanced calculus told me I was definitely barking up the wrong tree. I was at a bit of a loss for what to study instead, though the thought of majoring in Art History did cross my mind. I remember running the idea by my mom and she suggested psychology. It sounded interesting so I gave it a go.



So when did you “turn” to art?

When I graduated [from college] I worked in the fashion business. It was during my time as store manager at Urban Outfitters that I decided to take a ceramics class at the 92nd St Y [in New York]—I knew it would guarantee me one night out of the store. I had a great teacher who encouraged me and suggested I take this clay business more seriously. I continued taking classes and finally, months before turning 30, I decided to take the plunge and study ceramics at an art school with the goal of applying to graduate school. It was the most exciting and invigorating time I'd had up until then—I thought I had been living it up in my 20s! But the career change was also totally scary, wholly challenging, and completely exhausting; I'd never worked this hard before in my life.

How did your family feel about this sudden career change?

I grew up in an immigrant family from the Caribbean where the work ethic is very high coupled with my parents' quietly expressed big goals and dreams for their family. Education was of the utmost importance, as were the security and opportunities it would grant their kids. They had done it all right: I had a great career and was successful at it. And then I told them I wanted to go back to school for art—not even “art”—ceramics. My dad, needless to say, was nervous: Why would you waste an Ivy League education on making pots? My mom saw it a bit differently. Years after my leap she told me that I was one of the most courageous people she knew—giving up a known for an unknown, willing to take a risk with no guarantees. That conversation was an amazing revelation because I hadn't thought of it that way, of course. Time has

passed and now my dad is completely onboard too—has even helped me fabricate some of the larger works; and I honestly think this man who almost never steps foot inside a museum understands what I'm trying to do with this art thing more than most.



What kind of jobs did you have to support yourself before you were able to support yourself on your art?

Right after grad school I moved down to Houston to be an artist in residence in the Core Program [Museum of Fine Arts, Houston]. It was great—a studio, a modest stipend, an instant community. But there was the business of student loans—\$80,000 worth of loans. I couldn't live off the Core's monthly allowance so I scrambled for work. I juggled three to four gigs at a time: teaching art to toddlers (the most tiring two hours of my life), docent work at the contemporary art and fine arts museums, working in an after-school program, teaching art appreciation at a local community college. It was a lot, but I knew the residency was a gift, a real privilege, and I was certain it was also teaching me how to really be an artist—the good, the bad, all of it.

What were your work habits like back then, and what are they like now?

My habits are mostly the same—I work too hard, and worry too much, but I do get more sleep now than I used to. Not really because I want to, but ever since I turned 40 my body just demands it and says no more all-nighters. Well, most of the time.



Tell me a how you were living, what you were eating— all that good stuff.

When I first moved down to Houston a few months out of grad school I found a sweet one bedroom apartment not too far from my studio. I thought: perfect—I can bike over and be there in fifteen minutes. But I quickly found out why I never saw any bikers on the streets—you will not only be overrun by cars but are likely to be run over by them, too. So a Saturn sedan became my constant companion— you have to drive everywhere in H-town. The rent was a little higher than what I could afford, but I took the place for two reasons—1. I could rationalize that it was definitely cheaper than what I'd be paying back home in Brooklyn, 2. I was determined to not have a roommate— too many years spent sharing a room with my twin sister! So, I knew what I was doing and knew it would mean I'd probably have to take on an extra gig, which I did happily. Well, that might be a stretch—let's just say it was worth it.

I didn't like to cook, didn't have much time to cook, and couldn't afford to order in or eat out. Most weeks I cooked two dishes—Thai green curry and Trinidadian curry. These yielded a big pot's worth and were cheap and simple but delicious. I eventually added a third—Asian turkey lettuce wraps.

My apartment had a lot of light, which I loved and still miss—I am currently in a garden apartment in Fort Greene and even in the morning I have to turn lights on. The walls of my place in Houston were filled with dear friends' art works, mostly recent thesis paintings and photos; a few small sculptures here and there. Pretty much the same as it is today, but I either have a lot more art now or too few walls! My hours were a bit insane back then, but not unique for an artist. I would work until about 2 a.m., then watch a movie until about 4 a.m.—my brain needed a few hours to wind down. Then I was up again at 8—damn those 9 a.m. classes to teach!

Money. Tell me about it.

I almost maxed out my credit cards buying art supplies back then. I was committed to making the work even when the money wasn't there. Institutions would ask me to make site-specific work for shows with little financial support. I was eager for the opportunities so I always said yes and figured I'd deal with the money woes later. Now I still have some of that debt, but I receive grants, which help cover fabrication costs for new works, or institutions will commission me, taking care of expenses. And having a steady teaching gig

helps too.



