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Sirius Play

Demetrius Oliver's *Canicular* at The Print Center, Philadelphia

This article is one in a *IRAAA+* series linking art and STEM (science, technology, engineering, math)

Demetrius Oliver often draws from astronomy in developing themes for his installation and video art. In his early career, he created photo collages on themes such as Emmett Till and the Underground Railroad which directly reflected his African American identity. As the ideas of transcendental thinkers Thoreau and particularly Emerson began to percolate in Oliver's imagination, his work began to transcend race-based themes, but not entirely.

Demetrius Oliver's *Jupiter* at the Highline.
Courtesy Friends of the Highline



unbounded by racial identity while not eluding it.

Concerns with racial identity can be a tether for artists, restraining open ended expression of ideas, or a lifeline encouraging free flight from cultural roots. Now, as Demetrius Oliver (b. 1975) contemplates the cosmos (and occasionally, earth sciences), he does not reflexively think about social and cultural subjects but continues to be aware of the potential for their interface in his work. Some of his recent work addresses celestial themes with overt or oblique references to African and African American history and culture, and some of his work is devoid of such references. Following his imagination where ever it leads while being grounded in cultural concerns, Oliver is an artist who is

IRAAA coverage of Oliver's work began in 2011 with an article on his then-recent installations, including *Jupiter* (2010), a billboard containing five large round photographs which celebrated the alignment of this large planet with the Sun and Earth during the one-month period that the board was on view at the Highline in New York City. During this period, Jupiter came closest to Earth than it would at any time in the next dozen years. The cultural element in the presentation stemmed from Oliver's fascination with John Coltrane's interest in astronomy and the *Jupiter* installation was accompanied by weekly performances of John Coltrane's composition, "Jupiter Variation," by New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music students. The 2011 article also covered Oliver's 2011 *Penumbra* exhibition at two sites in Syracuse, NY which were focused on sea and sky themes without ethnocultural allusion.



Outdoor lightbox sign and sound installation at Print Center. Photo: Andrew Pinkham

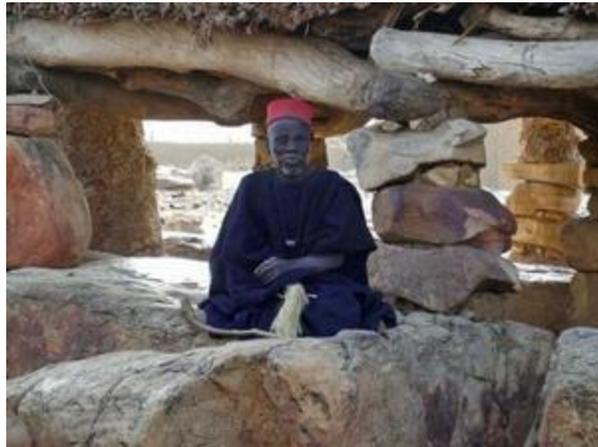
Oliver's *Canicular*, an exhibition based on the Sirius A and B star system, is on view at The Print Center, Philadelphia, through March 22, 2014. The term canicular is used to describe things pertaining to dogs, and is often used in reference to Sirius, the Dog Star. The Print Center's converted galleries are only open for one hour in the evening to coincide with the rising of Sirius in the night sky: originally, 7:00-8:00 pm; then 7:30-8:30 pm March 11 – 22 due to Daylight Savings; Tuesdays-Saturdays, weather permitting because clear skies are required for the live viewing of the Sirius star inside.

The ethnocultural reference in *Canicular* is the Sirius astronomy of the Dogon people of Mali. The Dogon reference is obliquely indicated in the selection of this particular star as a theme of the exhibition and a public program was planned to directly address the Dogon aspect: a presentation by multimedia and performance artist Terry Adkins and Derrick Pitts, chief astronomer of the Franklin Institute.

Demetrius Oliver studied in the University of Pennsylvania MFA program with Terry Adkins, a professor in the program, who continued to be a mentor to Oliver.

When Terry Adkins, 60, died suddenly on February 8, 2014, the Saturday before the program scheduled for Thursday, February 13, the Print Center canceled the program and rescheduled Derrick Pitts' lecture on the lore and meaning of Sirius and other aspects of the night sky. For the *Canicular* public program, Terry Adkins had planned to lead his Lone Wolf Recital Corps to create immersive soundscapes based on anthropologist Marcel Griaule's book, *Conversations with Ogotemmeli*, a pioneering work on the beliefs of the Dogon people of West Africa, in which an invisible satellite star to Sirius, called Sirius B, plays a central role.

Published in 1948, Griaule's book has sparked intense wonder and debate: How could the Dogon people, who Griaule first encountered in the 1930s, know about a star not visible to the naked eye – a small, dense star that was only determined to exist through telescopic observation by Western astronomers? What is not debated is the centrality of cosmology in the Dogon belief system.



Dogon hogon (wiseman). Photo: Senani P/Wikipedia Common

Transforming the Print Center into a mock observatory, *Canicular* includes a signal outside the Center to notify visitors of the one hour the "observatory" is open; *Heliometric*, a structure made out of plastic buckets that mimics an instrument used to measure the sun; a photo of a constellation charted by the French astronomer Charies Messier with a bent paper clip (providing third dimension to the 2-D lines in the chart); a multi-channel video based on Oliver's *Orrery* installation (that [IRAAA+covered here](#)); a round structure resembling a small observatory that visitors can only enter on hands and knees through

a dog door and, inside the structure, the live viewing of the Sirius star which is projected onto a scrim from a feed from a telescope at the Franklin Institute.



