

# ARTIST PROFILE

BY RACHEL BERRESFORD

## Creating Artistic Context

# Carolyn Speranza

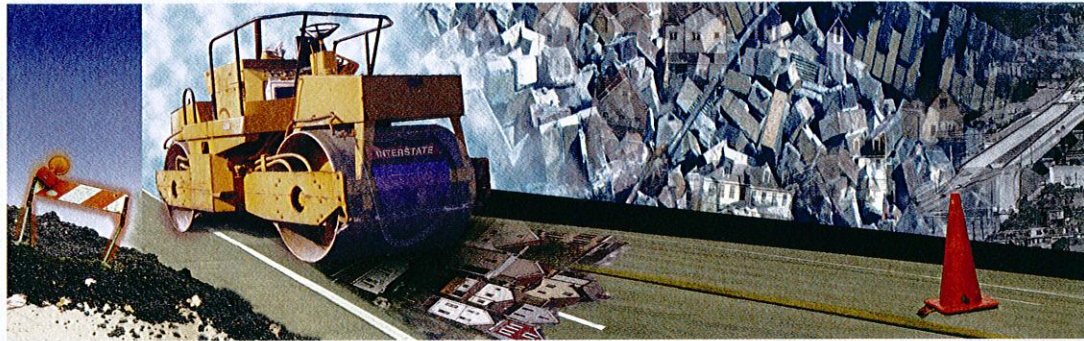


The artist in her Squirrel Hill studio.

Most discussions of art focus on the product—the painting, the sculpture, the sketch. Rarer are the conversations about how that art gets delivered to the public.

Yet for Squirrel Hill artist Carolyn Speranza, creating new contexts for her art to reach its audience is one of the greatest joys of being an established artist. “Getting to determine the interaction between the public and my art is exciting, in part because it’s so unpredictable,” she explains. This unpredictability has resulted in her compelling and multidisciplinary body of work with the capacity to change viewers’ perceptions of themselves and the world around them.

As an undergraduate at Carnegie Mellon University, Speranza majored in painting and also studied ceramics and fiber art. Her early work featured large-scale ceramic sculptures

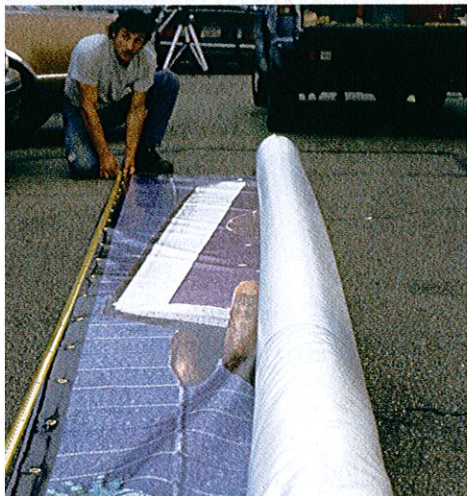


In 1996, Speranza created works based on oral histories (above), which were then displayed as installation art on Pittsburgh city buses (below).

and paintings of these sculptures. But as a young artist, Speranza found that her options for sharing art were limited to galleries, museums, and other traditional forums.

That began to change after she earned her master of fine arts degree from The Ohio State University in 1990, where she focused more intensely on ceramic sculpture and discovered the potential of installation art.

In 1993, Speranza completed her first public art installation that involved the participation of her viewers. She collaborated with artist Lisa Link and students from the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild to create a large mural called *Literacy Windows*, which was based on interviews with adult and teen par-



ticipants in literacy programs and installed on a Heinz building in the North Side.

In addition to finding new bricks-and-mortar contexts for her art, Speranza has also found a home for her work in cyberspace. Since the mid-1990s, she has tried to include a Web component in all her pieces. Her first exhibit to go digital was *End of the Line: Building Bridges with Pittsburgh's Busways in 1996*, where Speranza and Link printed collages on vinyl and displayed them on city buses. The collages were based on themes that emerged during workshops held at four Carnegie libraries to record oral histories, scan photographs, and compile original artwork from participants. The entire process was archived online.

Speranza further pushed the boundaries of artistic context and the interaction between art and the viewer with *Sight of Stillness* in 2002. In partnership with Pittsburgh Filmmakers and local yoga instructors, she held a series of meditation workshops. She then asked participants to describe their experiences and created visuals to represent their responses. The final product was a 30-minute film.

"More and more, I am gravitating toward moving images and sound," she says. "Then I decide on a public place to display the result."

This summer, the American Jewish Museum of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh (JCC) in Squirrel Hill will host Speranza's latest artistic endeavor called *Too Shallow for Diving: The 21st Century Is Treading Water*. The multimedia exhibit—which received a \$10,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts—will fea-

ture painting, sculpture, video, photography, and other art from 16 artists, who were asked to explore the aesthetic issues and environmental problems surrounding water. Topics addressed include the oceans, Pittsburgh's three rivers, and the decreasing availability of drinking water on a global scale.

