

Karyn Olivier *A Closer Look*



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Organized by **Laumeier Sculpture Park**

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Essay by Shannon Fitzgerald. Cover photo: Karyn Olivier, *Doubleslide*, 2006

EXHIBITION DATES | February 9 to May 13, 2007



Monkey-bar, 2005



Toilet, 2007



Winter Hung to Dry, 2003



Tether-ball, 2005

Karyn Olivier: *Intimacy, Please*

Karyn Olivier's new and recent work in the exhibition *A Closer Look* permeates Laumeier's five indoor exhibition galleries that were once part of an early 20th century home. This former domestic setting creates a neutral space and familiarity, providing the viewer an intimate vantage point to consider singular works. The quietude afforded by the interior architecture constitutes a compelling *mise en scene* as objects referring to large-scale, outdoor origins occupy small, affable indoor rooms. From a faux archeological perspective, individual works — in their isolated and singular presentation — seem curiously plucked from their natural environment and placed in a domestic setting, as specimens, as fodder. The sculptures work independently but also coalesce in an interdependency on one another. As narratives unfold, the installation offers a series of inspired contradictions and propositions gathered from nostalgia, the domestic, the familiar, and the banal.

Olivier has developed a framework for understanding the social and cultural contexts that produce multiple forms of disillusionment and disenchantment by concentrating on certain sites: the playground, the backyard, and the domestic. With an affinity towards minimalism, her objects are spare, fundamental, and bare only essential information. However, they are also deeply embedded with meaning, as she equally employs personal and collective experience as rooted in nostalgia and childhood memory. Her conceptual scrutiny presents sculptural objects as artifact. Often mined from playground topography, the work is familiar, but distanced through multiple associations and realities.

The playground and the domestic operate as physical sites and psychological receptacles rich in contradictions about desire, intimacy, and conflict. The playground after all is one of the earliest arenas where one learns to define power, privilege, collaboration, and respect in our immediate culture. It also represents a site for one of the first cognitive moments when children become aware of differences of: gender, race, physicality, and class, thus giving rise to the knowledge of inequity. At this crucial developmental stage, individuals are able to distinguish difference, assess the other, and the fundamental notions of tolerance and intolerance emerge. The emotional range communicated in Olivier's work is an expression of humanity and equity as opposed to a struggle for dominance. She locates pathos in the playground as a way to address social isolation as a larger symptom of our current cultural climate. Beyond the personal, an ideological alienation and sorrow for what may have disappeared is portrayed as more profound than mere nostalgia for the past.

Olivier explains that her "exploration into domestic spaces converges with my interest in nostalgia. Nostalgia functions in my work through cultural references (memory-based and imagined) and through art historical references,

notably minimalism. I overlay the two using the simplicity of minimalist language to trigger a recollection of past cultural norms.”¹ Olivier makes a concession in terms of pure nostalgia; the emotions associated with which are hard and cool precisely because of the purity of form she employs.

Like the social norms she references, her work is a construct. While playful and seductive, a sense of betrayal characterizes much of the work. Indeed, a “closer look” reveals a discomfort and suggests eclipsed aspirations and diminished dreams. With this somber discord of possibilities in sweet decline the artist effectively asks, can intimacy be obtained?

In an ambiguous, double articulation, Olivier pushes the contradictory boundaries between play and conflict in *Double Slide* (2005), which at first appears to transform two ordinary playground slides. Standing opposite each other, two steel ladders seamlessly merge at the bottom, suspended above the floor to become one. *Double Slide* dominates the space in a balanced tension that, despite its obdurate materiality and unsympathetic stature, creates an urge to play. Alone, one could slide down, but would only arrive in an indeterminate state, hovering in-between emotions, youth and adulthood, the beginning and the end — a sort of physical and emotional limbo. However, the inevitable collision that would occur with two participants underscores the potential harm Olivier implies throughout her work. The forced physical coming together in *Double Slide* obscures the joy found in a fleeting moment, as the thrill now resonates as dysfunctional and dangerous.

