

PRIVATE SPACES - PUBLIC VIEWS IV

**INDUSTRY**  
and the  
**GARDEN**

**BY KEITH OLIVER**

**GALLERY 1.1.1., SCHOOL OF ART, THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA**

**MARCH 12 TO APRIL 6, 1991**

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*View From My Window, 1989*  
wood, tin, rubber roofing, pressed tin, latex,  
9 x 22 x 14

*Dimensions are given in feet unless otherwise indicated, with height preceding length and width.*

*Industry and the Garden* is the concluding work of a five part series of installations constructed by Keith Oliver. Entitled *Public Spaces, Private Views* the series commenced with *A View From My Window* (1988), followed by *A Card From Kew* (1988), and *Of A Memory* (1989). *Graceland* (1989), *Prospect* (1990), and *In View* (1990), functioning as a single unit, were next in sequence. Two related sculptures, *A Firmer Shadow* (1986), and *Palace of Dreams* (1987) preceded *Public Spaces, Private Views*.

Oliver's dominant theme is the assertion of the individual private self in opposition to the dehumanized, alienated environment resulting from the industrialization of late capitalism. Meaning, order and identity derive from the self, symbolized by the garden, which because it is structured by human creativity stands for the individual's power to maintain orientation, i.e. a view. Creativity legitimizes the claims of the private.

Within this assertion of the value of the private there are strong subtexts such as separation and fusion, boundaries, passages, contradictions and their co-existence or resolution. Also different frameworks, the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, and the social, yield alternate readings. Oliver's enormous expressive power arises from the tension of oppositions as well as multi-layered meaning. In his dialectic of public/private we find fascinating incongruities, wit, sophistication and deep humanitarian concern.

In recent years as the line of demarcation between fine and applied arts disappeared some sculptors entered a crossover field of exchange between art and architecture. Oliver's use of forms from the built environment and landscape architecture classifies him as an architect sculptor as well as an installation artist. The premises of 19th century sculpture were that it was a monolithic closed mass related to the human body, literally or allusively. Meaning arose from the body analogy and the sculpture's ideal or internal core. Modernism in sculpture dates from Rodin who relocated meaning from the interior core to the surface, thereby including the space in which the body is situated. In postmodern installation the viewer customarily relates to the work by either physically or imaginatively inhabiting it in the same way humans feel themselves inhabiting the space of their bodies. Oliver's work sometimes involves even more complex identification because the viewer experiences the

work as a metaphor for the self in addition to inhabiting it. Complexity and contradiction, identified as indicators of the postmodern mode, are primary features of Oliver's installations.

The postmodern aesthetic is exemplified in *A Firmer Shadow*, a whimsical structure, fancifully irregular in form. The elegance of the formal facade contradicts vernacular forms - fragments of a fence, a matching gate, a sloping platform - at the back. The interior of this brightly coloured, playful hybrid is inaccessible. The construction is fun, and is symbolic of social structure. The monumental public entrance symbolizing temple or palace encodes the power of ruling elites, while domestic forms stand for the common people. The idioms of architecture reflect class and culture just as architecture is a context that conditions our subjectivity.

Hierarchical power relations are even more explicit in *Palace of Dreams*. The palace designates an imposing edifice housing an institution that shapes our daily existence. *Palace of Dreams* is a narrow, vertical structure made up of four lofty pillars holding up a small open pyramidal roof. One side of the structure is closed off by a Roccoco screen. Inside a ladder, ascending to the empty roof, represents both the promise and the inadequacy of life - the feeling of loss because of the unrealizable nature of our desires within the constraints imposed by hypocritical and bureaucratic institutions. The beauty of architectural form contradicts the unresponsive nature of the symbolized institution evoking a viewer reaction that is a compound of celebration, outrage, and amusement.

