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Karyn Olivier Seep



Karyn Olivier ***Seep***

November 1 – December 15, 2023

List Gallery, Swarthmore College



“Art allows an openness. It starts with questions. We are in the business of the ‘what ifs’ that spark conversations.”

— Karyn Olivier

Karyn Olivier and the Art of Interconnection

— Andrea Packard
Director of the Swarthmore College Art Collection and List Gallery Curator

As an artist of African descent, an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago, a gay woman, and a resident of the historically Black neighborhood of Germantown, Philadelphia, Karyn Olivier keenly understands not only the legacy of slavery, but the need for open-ended dialogue, civic engagement, and creative forms of repair. Her wide-ranging creative practice focuses especially on the problematic effects of many public monuments and the need for marginalized groups, particularly people of color, to see themselves represented more fully and positively in public spaces. Whether working on an architectural scale in urban plazas, transforming highway billboards, or creating wall-mounted collages, Olivier sparks community interactions and self-reflection in equal measure.

Born in Port of Spain, Trinidad in 1968, Olivier moved with her family to Brooklyn, and grew up straddling diverse cultures—not only nav-

igating her multi-racial neighborhood or exploring diverse aesthetics at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, but also returning to Trinidad to visit family. After studying psychology at Dartmouth College, Olivier’s growing passion for ceramics led her to pursue graduate studies at Cranbrook Academy of Art—a program that also allowed her to experiment with large-scale sculptures and site-specific installations. Upon earning an MFA in 2001, she was accepted to the Core Residency Program at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston for two years. Afterwards, she taught at the University of Houston and installed artworks at Project Row Houses (2002), completed a commission for Dupree Sculpture Park titled *Billboard Project* (2004), and earned a Creative Capital Grant to create *Inbound: Houston* (2009).

A residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem brought her back to New York in 2005, and allowed her to exhibit large-scale sculptures such as *Double Slide* (2006), a sculpture created by the seamless mid-air meeting of playground slides. Its sinuous and sprawling M-form recalls the dramatic scale shifts, formal concision, and wry humor of artists such as Claes Oldenburg and David Hammons. Olivier’s conceptual sensibility especially brings to mind Hammons’ *Higher Goals*, a

group of five totemic basketball hoops. Standing 20-30 feet high, adorned with thousands of bottle caps, and holding their nets out of reach, the hoops call attention to the scarcity of athletic careers or other escape routes for disadvantaged youth. Similarly, Olivier’s *Double Slide* conjures the excitement we associate with playgrounds and the ingenuity of creative play while also reflecting more sobering concerns, such as the precarity of childhood and the dearth of safe, communal spaces.

Olivier also developed a reputation as a pre-eminent public installation artist. One of her most impressive recent projects, *The Battle is Joined* (2017, page 6–8), was sponsored by Mural Arts Philadelphia and Monument Lab, a non-profit that encourages dialogue about how monuments have been interpreted and supports artists who reimagine such structures in a spirit of repair. Olivier’s project connected two disparate monuments in Vernon Park in Philadelphia. One of them, *The Battle of Germantown Memorial*, is a 22-foot-tall upright architectural structure and bronze plaque that extolls the heroism of George Washington’s soldiers during the Battle of Germantown in 1777. Although more than 1,000 continental soldiers were killed, injured, or captured in the battle, enabling the British to consolidate

their control of Philadelphia, the memorial is inscribed with Washington’s misleading report to the Continental Congress: “Upon the whole, it may be said that the day was unfortunate rather than injurious; we sustained no material loss.” As Olivier often points out, the monument’s narrative mythologizes the battle, asserts the primacy of white colonial power, and obscures other important perspectives, including the difficult truth that Washington fought for liberty while enslaving others.



