

Exhibition combines sights, sounds, and the Dog Star



"Orrery," by Demetrius Oliver, is a sort of mock solar-system model made with umbrella frames, tape, and other found objects. It's included in the show at the Print Center.

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When artist Demetrius Oliver's exhibition "Canicular" opens at the Print Center on Friday, it will be months late. For that, you can blame the cosmos.

"We had planned this exhibition for the fall," the center's assistant director, Ashley Peel Pinkham said. "But we had to move it, because the stars would not have been aligned at that time."

She meant that literally.

The trouble was, the exhibition's centerpiece is a cylindrical, observatory-like space crowned by a video projection of Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky, live-streamed from a telescope at the Franklin Institute. And, as Print Center staff learned, Sirius is visible in the Northern Hemisphere's night sky only in winter and spring.

So, through March 22, the rescheduled "Canicular" is open from 7 to 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, weather permitting. (If skies are too cloudy, the show's off).

When the exhibition is open, an artwork installed above the Print Center's secluded entrance at 1614 Latimer St. will be illuminated - like a red lamp outside an art speakeasy, welcoming those in the know.

It's an appropriately reserved invitation for an exhibition by Oliver, 38 - a reticent, modern-day transcendentalist who lives in Manhattan, a place where stargazing is mostly futile.

Oliver said the work was inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who saw nature as an avenue to enlightenment.

"I started to think of, if they were alive today, where would nature exist for them?" Oliver said. "And I thought about space, because that seems the most sublime landscape there is."

In previous works, Oliver has sent viewers outdoors to watch the night sky.

But in this exhibition, he takes that celestial landscape and repackages it, jumbling mythology, astronomy, and pseudoscience. The result is a meditation on the Dog Star that calls on the belief held by many cultures that Sirius influences canine behavior - particularly during the "dog days" of summer, when the star is visible in the daytime sky.

The exhibition starts with that artwork-cum-"open" sign, a round lightbox that bears a reddish, textured image recalling a solar landscape but that is actually an enlarged view of dog fur. Also calling in viewers - at least in theory - is a sound work. But, as it's composed and performed by the artist on a dog whistle, it's inaudible to human ears.

Within, the series of works progresses: A stack of five-gallon buckets is transformed into a sculpture invoking a heliometer, a device used to measure the sun's diameter. A light installation, contrasting green lights with rosy heat lamps, references Sirius' flickering as well as red-green colorblindness, which afflicts some humans and all dogs. And a bank of monitors displays video of a kinetic sculpture called *Orrery*, a sort of mock solar-system made with umbrella guts, tape, and other found objects.

The exhibition not only stretches beyond the Print Center's normal hours, it also pushes the boundaries of the 99-year-old organization's mission. The single print on paper seen in the show, *Messier*, is a photo of a paper clip atop a star map.

But Caperton said the show is a logical step for the organization.

"We were founded to nurture at first printmaking, and then photography, at times when those art forms needed help," he said. "That nurturing role is sort of done. Now, any museum you go to, there are print departments, photography departments. So we've sort of shifted our focus to exploring the role of printmaking in contemporary art."

Caperton had been following Oliver's career since the artist was a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania focused on photography; he sees photography as an ongoing force in the artist's work.

Still, it's quite a leap from etchings and lithographs to "Canicular."

The exhibition has introduced the center's staff to new curatorial challenges - for example, how to test the audio of the dog-whistle composition to ensure it won't prove too deafening for neighbors' pets.

And it's tested the know-how of their collaborators, among them Derrick Pitts, chief astronomer of the Franklin Institute, who's providing the live stream of Sirius.

Pitts volunteered for the job because he knew there weren't many astronomers with the capability to provide that video stream. But just a few days before the opening, he still didn't have all the software he needed to beam the star's likeness over.

Pitts will be training students from Project Space, an independent-learning project of the Science Leadership Academy, to run the telescope for "Canicular."

Ordinarily, he said, he doesn't advocate watching stars on a screen when they can be viewed more directly. But, he said, "This is different because the artist has intent. Any opportunity to pair science with art, that's always a win-win."

Beyond that crossover potential, Caperton believes the exhibition could also bring a new audience - fans of contemporary and conceptual art - to the Print Center.

To that end, the center will be promoting the exhibition, and letting visitors know when it's open or closed, not only via the light-box signage, but also on social media. Joseph Gonzales of the University of the Arts has been developing hashtags for the show.

In that way, Gonzales said, "We're able to increase the digital footprint of the Print Center," not just in Philadelphia, but globally.

Still, there's always the chance of a backlash.

After all, this is exactly the type of exhibition that's liable to make art skeptics groan, with its sound composition performed on a dog whistle, a light installation that is just a handful of colored bulbs, and the oversize dog door visitors will have to crawl through to access the mock observatory.

The key may be not to take the Sirius-themed artwork too, well, seriously.

"It doesn't rely on knowledge or this esoteric sphere," Oliver said. "There are multiple entry points. This show is going to be very experiential."

ART

Canicular

The Print Center, 1614 Latimer St.

7 to 8 p.m., Tuesdays through Saturdays, weather permitting. Through March 22

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