Do you view your work differently now that you know it is more likely to find an audience as opposed to when you were just starting out?

I don't think so. My work has always been positioned with the viewer/participant in mind. Even back when I was making ceramic tea bowls, I was aware of someone using my work—the haptic experience that unfolded, the object's relationship to an individual's need for sustenance. I think because I didn't grown up drawing or doodling or making much art I never had that self-reflective relationship with it. I didn't use art to express myself; it just wasn't an outlet for me. Later, when I started making sculptures and installations I was still thinking of the user (like with the tea bowl), and how I could engage him with the work. Often, this was manifested in an "Installation Art" way where the viewer completes the work. I wanted my nephews to play with my sculpture and enjoy it for completely different reasons than, say, an art audience would.

Why are you drawn to large-scale work?

I think I was secretly afraid to make small work, doubting I could make it as powerful if it was small. I really wanted to engage the viewer and thought I might have a better shot at it if I worked larger, using the human body as the gauge. If the viewer had to physically enter the work or activate it in some way, there was the chance that they would be affected experientially, psychologically, and emotionally. I am still interested in this level of engagement, but am trying to have a lighter touch. I'd like for the experience to be incidental—maybe people won't notice that it's art at all, but perhaps recognize it as something they need.

Can you tell me about the public art project you did at ACA Foods market?

Earlier this year I installed a functioning library inside ACA Foods market, a Caribbean grocery store in Hartford, CT. It's an exclusively Caribbean library open to all patrons of the market. The books are organized by category (i.e. literature, history, children, region) and arranged on shelves alongside the customary products and provisions sold in the store. What is most exciting to me is that it is an honor library—no library card necessary, no proof of residence required, no specific date of return. Any customer can take a book out—the borrowers are only asked to return them when they are finished digesting them.

My hope was for this library to expand what we imagine the "consumables" of a market to be—particularly when that market inadvertently traffics in nostalgia for home. I hoped for it to be a place where folks could really slow down, browse, and relish the sights, smells, tastes, sounds of our collective West-Indian heritage.



Are residencies something you recommend?

Residencies are amazing. GO!! I attended Skowhegan the summer between my first and second year at grad school and it was critical in shaping me as an artist. I was coming from an excellent ceramics program, but the dialogue, support and access the residency afforded me were unparalleled. I returned to Skowhegan for three more summers as dean, which was like having three bonus residencies. I participated in the Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation Space Program and the Studio Museum in Harlem, too, which helped immensely with my transition from Houston back home to New York. They gave me the working space I needed that I wouldn't have had access to otherwise. Residencies are great safety nets for young artists; they really push you to take unbelievable risks...and catch you, if necessary. And I think they are amazing for older artists, too —I'm planning to do one next year. But I do think it's important to set up your own studio eventually, and define a space for yourself. There are some artists who go from residency to residency, which is one way to go, but for me, there is nothing like a sustained place that I can keep returning to.

How did you find venues to show your work?

Residencies helped a lot. Sometimes during an open studio event, a curator would see my work and express interest. Often an exhibition opportunity would come out of that exchange. I also applied for juried shows in places I'd never heard of and sometimes those shows would lead to other opportunities.



Any early hurdles?

Hurdles—yes, during my first semester at the University of the Arts when I entered their post-bac program. I was placed in a senior ceramics critique class that required all students to present work for crit every week. And each week my work was trashed. I would leave school, go back to my apartment in this new city I hadn't grown to even remotely like and cry. I'd think, "I've left my family, friends, my fun life for this? I'm 30 years-old and being told I'm not up to snuff." And every week I'd decide "I'm going back home" and every week—or what felt like every week— my best friend would call and say "you can't come home; not yet." Well, by the end of the semester things did eventually get better—and my work got a little better, too.

Was it important for you to be a part of an artistic community?

I think having a community is critical. I have a group of friends that I call on to come and visit my studio, to give my work a kick in the butt when necessary. I also have a somewhat indirect community through teaching. My colleagues are talented, as are my students. Sometimes after a great day of critiques where students have demonstrated real ambition, I have to look at myself and say "have you taken any big risks in your work lately?" I'm forced to face my work even when I'm nowhere in its vicinity.

When you were just starting out, what was your dream?

I don't know if I ever had a clear-cut dream. I just wanted the opportunity to make work and share it. I still feel the same way.

Any advice for artists just starting out?

Just work your ass off and relentlessly believe in yourself—at least as much as you doubt yourself.

Images courtesy of the artist. 1.) Image from *Inbound: Houston* 2.) Image from *Inbound: Houston*
3.) Doubleslide 4.) Grey Hope 5.) Free Library, consolidated 6.) Toilet

Interview by Astri von Arbin Ahlander

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