Double Slide, 2006, steel, 7 x 25 x 22 feet
Installation view at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Courtesy of the artist



Above: *The Battle is Joined* deinstallation, November 30, 2017. Photo by Steve Weinik
Opposite: *The Battle is Joined*, 2017, mirrored acrylic, plywood, studs, 20 x 14 x 5 feet
Monument Lab, Mural Arts, Public art commission, Vernon Park, Philadelphia, PA

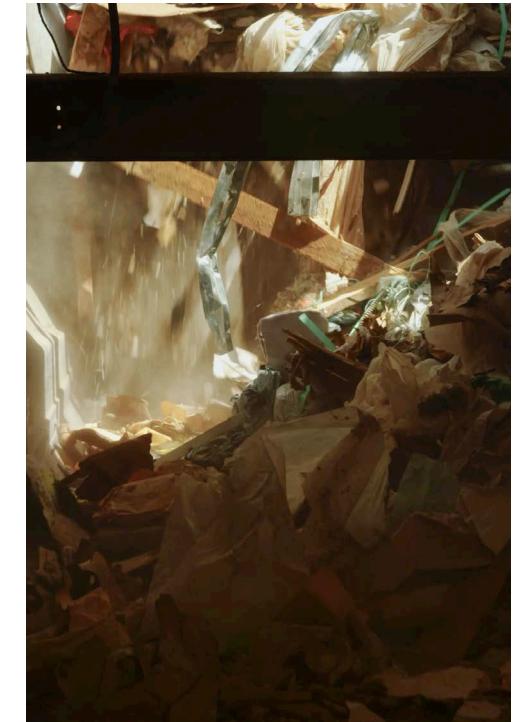
In contrast, a nearby monument honors Daniel Francis Pastorius, the 17th Century German settler and abolitionist, but that monument was boxed over during both World Wars, because the monument's aesthetics and symbols were considered too Germanic. Olivier applied that same disruptive strategy to *The Battle of Germantown* monument—temporarily boxing it in and shrouding it with reflective material. The material mirrored the surrounding trees, sky, and passersby so that the structure and its narrative no longer appeared fixed or immutable.

As the artist stated, “I want the sculpture at moments to feel uncanny, particularly for my Germantown neighbors who’ve most likely walked by this monument countless times, perhaps registering it only marginally after repeat encounters.”

The goal of reimagining everyday things, places, and relationships also guides Olivier's process when she works on a smaller scale. During the past decade, while working on numerous public installations and large commissions, Olivier has also been creating wall-mounted photo collages, free-standing sculptures, and multi-media installations designed for interior gallery spaces. The artist's

List Gallery exhibition, *Seep*, provides the opportunity for viewers to consider such works at length in an intimate setting.

In varying ways, all of the works in *Seep* incorporate some of the materials, thematic concerns, or creative strategies Olivier explored as a resident fellow at the Recycled Artist in Residency program (RAIR) in Northeast Philadelphia. Beginning in 2020, the year-long residency allowed her to observe closely the processes, sights, sounds, and smells of a large urban recycling center. As truck after truck unloaded trash for staff to sort, repurpose, or dispose, Olivier filmed the outpouring and sorting of detritus and watched trucks deposit the entire contents of homes that had been completely emptied out after misfortunes, such as the death of a tenant. She edited the footage and formatted it vertically to create *Waterfall (basin)* (opposite), a nearly 17-minute looping video projection: Images of trash seem to pour endlessly from the ceiling and down along a wall in at the rear of the List Gallery. The video's cascade of household objects, construction materials, and unidentified toxins, hauntingly reminds us that as such waste seeps into the atmosphere, earth, and oceans, it also enters our stream of consciousness.