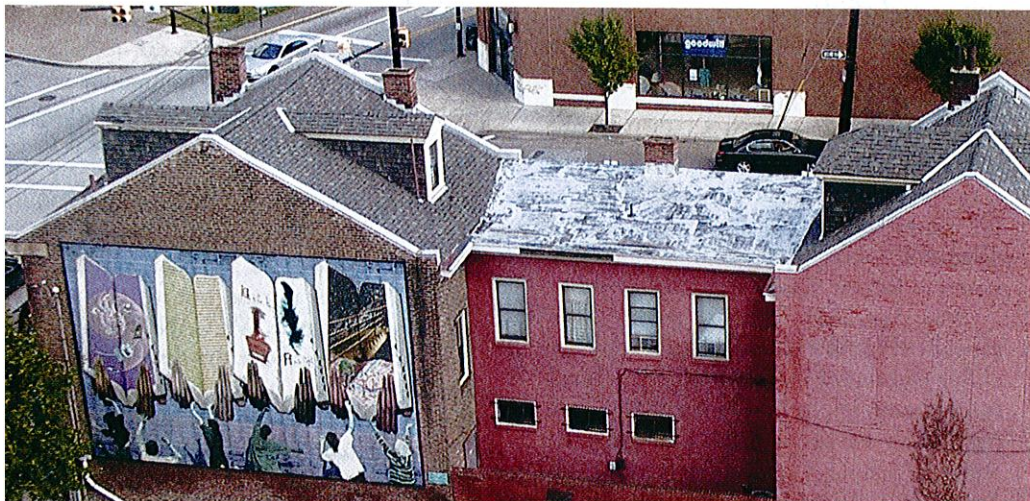
Speranza will serve as guest curator, in addition to contributing original work that compiles imagery from old black-and-white detective films and various oil spills. The idea for the exhibit grew out of her experience in a course in which participants were called upon to engage one community to impact another. She chose to ask the artist community to engage the JCC and general public in a discussion about water issues.

The resulting exhibit could take Speranza's longstanding commitment to public engagement to an even higher level, yielding unpredictable and exciting results. She also hopes it will serve as a catalyst for viewers to think about how human intervention impacts the future of water resources and what better choices we might make.

"JCC members are a highly engaged, civic-minded community," she says. "I want people to do something with the ideas generated by this exhibit." SA

*"Too Shallow for Diving: The 21st Century Is Treading Water," which includes works by curator Carolyn Speranza, will be on display May 16-July 28 at the American Jewish Museum of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh, located at 5738 Forbes Avenue in Squirrel Hill. For more information, phone 412-521-8011 or visit [www.jccpgh.org/pagelajm](http://www.jccpgh.org/pagelajm).*

In her Literacy Windows project, Speranza created a massive mural based on interviews with people involved in a literacy program. The mural was installed on the face of a North Side building.



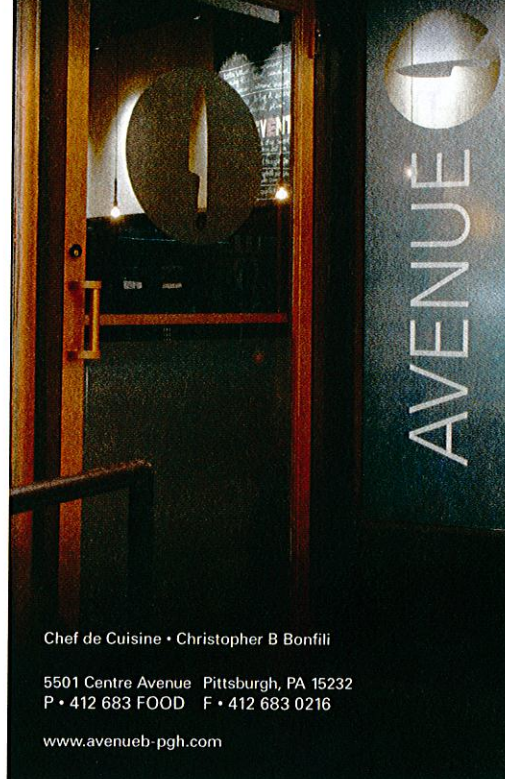
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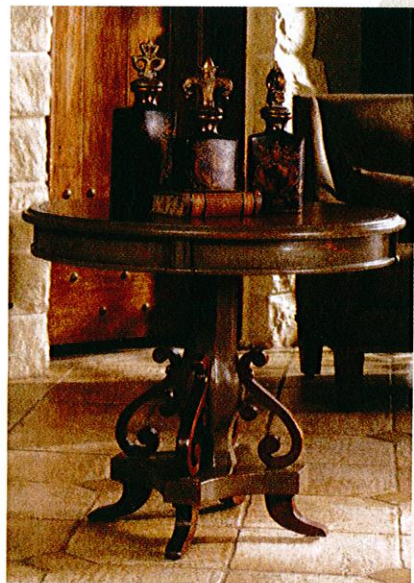


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