

...might be good

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Two Helpings Of The Future, Yes Please

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Demetrius Oliver *Oort* 2012 Enamel and graphite pencil on paper 70 x 51 1/2 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston

## Demetrius Oliver

Inman Gallery, Houston

Through April 7

by Melissa Venator

Even if the title of Demetrius Oliver's exhibition *Azimuth* is obscure, its astronomical reference is unmistakable. The four large paintings that dominate the Inman Gallery space resemble antiquated star charts, with their familiar blue ground broken up by the white dots of stars and the connecting lines of constellations. In fact, they aren't constellations at all, but the silhouettes of broken umbrella frames, identifiable by their characteristic curved handles and radiating spoke-like ribs. In these works, Oliver uses sprayed paint to create atmospheric compositions that combine dispersed fields of color with linear elements and the flatness of the paper surface.

Astronomy has been a major source of inspiration for Oliver in recent years. The works in *Azimuth* are an extension of his 2011 installation *Orrery* at D'Amelio Terras in New York City, in which he made a room-sized model of the solar system from discarded materials, substituting umbrella frames for planets. In one sense, then, the paintings represent a two-dimensional diagram of the original three-dimensional installation, comparable to the way a star chart reduces the overwhelmingly complex arrangements of distant stars into a deceptively simple map. Like the orrery, Oliver's titles (*Uranic III*, *Oort*) recall a nostalgic moment at the dawn of modern astronomy when a hand-crafted device made of precious metals represented the latest innovation in scientific modeling. The abject materials Oliver uses contradict not only the refinement of these luxury objects, but also the ethereal quality of the stars themselves. Despite the differences between their low and high status, the broken umbrella and the orrery both represent the loss of a usable past; a loss that is more poignant in today's post-space shuttle age, when the stars seem as distant for the average American as for the nineteenth-century viewer of the orrery.

Oliver's work has art historical as well as astronomical precedents, especially in the photograms of artists like Man Ray and Christian Schad. The indistinct umbrella frames have the same ghostlike silhouettes as the objects that appear in negative on the light-sensitive paper of rayographs and schadographs. Through their silhouettes, Oliver's paintings retain the indexical quality that gives the photogram its power. His use of spray paint fixes the auras of the original objects indelibly to the paper, bringing to life the carefully arranged network of ribs responsible for the silhouettes. Oliver's choice of a distinctive Prussian blue color evokes the blue of cyanotypes, another early process of camera-less photography. The cyanotype reinforces the works' diagrammatic quality through its most common use in architectural blueprints. Here, Oliver erodes the technological associations of blueprints with the insistently expressionistic quality of his paint application, in which the flow of the spray traces the movement of his hand.

American sculptor David Smith's *Sprays* series is another reference for *Azimuth*. Dating from the 1950s, the *Sprays* were among the first works to exploit the new technology of aerosol spray paint. In these pioneering paintings, the geometric shapes that make up the image appear as voids in the field of paint, reversing the conventional relationship between figure and ground, positive and negative space. Smith described his *Sprays* as experiments in dissolving the boundaries between drawing, painting and sculpture. Oliver's recent work demonstrates a similar testing of borders, between painting and photography, art and science, with equally insightful results.

*Melissa Venator is a PhD student in the Department of Art History at Rice University.*