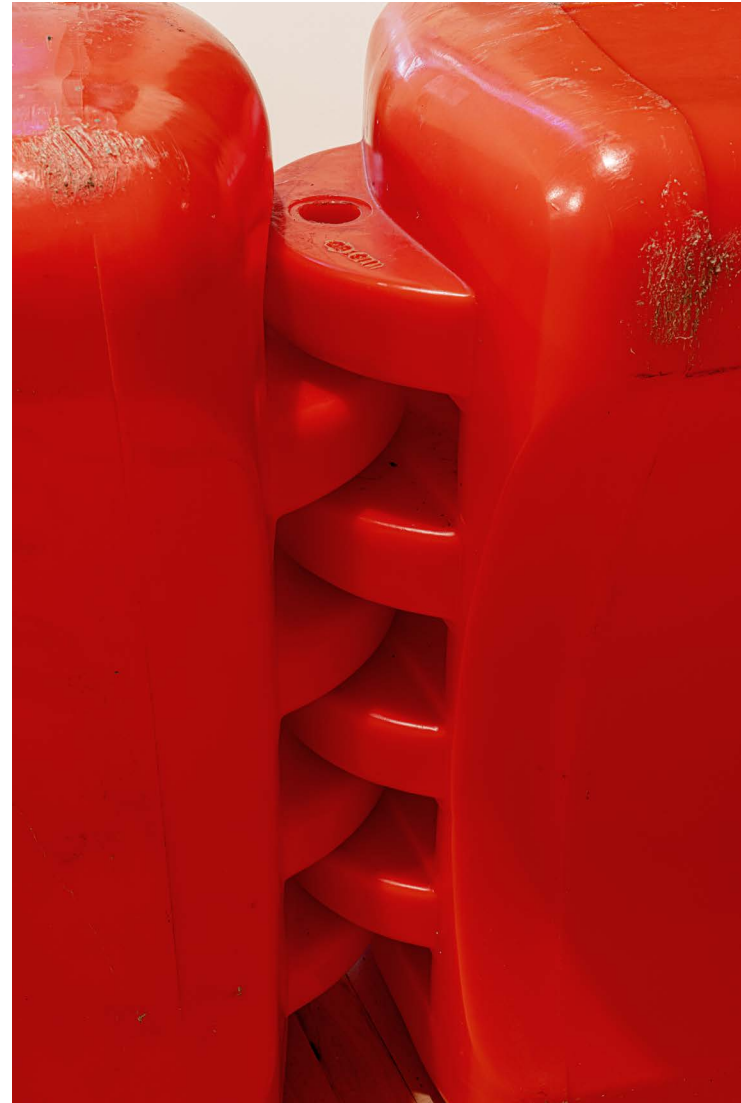


Although *Waterfall (basin)* is silent, the projection flows just a few feet away from Olivier's nearby installation, *Surface Tension* a 24-foot long installation and motion-activated soundscape that consists of four bright orange construction barriers rescued from the wastestream and aligned in a row, nearly spanning

the rear room of the gallery and bisecting the entryway. Immediately visible from the gallery entrance and protruding several feet into the main space from the back room, the installation offers a reminder of the ubiquity and disruptiveness of rampant construction.

The interconnected line of barriers provides a pathway of sorts, prompting visitors to walk from the main room into the darkened projection space. Such movements trigger a cascade of both natural and machine-made sounds. Walking counter-clockwise around the barrier, visitors hear a succession of recordings: a rain shower, birdsong near a waterfall, waterfall, and stream. Turning around the far end of the barrier, such natural sounds merge with recordings of domestic water consumption: a mug filling, a washing machine cycling, a bathtub filling, and a lawn sprinkler. Olivier transformed the construction barriers into resonant echo chambers that amplify and overlap the audio cues. The resulting chorus ebbs and flows with our movements, inviting us to consider the ways we participate in all that we see and hear.

Reflecting on our economy's hyper-productivity and excess, Olivier also began to think about the way both domestic activity and our notions of home are intertwined with commerce. Such ruminations gave rise to *Powers of Ten (Home Kit)* (page 13), one of the first works visitors encounter as they enter the gallery. Created in early 2023, the sculpture consists of a five-foot square plywood box containing ten concentric channels made of



plexiglass. Each time the work is installed, she fills the channels with the primary materials that are found in contemporary homes, including fragments of steel conduit, pieces of glass, carpet padding, cement, armored cabling, fiberglass insulation, sawdust, gypsum powder, asphalt roofing, and plastic resin. The work's colorful palette and pleasing graphic design might prompt comforting associations, such as hooked rugs, but her industrial materials do not encourage nostalgia. Sitting on a dolly with large rubber castors, this sampler of big box store materials seems designed for transience. Wryly reducing the notion of home to such meager components, Olivier prompts us to consider the marginal value of advanced building materials, without the addition of human skills, craft traditions, and longing that ultimately render true shelter.