Heliometric, 2014 Buckets, steel, slide projector, single slide, Photo: Andrew Pinkham

Canicular was curated by John Caperton, The Print Center's Jensen Bryan Curator. In his exhibition catalogue essay, Caperton sets the scene for the visitors' approach to the Print Center building:

*The dark, evening streets of Center City Philadelphia have been emptied of commuters rushing home from busy workdays. Storefront lights on the main thoroughfares have dimmed, but on tiny Latimer Street, a round sign glows warmly against the wintry night sky. Devoid of text, this lightbox offers only an image resembling the sun's surface swirling with red and orange flares. The frosted windows of a white-brick, 19th-century building exude a strange green light. Closed by day, Demetrius Oliver's exhibition *Canicular* is now on view, illuminating the narrow street*

lined with former carriage houses and, for nearly a century, The Print Center.

The "speakeasy" type lightbox signal notifying visitors that the installation is open is an illuminated photographic image of dog fur accompanied by a sound composition played by Oliver on a dog whistle in a frequency that only dogs can hear.

Canicular's video installation, inside the mock observatory, consists of a projected, live-feed from a high-power telescope focused on Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky and its tiny satellite star, Sirius B. The video is projected in a round structure, built within one of The Print Center's galleries, to resemble a small observatory. The live-feed comes from a telescope mounted on the roof of The Franklin Institute, one of the oldest centers of science education and development in the United States. The Print Center worked closely with Derrick Pitts, chief astronomer at The Franklin Institute, to make sure the stars aligned for this exhibition – literally!

"Oliver has become known for creating elegant, improvisatory, site-specific installations using photography, sculpture and video," says Ashley Peel Pinkham, Print Center assistant director. "Many of his works have included celestial imagery, metaphorically linking the moon (which is associated with the metal silver) and the silver process of traditional photography. For each exhibition opportunity presented to him, the artist has created a new piece, moving gracefully between media; he is gradually building an increasingly complex and resonant body of work."



Messier, 2013, Digital C print, Photo: Andrew Pinkham



Diurnal, 2014, Eight Channel video on 32" flat screen monitors, Photo: Andrew Pinkham

The accompanying *Canicular* publication includes an essay by Michelle White, curator, The Menil Collection, Houston, TX, in addition to Caperton's essay and is designed by in close collaboration with the artist. This will be the first book-length publication dedicated solely to Oliver.

The Print Center's related public programs including an evening of readings by writers interested in the links between science and culture curated by Temple University's Jena Osman.

Derrick Pitts' re-scheduled lecture on the lore and meaning of Sirius and other aspects of the night sky was held March 20, 2014 at The Print Center.



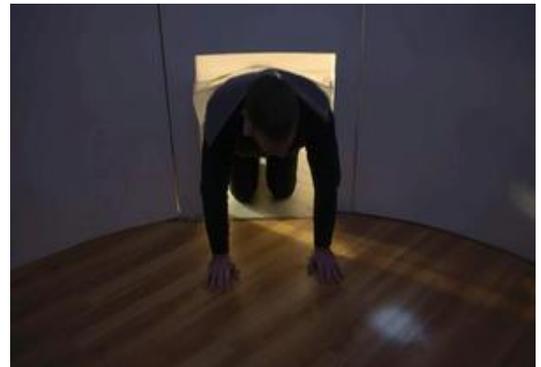
Orrery, 2011, Diurnal video is based this installation mimicking an orrery (a mechanical model of the universe used by 18th century astronomers, Photo: Andrew Pinkham)

When *IRAAA* contributing writer Lori Salmon interviewed Demetrius Oliver for her article on his Jupiter and Penumbra installations (["Nature's Transcendent Image," IRAAA vol. 23, no. 3, 2011](#)), the artist said, "I try to capture the mysteries of nature in some of my images. There is so much that we don't fully know about how we came to exist in this world, how the world came about."



Canicular, 2014, Observatory with dog door, live feed projection and sound installation
Photo: Andrew Pinkham

He also discussed the Jupiter/Coltrane connection in his *Jupiter* installation and his 2011 *Penumbra* and *Mare* (sea) installations in Syracuse. "Oliver sees 'nature' as the connection between technology and the human intuitive experience of reality," says Salmon. "It's about turning to nature for inspiration," explains Oliver. "I'm fascinated with transcendentalist literature — people like Emerson and Thoreau — that focuses on intuition, which has always been important for what I do. A lot of times in my work, I am trying to find a form that captures a sense of discovery."



Visitor entering observatory through dog door,
Photo: Andrew Pinkham

Darkness and Illumination

Explaining changes in *Canicular* public programming in the wake of Terry Adkins' sudden transition, Ashley Peel Pinkham said, "his passing was quite devastating to the whole community here."

A reflection by Demetrius Oliver's muse Emerson offers a glimmer of understanding how the loss of Oliver's mentor, Terry Adkins — a tragic, dark moment — may have some illuminating meaning. "When it is dark enough, you can see the stars," Emerson said. In other words, as expressed by *Twilight* author Stephenie Meyer, "Without the dark, we'd never see the stars."