*View From My Window*, the first work in *Public Spaces, Private Views*, is a rooftop landscape built to life scale. The format is dispersive. From the front the viewer looks into a brightly lit semicircular window in a gabled dormer. Back views position the viewer as if in the room looking out the window. Architectural fragments - a pitched roof with ladder, a plastic rain gutter that is the cap of a truncated cornice - are attached to each other at eccentric angles. The agglomeration of shapes and forms is reminiscent of Paris or New York. Double positioning the view creates ambiguity. Bright colours accentuate the artist's playful humour and satirical wit.

Oliver's philosophic approach unfolds in the two following installations, *A Card from Kew* and *Of A Memory*. The first, invoking Kew, the great English botanical garden, is a typical small English household garden. The second, *Of A Memory*, is formal and archetypal.

*A Card From Kew* includes a low hedge surrounded by an ornamental white picket fence, three trees, a bush and a white Adirondack chair. There are two entrances: a gate in the fence and a rustic arbour made of twigs whose texture enhances the cottage affect. The chair symbolizes comfort and is a surrogate for the viewer in the crowded and intimate garden.

*Of A Memory* is minimalist, a garden reduced to its most abstract essentials, like Zen courtyard gardens. At the centre of the monumental faux brick facade is a ceremonial entrance. On both sides, entrances, framed by thick, deep hedges are topped by a latticework canopy. The strength of these passages gives significance to the act of entry, marking the transition from the exterior world to the garden as an important experience. Hedges and trees are painted green except the interior walls which are painted in a pattern of leaves. The garden walls converge slightly at the end creating a tighter, more intimate space. The feeling of enclosure is intensified by the height of the hedge walls, which are high enough to envelop a seated occupant and low enough to look over when standing. Oliver's use of proportion and scale to create meaning is impeccable. In the centre is the pool, its sides tapering slightly to conform to the walls. Water, the most compelling of garden features, signifies life and refreshment. This garden combines the essentials of life: water, air and vegetation. Contradiction is introduced artfully by an Adirondack chair, which with the latticework, is too rustic and everyday for idealization.

The enclosed garden, open to sky, space and greenery safeguards the requirements of privacy. In it individuals find emotional ease and mental appeasement, an end to alienation from nature and themselves. The garden is cultivated nature, in which the occupant can find equilibrium between inner feelings and the outer world of experience. Like memory, the garden is recuperative, a place of harmony and serenity.

Oliver creates a powerful sense of place by combining complementary aspects of a graveyard in *Graceland*, *Prospect* and *In View*. Reprocessing mortuary sepulchers in *Graceland* he inverts the relationship between monumentality and power. By reducing the size but retaining the scale, Oliver personalizes the monumentality making it a function of private individuality rather than of the status of the occupant. Paired down to their essential elements the three small but stately tombs are faced with various colours of faux marble arborite. The roof of the central structure is galvanized steel, the other buildings are roofed in copper. The artist cleverly subverts the elegance of these noble mausoleums by the use of a common domestic material for their surfaces.

*Prospect*, continuing the graveyard theme, is composed of the Adirondack chair placed to view an obelisk, flanked by two gravestones installed in front of a wall bearing two horizontal photographs of an avenue of mausoleums in Pere Lachaise cemetery, Paris. These are intersected by a vertical photograph of a street in this burial ground. As the vista of the vertical photograph is a visual extension of the lines of the obelisk the installation is integrated. Because there were few public parks in the 19th century, graveyards functioned in their place for those who could not afford a private garden. The graveyard is a place where public and private distinctions blur. Although the most public, it is the place where private emotion, grief and sorrow, are expressed most freely. The emphasis on passageways, established by the entrances of the previous works becomes passage - passage along sepulchre lined streets, passage through life. And nothing is more private than a person's prospect, or view of their own death.

*In View*, is the experience of the graveyard as a surrounding environment. Although it is an interior, its bright green walls represent the openness and garden aspect of the cemetery. Mortuary objects, establishing mood and organizing the interior space, include a tall obelisk, a square pool of water, and a funeral bench. Large drawings on three walls repeat and elaborate on these motifs.