As many viewers may surmise, Olivier's title, *Powers of Ten* references an acclaimed 1977 film by Charles and Ray Eames that dramatized vast shifts in spatial relationships and exponential changes in perspective. Early on, the movie zooms out by a power of 10 each second, leaving a scenic picnic to reveal in succession, a harbor, Chicago, the Mid-western United States, the Earth, and the expanding universe, before reducing inward

to a single atom and its quarks.

Another recent sculpture, *(Dis)(Re)(In)Place* (pages 24–25) consists of a semi-transparent photograph printed on plexiglass and positioned at a slight angle within a mound of blue sand. Although no people are shown, the image shows seven chair seats arranged in an elementary school's playground. Detached from their legs, the seats appear to be arranged in quasi-intentional relationships. The chairs touch, tilt, or face one another in ways that seem purposeful, yet mysterious. The technological cost and architectural presence of this glossy photo and its careful placement in a precisely contoured island of sand contrasts abruptly with the photo's melancholy absence. To my eye, the work can be seen as a prayerful offering or homage—a way to make space for loss.

Installed nearby, *North Philly (Shadow)* (pages 16–17) also confronts viewers with stark contrasts and prompts awareness of absence and abandonment. Printed on aluminum, Olivier's large glossy photograph depicts a fallen tree, still shrouded in parasitic vines, sprawling across an empty lot in a distressed neighborhood the artist passed through during her commute from Temple University

in North Philadelphia to her home in Germantown. Olivier overlays the bottom half of the work with an irregular and undulating swath of discarded roofing tar—a shape that somewhat echoes the form of the fallen tree. Although Olivier’s parenthetical title invites us to imagine the tar as a type of shadow, its opaque, flowing, and crackled surface provide an inhospitable foreground. Instead of providing access into the middle ground and distance, it functions more as a barrier, foreshadowing further decay.

In varying ways, Olivier’s artworks model her belief that bearing witness and making space for change begins with questions and sustained engagement, not answers. Olivier’s free-standing sculpture, *Grief and Loss (AZ Family Discount)* (pages 26–27) invites viewers to imagine and empathize with suffering, even amid insufficient information or the absence of easy answers. To create this vibrant and haunting work, Olivier constructed a tall, four-foot-wide grid with metal drywall studs, anchored the structure with white sand bags, and used it to support a large color photograph mounted on drywall. The photograph shows a display of curtains draped in front of a commercial door on a gritty urban street. Brickwork flattens the top of the picture, and

at the bottom of the composition we glimpse only a fraction of the cement sidewalk. It is an unwelcoming space before a doorway, offering barely enough room for the viewer to imagine standing there or being invited in. Engaging colors, textures, and patterns in the displayed curtains suggest the potential for creative domesticity and self-sufficiency at AZ Family Discount, but there are clues everywhere that point to loss, scarcity, and displacement. Graffiti tags on an orange wall frame the left side of the composition and the right edge is divided by a series of contrasting vertical bars: a black metal pipe, a plywood stud, a glimpse of an adjacent storefront, and a tear sheet advertising a grief and loss support group. Excluded from the shallow and shuttered space, we may circle around to inspect the backside of the sculpture, only to find plain metal studs and drywall backing—the bare minimum—propping up the image of a fading dream.

