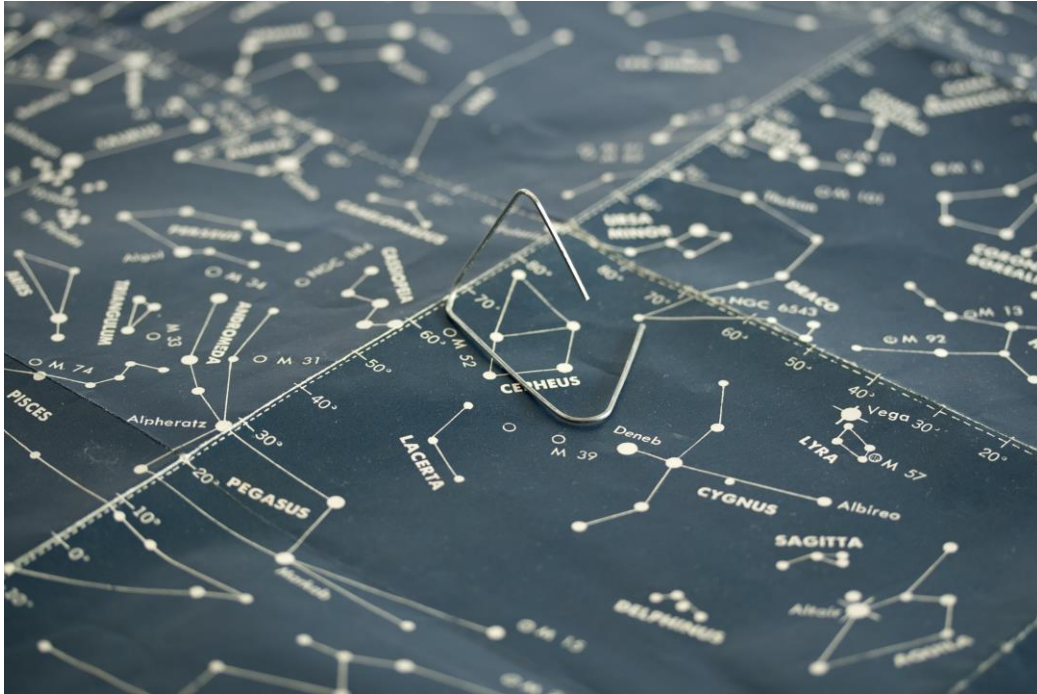


# TITLE MAGAZINE

JANUARY 28, 2014  
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## Demetrius Oliver: Canicular



My 18 month-old is fascinated by the moon and stars. Every night he asks to be taken outside, and if the moon is visible he breaks into a gleeful smile and calls out "Moon! Moon!" He also loves our two dogs, looking for them each morning as soon as he gets up. A deep impulse compels us to the lure of the heavens, and to our primal relationship with animals. Demetrius Oliver has investigated the celestial urge for much of his career, and digs in once again for his current exhibit at The Print Center, *Canicular*, a word indicating relationship to dogs or to Sirius the Dog Star.

Materially, the show is spare and, I suspect, intentionally underwhelming. The first floor holds a faux heliometer (used to measure the sun) made of stacked plastic buckets containing a small projection of the sun's reflection on Oliver's studio floor. The gallery on the Print Center's ground level is lit red while the stairway is lit green, signaling canine color-blindness. A single photograph hangs at the top of the stairs.

A series of videos line a wall of the back gallery, slowly panning through and around his 2011 installation, *Orrery*, in which he created a celestial model using stripped umbrella frames



with odds and ends from his home and studio attached to their metal ribs. Finally there is an observatory chamber made with only a slight nod to outward elegance. Entering this makeshift space on your hands and knees through a dog door allows you to see an image of the star Sirius projected live from the Franklin Institute's telescope onto a scrim suspended a few feet overhead.

The Dog Star floating within reach is striking, and also notable is the faded pool of light that passes through the scrim to appear on the floor. Compared to what a star actually is, the faintly illuminated circle near my feet was an excellent demonstration of how little reaches us here on earth. But I think the most visually rewarding moment is actually outside. Mounted above the entrance to The Print Center is a circular sign that lights up when the show is open. The sign presents a close-up of dog fur that at first glance resembles a photograph of a distant planet. It is a captivating image that invokes the dual foci of the exhibit, Sirius the Dog Star and actual dogs on earth. Oliver's circular beacon also broadcasts music that he composed and performed on a dog-whistle, beyond the range that most people can hear.

The dog-whistle expresses a central theme in *Canicular*: our limited understanding of natural phenomena, be they stars or the inner lives of dogs. The exhibition notes tell us the whistle is present, but we do not experience it. Oliver did not install his actual *Orrery* at The Print Center, but presents video footage instead. Video is a sort of print and therefore in keeping with this venue, but feels somewhat dilute in this case. Sirius



on the scrim is a complicated experience – on the one hand it is simply a spot of white light. On the other hand, we know we are looking at a live feed from a high-powered telescope trained on the brightest star in our sky. The night I visited, the star appeared to actively flare and burn. It turns out this was an interference effect of humidity and pollution, and that too is something to ponder.

Oliver seems to suggest that mediation is our only approach to the sublime in nature. The Dog Star is wondrous when viewed directly in the night sky, but how many urbanites in 2014 can even point it out? Unlike many artists today who present simulacra as an academic commentary on alienation, Oliver's take is the opposite, more akin to Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalism. Oliver has long been concerned with our relationship to the universe, for example in *Jupiter*, his public art on New York's Highline in 2010, or his exhibit *Observatory* at D'Amelio Terras in 2002. In both cases he created photographs that unite our terrestrial existence to the planets, and to the act of looking itself.

While the photographs in *Jupiter* and *Observatory* have great aesthetic power, Oliver largely eschews beauty in *Canicular*. The exhibition has conceptual authority, but what it offers the senses is attenuated to the point that it makes for a mixed experience. That may be part of Oliver's point. *Canicular* pushes back against our grandiosity and entitlement: we cannot hear the dog-whistle, we do not really experience his orrery, we must crawl into his observatory, and the entire exhibition is open only for an hour per day, and then only if weather conditions permit the telescope to get an adequate view of Sirius. Nature confronts us with the boundaries of human knowledge and power. In *Canicular*, Oliver's gambit is the materialization of those limits.