The subtly explored disjunction between public places and a private view is made explicit in *Industry and The Garden*, an industrial landscape composed

of mechanical factory components, with a small garden on one side. The garden represents the preservation of a green and pleasant environment; privacy where the inner self can be cultivated; and alternatively the interior self which constitutes each human's identity. The industrial landscape is emblematic of the chaos and blight that damages the human spirit just as it destroys the environment. It is inimical to nature and to human nature.

Oliver's approach is playful and ironic, embodying paradox and contradiction. His philosophy is pragmatic and practical. Like Voltaire in *Candide* he finds value not in the divine, or nature, but in the cultivation of nature. By cultivating our private view, we create value, order, and orientation. Value has its source in the self, can be symbolically perceived in nature and can be externalized in the garden that is a nurtured rather than degraded environment.

*Marian Yeo*



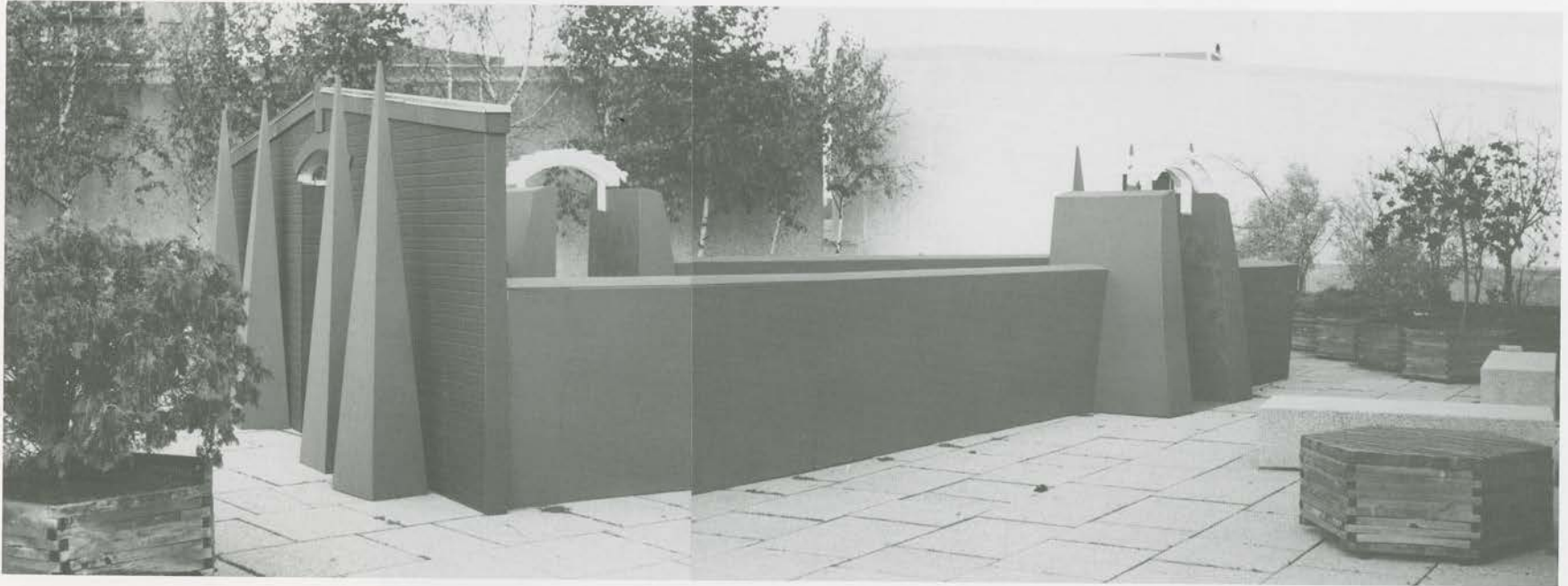
*A Card from Kew, 1988*  
wood, astro turf, latex  
8 x 10 x 10 ft.