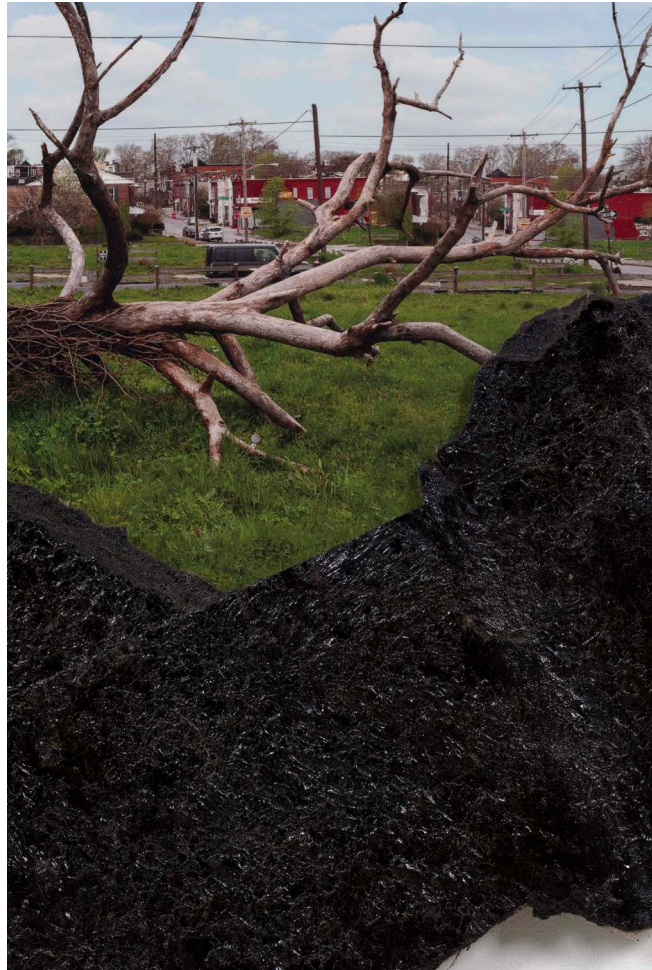
Olivier’s willingness to make space for open-ended interaction recalls the philosophy of Martin Buber, who famously described two main types of human interconnection: “I-it relationships, which are primarily transactional and self-absorbed, and “I-thou” relationships, which are authentically engaged and mutual, allowing for emotional, spiritual,



and other ineffable experiences. What unifies and guides Karyn Olivier’s wide-ranging and experimental practice is her tireless effort to reanimate objects, images and public spaces in ways that challenge rigid assumptions. Through creating artworks that ask, “*what if?*”

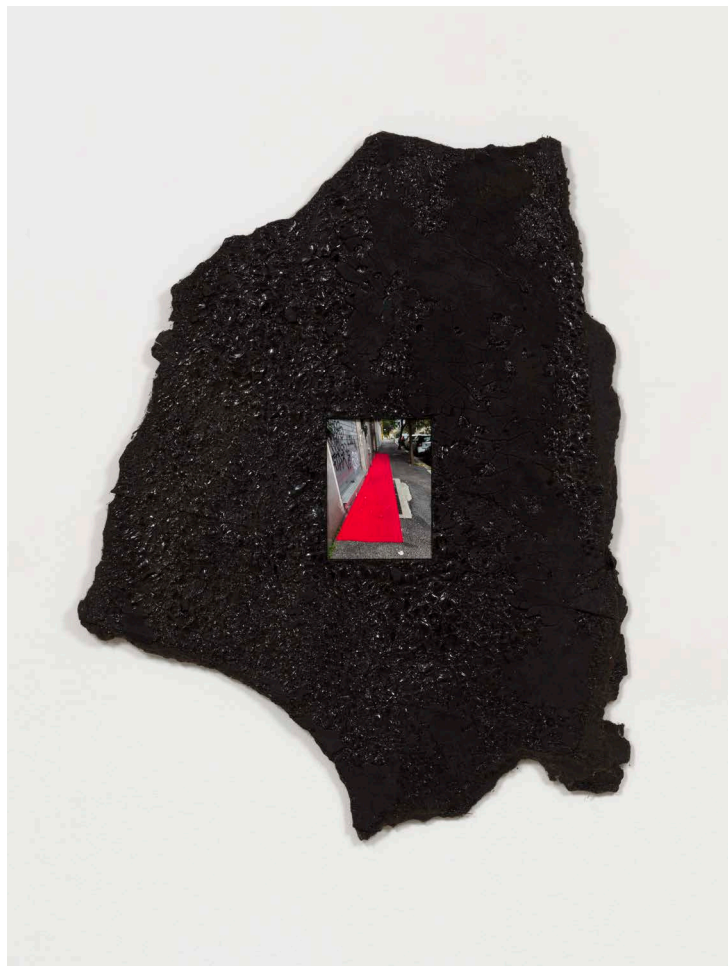
she invites viewers to join her in questioning the presence and power of everyday things. In doing so, she opens pathways for greater openness, social engagement, and authentic interconnection.