Formally austere and cool, this work reminds us that the playground can represent an isolating experience, as the social expectation often stands in opposition to the fun associated with innocent exchange and recreational activity. The forced engagement reveals an essential vulnerability, we all possess, still. The alterity of *Double Slide* generates pause; it conjures memory as distortion that not only exists in childhood but also, profoundly modified, in adulthood. Moreover, to encounter *Double Slide* is to realize that just as play is an essential part of children’s development, so too is desire. There is an acute awareness that desire often shares the same psychological space with futility.

Olivier’s consideration of games to explore the psychology of social circumstance unfolds beautifully in the hand-sculpted *Monkey-bar* (2005). Olivier’s respect, skill, and affinity for hand-sculpting fine wood into objects is reminiscent of Martin Puryear. She laboriously carves, hand-dowels, and bends poplar, a wood Olivier selected to work with for its inherent yellow cast and flexibility. Inspired by a Nigerian monkey bar and personal experience, Olivier addresses notions of aspiration and simultaneously delivers such concepts as hope and hopelessness. Olivier’s reductionist language and honed skill transform this into a devotional object, a revered entity that is precious and timeless.

Olivier’s *Monkey Bar* collapses the goal of the activity as it elegantly folds in on itself. It is also safer, as the harm from propelling oneself through the air and falling is no longer a risk. Gregory Volk observed that *Monkey Bar* is

“Midway between a utilitarian object and pure abstraction, it’s partly playful, disturbingly fragile, and in the midst of its whimsy you get a nagging sense of impending danger.”² Oliver reconsiders the psychology of the playground as social arena, which is at once safe and unsafe, free and constricted. The illusion of distance is created as the diminutive scale, weightlessness, and transportable quality suggests that *Monkey Bar* could easily fold up and be carried away: a delightful prospect.

In *Tether-ball* (2005), Olivier presents the childhood game as a cultural relic. Over 100 tetherballs hang from rope and gather in a gourd-like shape around a stationary metal pole. Seen in Laumeier’s truncated, once residential space, the sky seems to fall and contributes to the monumentality of the sculpture. The game is designed for two opposing players, each of which attempts to hit the ball one way; clockwise or counterclockwise. The game culminates when one player succeeds in winding a single ball all the way around the pole until the rope halts it.

The accumulation of the heavy balls, treated in pigment that resembles flaking concrete and anchored to the pole, suggests limited movement and works to quell exertion and effort. The synchronized gesture and implied revolution that would be intuitive to the players are deadened, as are the required negotiation and social action of the game. The game’s basic enchantment, the dueling aspect and exercise of participation is removed and the perception that playground games are inclusive and promote partnership is belied.

The ridiculous accrual of the petrified-looking balls feels antagonistic. The bodily, organic, and bulbous massing is somehow not quite right. As such, *Tetherball* signifies a site for conquest. Much like a marker or a memorial, it reminds us that the playground can be a victorious and joyous place. Conversely, it is also an environment ripe for cruelty. This compelling dexterity harkens us back to our earliest memories enabling us to see ourselves (or former selves) in the work.

Bike (2005) is a wondrous, futuristic flying machine with an elaborate steel and Plexiglas armature that confounds mobility. In a Renaissance revival sensibility, *Bike* is like a humanist experiment as hope and delight in both art and science are marvelously articulated, and the kinetic amplification produces both fancy and anxiety (think of Leonardo Da Vinci’s astounding 15th century flying machines). Olivier’s proposed glider is just as complex and functionally inadequate, as her hybrid machine will never lift itself off the ground, or even move forward. The metamorphosis is a concoction comprised of playful wings, propellers, and kite boxes orchestrated around a centralizing, weathered 3-speed bicycle.

The simplicity of form found in other works is beautifully complex in this singular, incongruous prototype. As a conceptual proposition, of Duchampian order, this work retains an absurdist visual surprise and sense of irony. Working with a formerly functional bicycle as readymade, Olivier layers the object with collective nostalgia that further underscores its futility. Despite a balanced application of ordering principles, Olivier eliminates the purpose of her illogical construct to suggest metaphorical modification, transient in nature. The improbable apparatus now only transports

one to a refrained and disembodied past, detached from any form of actualization, thus eclipsing the promised sojourn.