*Of a Memory, 1989*  
wood, astro turf, tin, water,  
latex  
8 x 32 x 16





*Of a Memory,  
exterior view*

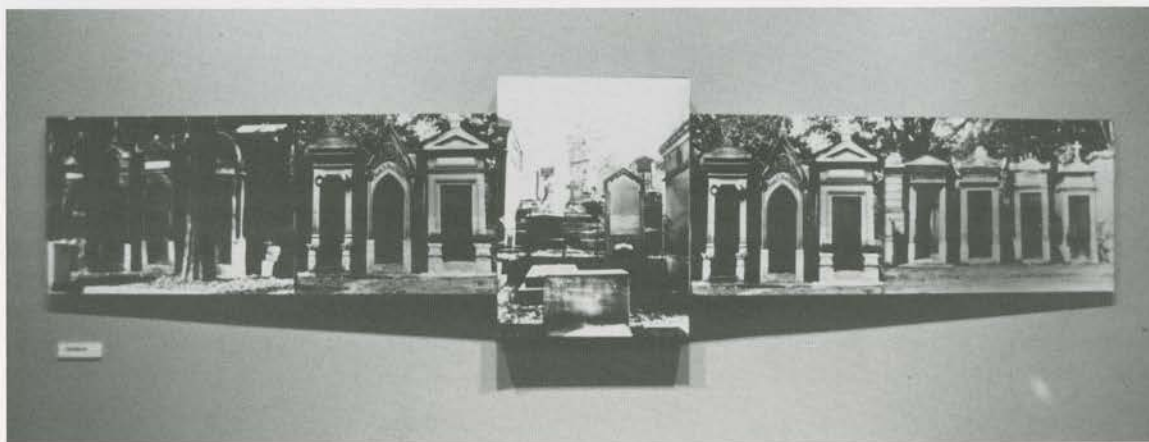


*Graceland, 1989*  
plastic laminate, copper, tin  
22 x 16 x 10 inches

*Prospect, 1990*  
photographs, plastic  
laminated, gravel, wood,  
latex



*detail of photographs*



## BIOGRAPHY

Keith Oliver

### Education

- 1976-78 Master of Fine Arts, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island. Major in sculpture.
- 1970-74 Diploma in Art, University of Manitoba, School of Art. Majors in printmaking and sculpture.

### Professional Experience

- 1979-90 Assistant Professor in Sculpture, School of Art, University of Manitoba
- 1977-78 Teaching and Technical Assistant in Sculpture, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island

### Public Collections

The Manitoba Arts Council Art Bank,  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Artspace Building,  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
The Canada Council Art Bank,  
Ottawa, Ontario  
University of Alberta,  
Edmonton, Alberta  
Tillinghast Estate,  
Barrington, Rhode Island

### Shows

- 1990 *Public Spaces - Private Views III*,  
Main Access Gallery, Winnipeg
- Opening Show*,  
Brian Melnychenko Gallery, Winnipeg
- 1989 *Public Spaces - Private Views II*  
Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg
- Urban - Rural Landscapes*  
Main Access Gallery, Winnipeg
- Public Spaces - Private Views I*  
Gallery 1C03, The University of Winnipeg,  
Winnipeg
- 1988 *Anatomy of Wit*  
Main Access Gallery, Winnipeg
- Apropos Design*  
Main Access Gallery, Winnipeg
- 1987 *Contemporary Art in Manitoba*  
Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg  
(catalogue)
- 1986 *Nothing Past the Swans*  
Collaboration with Tedd Robinson and  
Contemporary Dancers, Canada
- 1985 Group Show, Gallery 1C03,  
The University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg
- Furniture*  
Gallery 1.1.1. University of Manitoba,  
Winnipeg (catalogue)
- 1984 Harbour Front Art Gallery, Sculpture Court,  
Toronto, Ontario
- 1983 *Canadian Contemporary Art*,  
Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta
- 1982 *Under Construction*,  
Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg  
(catalogue)
- Group Show, Brian Melnychenko Gallery,  
Winnipeg

## CREDITS

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