Above and opposite detail: *Welcome (Accra)*, 2023, archival vinyl print, asphalt roofing, 32 ½ x 24 x 2 inches
Photo by Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles





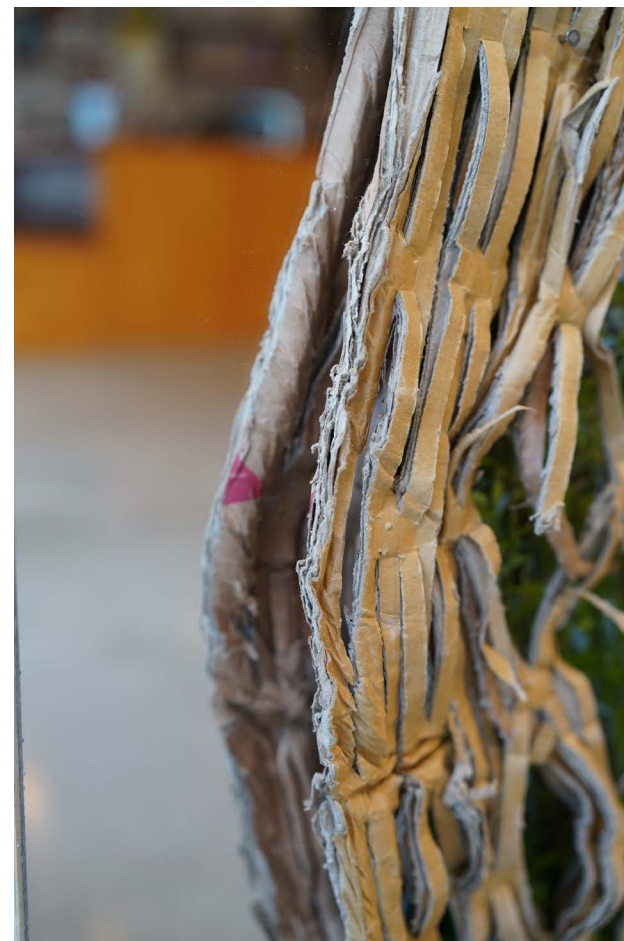




Above and opposite detail: *Grief and Loss (AZ Family Discount)*, 2023, archival photo on drywall, metal studs, sand bags. 66 x 48 x 20 inches
Photo by Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles



For Sale (1510 N. American Street), 2023, photo on canvas, cardboard packing material, mirrored Plexiglas, wood, 72 ½ x 53 x 1 ½ inches
Photo by Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles
Opposite detail: Photo by Joe Painter



