

The Accidental Artist It's never too late to become a world-renowned artist.

by Tim Moloney. Photography by Anthony Rathbun

for art's sake



Take the story of Karyn Olivier, for example. After graduating with a BA in psychology from Dartmouth in 1989, she went to work for Bloomingdale's as a buyer, and later became a store manager for a large Urban Outfitters outpost in Manhattan. But one day, she decided she needed to do something different, just for herself. And it changed her life forever.

What was this monumental force, this powerful influence? A **Tuesday night ceramics class.**

"I'd always been artistic as a child," says Olivier, who was born in Trinidad and Tobago and raised in Brooklyn by a family who put a high priority on education, "but when I was deciding what I wanted to study in college, I asked my mom for her opinion. My mom's pretty much always right, so when she told me **I'd be a good psychologist**, the decision was made."

Olivier never pursued a career in her field of study. However, eight years out of school and frustrated by the pressure and long hours of retail work, she remembered how much she enjoyed art as a child. She decided to take one night off just for herself – and signed up for a class. "That ceramics class really set me off on a whole different path," she laughs. "I fell into it completely and discovered my love for the medium and the materials and the whole artistic process."

In 1997, she made her decision: she would become a ceramicist. Off she went to graduate school at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, and in 2001 she earned her MFA from the **Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan**. During these years she began learning about other art forms, including sculpture and installations, and other variations in conceptual art. Olivier began avidly using her knowledge of materials and combined it with her thought-provoking ideas to create pieces that caused the art world to sit up and take notice.

It wasn't long before she was accepted into the exclusive **Core Fellows Residency program at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston**. "I had never been to Texas before, and to tell you the truth, I was a little scared of the South," she laughs, but with sincerity in her voice. "When I first got here, it was rainy and tropical and it reminded me of the Caribbean – my home in Trinidad – so I knew it wasn't going to be too bad."

While her vision of Houston as a Caribbean paradise steadily went away, her appreciation for the city's art scene increased exponentially. "It's cosmopolitan, culturally rich and diverse. I like it because it's sophisticated and competitive, but in a healthy way."



Olivier's installations **center on the study of objects and spaces** from a variety of vantage points that challenge spectators to participate in the work, inviting them in (and often shutting them out) and then allowing them to feel and see environments in a completely personal way.

Immediately, positive reviews for her work started appearing – and her work began appearing in some prestigious venues. Olivier was chosen as a featured artist for **Project Row Houses' "New Artists' Installations Round 16"** in 2002. *The Houston Press* praised her **"Fort with Centerpiece"** installation, which turned her living room inside out, at the 2003 Core Exhibition. She was also singled out by the UK art magazine *Dazed and Confused* as an up-and-coming artist worth watching.

Olivier's Core Residency ended in May 2003, but not before the museum bought one of her installation pieces for its permanent collection. "That was the most amazing, gratifying experience," she beams.

It was only topped in December of 2003, when she won the \$20,000 Tiffany Prize from

the Louis Comfort Foundation. "I've been traveling back and forth to New York a lot, installing a new show, and having my mail held, so I haven't really tracked down the check yet. I'm sure it's out there somewhere."

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Now teaching at **University of Houston** in the fine arts department as an assistant professor of sculpture, Olivier is challenged anew every day by the young creative minds that surround her. "I expect a lot from them, and there's always a grumble when I throw a big assignment their way. But then they always step up to the plate and surprise me with fresh ideas," she smiles.

"I'm assuming I'm going to learn as much as they are," says Olivier. "It's kind of a selfish thing, I guess, but anything that keeps my mind active and working is only going to help my own art."