Similarly, physical and psychological transformation is imparted in *Crutches and Stilt* (2006). As earnest objects, they are potent and deliberate: loss is elusive, anonymous, and ageless. Propped up against a wall in a row, are various, hand made, wooden crutches, a walking stick, and a stilt. The artist's alterations subtly emphasize difference and an emotion that implies care. The group of singular props (each without its counterpart) conjures a site honoring the afflicted, lame, and lonely. Left behind are remnants evidencing disability, abandonment, and/or healing. As a whole, the four prop pieces are ambiguous; do they suggest pilgrimage? conflict? a witnessing? or, alternatively, a miracle? Resignation belies the allure of these fragmented human surrogates which evoke a heightened appreciation for simple mobility and the task of walking, so easily taken for granted.

In another double articulation, *Toilet* (2007), a cast concrete, site-specific piece made for Laumeier, blends the boundaries between the public and private. Olivier's critique of the private consists of a heavy poured gray rectilinear expanse set low to the floor, featuring nine, dark, keyhole shaped toilets only inches apart. Laumeier's installation represents a second manifestation of *Toilet*. A version three times its size was created for the Wanas Foundation in Sweden. "Its direct inspiration comes instead from the public toilets common in ancient Rome. . .this merging of phenomenological concerns and decidedly baser ones not only highlights the contradictory forces embodied by Olivier's objects, but also the manner in which acceptable behaviors change across time and cultures."³

Olivier succinctly neutralizes what could be a pithy subject as there is no sense of shame to the banal, outdoor, communal toilet, now transported indoors. Its austerity corresponds to the minimalist elegance of Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt. In its duplicity, *Toilet* is transformed into an ethnographic object, as the spectator now becomes a voyeur of a culturally removed and distanced reality. While its historicity and self-reflectivity coalesces with architecture and human necessity, individual import and privacy, acquiesce to structure and community. Centralized in the exhibition gallery between two windows overlooking Laumeier's vast grounds and bathed in abundant natural light, *Toilet* possesses a familiarity that is surprisingly comfortable. While an important thread in Olivier's work is its aspect of emotional anxiety and bodily discomfort, the severe banality of *Toilet* accomplishes just the opposite: it rouses human connectedness.

Likewise, the interplay between object, function, and space is performatively explored in *Winter Hung to Dry* (2003). For Olivier, the clothesline is an image culled from her youth growing up in New York City. Anchored to adjacent corners of the gallery is an almost transparent clothesline, on which the artist has carefully layered a vibrant assortment of her own winter clothes — colorful sweaters, knit scarves, tights, woolen coats, and long underwear comprise a slumped stack.

Transformed into a human proxy, the clothespile creates an approachable dialogue with the viewer. Draped across a thin line, heaps of garments evoke a graceful body whose physicality is precariously balanced in a tension that threatens to break and fall to the floor at any moment. The parlance of *Winter Hung to Dry* is feminine and lyrically denotes home, labor, and resignation. It is a whimsical gesture, but more importantly it communicates collapse, passage of time, loss, and a discomfort in an illogical present.

The humanness expressed in everyday encounter, the common endeavor, and repetitive nature of the implied action conveys futility and struggle. As clotheslines are associated with spring and summer months, an unbearable weight of existence is evident. It is unlikely this mass of winter clothing would ever dry and functions as evidence of a previous self, left behind — and a modicum of hope emerges from this unlikely juxtaposition.

Using the archetype of the playground, Olivier paradoxically infuses a playful and frivolous nature into her work as she takes a serious, closer look at desire and the will of the individual. She imbues transference and possibility in compelling contradictions and inane proposals. The work is pleasantly taunting in a world of inconsolable affront, as she assures us, for better or worse, playground mentality endures. Profoundly interested in the cyclical nature of psychological order and disorder, Olivier taps into a protected consciousness to explore intimacy, memory, and relationships. Accessibility is important and achieved through the familiar and the power of nostalgia to create poetic shifts in perception. Desire is a social construction that yields allegiance to hope. Articulated through the lens of childhood imagination, hope exists if we maintain the belief that the dreams we once thought were attainable in our youth, still permeate and inform adult desires. In this context, Olivier asks how do we define desire? aspiration? possibility? While the work in *A Closer Look* is not necessarily a plea, it does recognize a call for empathy and intimacy. In a cohesive body of work, and not without humor, Karyn Olivier intelligently and intuitively embraces desire, conveys sadness, and memorializes loss. But also, with optimism, perhaps arouses an inspiring collective longing.