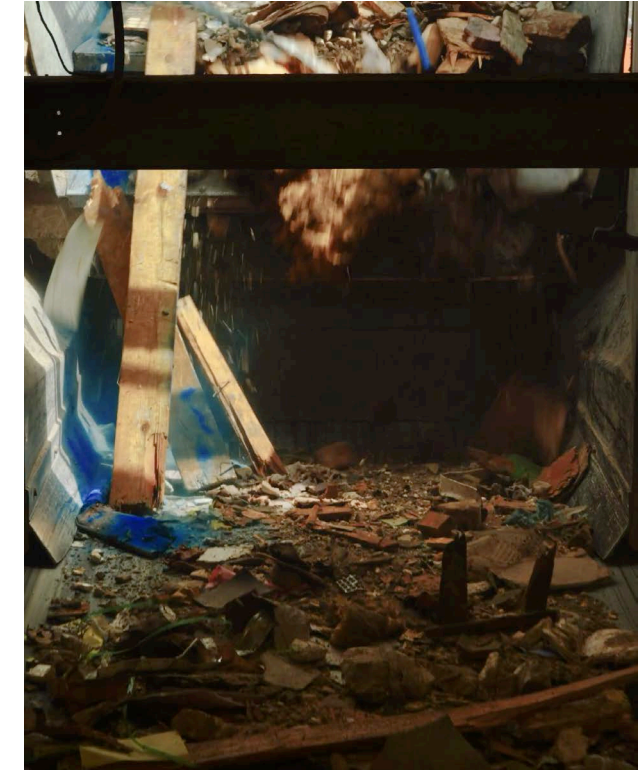
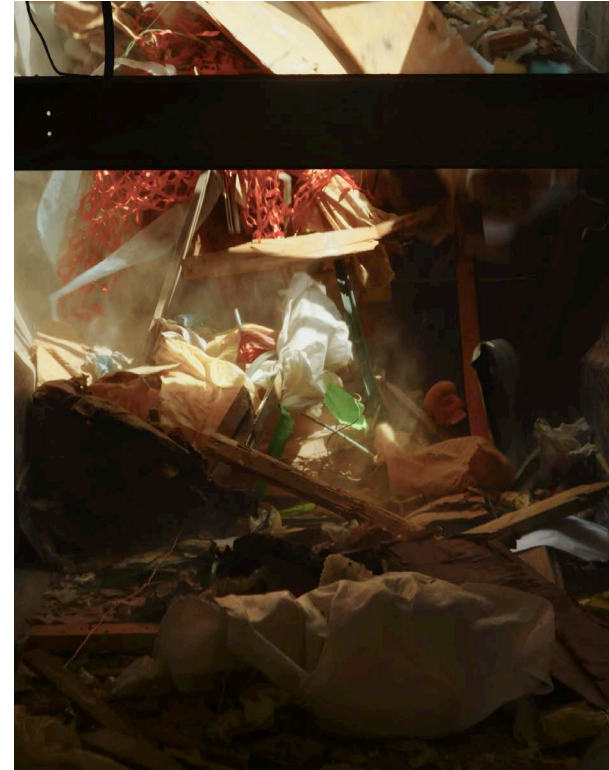
Biography

Karyn Olivier was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago in 1968, and moved to Brooklyn, New York as a child. She graduated with a BA in Psychology from Dartmouth College in 1989, and an MFA in ceramics from Cranbrook Academy of Art in 2001.

Olivier has exhibited internationally including at the Gwangju and Busan biennials, the World Festival of Black Arts and Culture in Dakar, Senegal; The Studio Museum in Harlem; The Whitney Museum of American Art; MoMA PS1; SculptureCenter; ICA Watershed Boston, The Museum of Fine Arts Houston, among others. Her solo exhibitions have been presented at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, and Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis.

In 2024, Olivier will unveil two memorials in Philadelphia—honoring a former slave at Stenton House, and commemorating more than 5,000 African Americans buried at Bethel Burying Ground. In 2022 Olivier participated in Documenta 15 and installed a permanent commission for Newark Liberty International Airport.

Olivier has received numerous awards, including the Rome Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award, a NYFA Award, a Pew Fellowship, and a Creative Capital Foundation grant. She is a sculpture professor at Tyler School of Art and Architecture, Temple University.



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—Andrea Packard and Tess Wei,
exhibition curators



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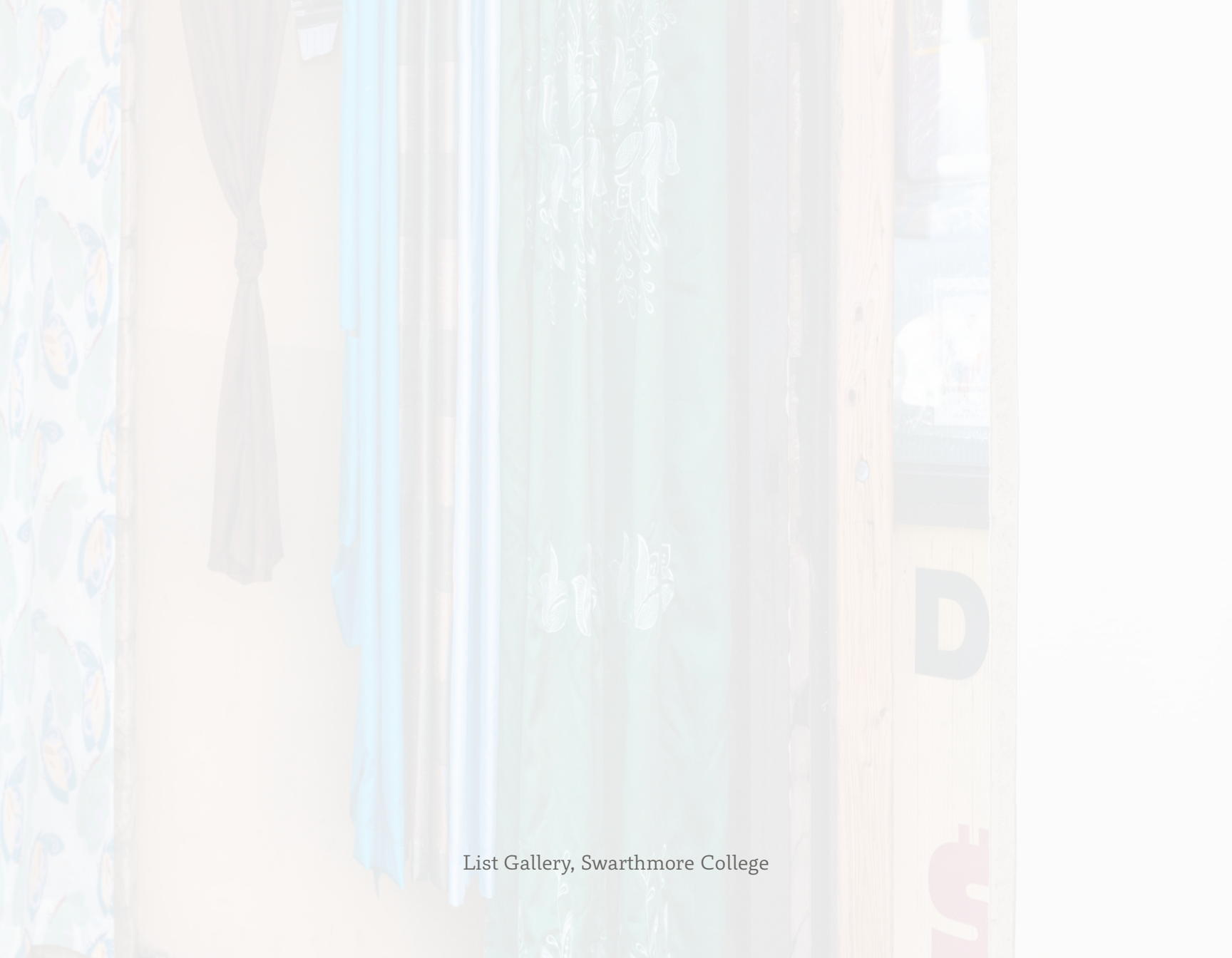
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Cover image: *Surface Tension* [detail], 2023, construction barriers, eight channel audio, ultra sonic sensors, transducers.
Photo by Joe Painter

Back cover and opposite: *Grief and Loss (AZ Family Discount)* [detail], 2023, archival photo on drywall, metal studs, sand bags 66 x 48 x 20 inches. Photo by Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

Inside front cover: *Waterfall (basin)*, 2023, projected video, 00:16:48. Courtesy of the artist

Page 2–3: Installation view, *Karyn Olivier: Seep*, Nov. 1–Dec. 15, 2023, List Gallery, Swarthmore College. Photo by Joe Painter





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