¹ Taken from an artist statement prepared by Olivier specifically for this exhibition, February 2007.

² Gregory Volk, "Karyn Olivier" in *Quid Pro Quo: Rashawn Griffin, Karyn Olivier and Clifford Owens*, exhibition brochure, New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006. p. 8.

³ Linda Rydberg, "Karyn Olivier" in *Insight Out*, Knislinge, Sweden: The Wanas Foundation, 2006. p. 50.

Essay by Shannon Fitzgerald, St. Louis



artist bio

Born: Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

Karyn Olivier is Professor of Sculpture at the University of Houston. She currently holds the position of Assistant Professor of Sculpture at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University, Philadelphia.

education

Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan; M.F.A., May 2001

University of the Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Post- Baccalaureate Program (1997-1999)

Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire; B.A. in Psychology, June 1989

residencies

AIR Program, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2005-2006

The Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation Space Program, New York, New York, 2004-2005

The Core Program, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, 2001-2003

Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine, 2000

Art History Abroad Program, Dartmouth College, Florence, Italy, 1988

solo exhibitions

2007 *Billboard Project (59 South)*, Houston, Texas (Creative Capital Grant)

A Closer Look, Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, MO

In the Public Realm, Public Art Fund, New York, New York

2006 *Factory Installed*, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

2005 *Time to go home*, Dunn and Brown Contemporary, Dallas, Texas

Winter hung to dry, Women and their Work Gallery, Austin, Texas

2004 *Billboard Project*, Dupree Sculpture Park at Project Row Houses, Houston, Texas

2003 *Bench (seating for one)*, Feldman Gallery, Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland, Oregon

2002 *Round 16*, Project Row Houses, Houston, Texas

two-person exhibitions

2003 *It's not the end of the world*, Nave Museum, Victoria, Texas

2000 *Blue*, Forum Gallery, Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

selected group exhibitions

2006 *Insight Out*, The Wanas Foundation, Knislinge, Sweden

Trace, The Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, (catalogue), New York, NY

Quid Pro Quo, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY

Busan Biennale 2006, Busan, Korea

"Making Do," Yale School of Art Gallery, curated by Samuel Messer, New Haven, Connecticut

2005 *Frequency*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY

You are Here, Ballroom Marfa, Marfa, Texas

Greater New York 2005, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, MOMA affiliate, Long Island City, NY

Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art since 1970, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX

Money, Baby! Artadia at Diverseworks, Diverseworks, Houston, Texas

2004 *Three Attempts at Longevity*, Triple Candie, New York, NY

Emerging Artists Fellowship Exhibition, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York

In Practice Series, SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York

2004 2004 Houston Area Exhibition, Blaffer Gallery, The Art Museum of the University of Houston, (curated by Bill Arning), Houston, Texas

The 18th Rosen Outdoor Sculpture Exhibition, Turchin Center for the Visual Arts, Boone, NC

African American Art from the Permanent Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas

fellowships and awards

Guggenheim Fellowship, 2007

Creative Capital Grant Recipient, 2005

Emerging Artists Fellowship, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, 2004

The 18th Rosen Outdoor Sculpture Competition and Exhibition Award, 2004

Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Award, (catalogue), 2003

exhibition list | Karyn Olivier: A Closer Look

gallery 1

Toilet, cast concrete, 18" x 22" x 22' 7 3/8", 2007

gallery 2

Bike, steel, Plexiglas, bicycle, 54" x 120" x 84", 2005

gallery 3

Double Slide, steel, 84" x 25' x 22", 2006

Monkey-bar, poplar, 56" x 35" x 41", 2005

Double Houses, photo, 11" x 14" image, 2005

Red Shirt, photo, 11" x 14" image, 2006

gallery 4

Tether-ball, tether balls, steel, pigment and clay powder, 10' x 6' diameter, 2005

Jesus, photo, 15" x 20" image, 2006

gallery 5.1

Crutches and Stilt, wood, mixed media, dimensions variable, 2006

gallery 5.2

Winter Hung to Dry, clothing, cord, weights, dimensions variable, 2003

All works courtesy of the artist and Dunn and Brown Contemporary, Dallas



Crutches and Stilt, 2006

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A Closer Look

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