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# Nature's Transcendent Image

The Art (and Technology) of Self Realization

LORI SALMON

IN DEMETRIUS OLIVER'S EXHIBITIONS AT THE HIGH LINE AND LIGHT WORK, the cosmos is given new visibility for imagining inner spaces and the unknown. "I try to capture the mysteries of nature in some of my images," says the New York-based artist. "There is so much that we don't fully know about how we came to exist in this world, how this world came about."

## Jupiter, Einstein and Coltrane

Celestial events set the stage for "Jupiter," Oliver's installation at the High Line on Manhattan's West Side. Two nights before the rare full-moon autumnal equinox of September 22, 2010, Jupiter came the closest to Earth than it would at any time in the next dozen years. It was what astronomers call the "night of opposition," when Earth inhabitants could see a dazzlingly bright Jupiter directly overhead at midnight.

On September 7 through October 6, Oliver celebrated this alignment of Sun, Earth, and the giant planet by creating a 25-by-75-foot billboard adjacent to the High Line at West 18th Street. Jupiter featured five round photographs exposing acts and props, reflected in converging mirror displays. In one photograph, a camera sat in the foreground while an Earth diorama with glass spheres and bed are in the background. In



Demetrius Oliver cutting across a gallery.



Demetrius Oliver  
*Mare*, 2010  
Single-channel video, installed at the Light Work Main Gallery  
January 18-March 8, 2011

photo by Steve Sartori, courtesy of Light Work



Demetrius Oliver

*Perigee*, 2010

Single-channel video, installed at the Light Work Urban Video Project, Everson Museum of Art site  
February 2011

photo by Steve Sartori, courtesy of Light Work



Demetrius Oliver  
*Penumbra*, 2010  
 Three-channel video, installed at the Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery  
 January 18–March 3, 2011

photo by Steve Sartori, courtesy of Light Work

another, a camera sits on a table but the image is upside-down. Set against a solid, black background, each photograph resembled planets moving in orbit.

His work was accompanied by weekly performances by five bands of student musicians from the New School. Simultaneously, they played jazz saxophonist's John Coltrane's composition, "Jupiter."

"I've been fascinated with John Coltrane for a while," says Oliver. "He talks about the symmetry of the solar system, black holes, constellations and how Einstein was able to reduce all that complexity into something very simple. Coltrane was looking to do the same thing with his music. So I used that as the jumping board to make that piece."

The High Line is a mile-and-a-half park built on an elevated surface that formerly supported railroad tracks. "I think the public really appreciated what I had to offer. I allowed the musicians a lot of artistic license to interpret Coltrane's composition. With five groups spread out along the entirety of the boardwalk, no matter where you were standing, you'd

be able to hear sound. It really played into the notion of space. As soon as one group started to fade, another would become audible," says Oliver.

## Light Work

Another Oliver exhibition was at Light Work in Syracuse, New York, January 18 through March 8, 2011. Art and nature recall the 18th-century aesthetic of the Sublime with Oliver's gallery exhibition, "Penumbra." Stressing the essential dignity and worth of humanity and its capacity to achieve self-realization through reason, the show projects the concept that conflict and opposition represent a struggle between actual and potential worlds.

"The Light Work exhibition was based around my video work," says Oliver. "The centerpiece of the show is called *Mare*. "Mare" is the plural form of the Latin word for sea. Some of the ancient astronomers looking at the moon thought there was some similarity in composition between the moon and the earth. They thought those dark patches on the moon were bodies of water.



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

So that's where Mare came from. With the projection, I quoted a photograph, making it circular and making the image spin to relate it to the movement of the moon."

*Mare*, 2010, is an ocular image of the sea projected on the wall in a darkened room. Viewers enter and exit the space, obstructing the environment in which the projection is displayed. Upon closer examination of the plinth on which the projector sits, one can literally see the reflection of the moon's surface. The first moment, the viewer is almost overwhelmed by the motion of the black and white image of storm gusts. This is followed by the second moment in which she or he comprehends the experience. Oliver favors the second, redemptive moment where the deceptive maneuver places his viewers as shadows within this scene. Passing in and out of view of the projected image, each individual must challenge feelings of defeat and frustration caused by the eroding sea feeding on his or her soulful silhouette.

"Outdoors at that time, the ground was covered in snow. So you got to see that material, water, in two different states," says Oliver. Using the Everson Museum of Art building's surface as a canvas to a single-channel video in *Perigee*, 2010, the artist continues such conversations as described above. The outdoor display provides a venue for onlookers' contemplative attention in a different kind of mesmerizing practice. Oliver's image of the sea emerging in a realist manner seems to be one step further in the direction of liberation. In daytime, the work is completely invisible, but by night, the brilliant light sometimes appears filmy or evanescent, depending on weather conditions. Both landscapes are reminiscent of stormy skies and turbulent moods that are characteristic of the eighteenth-century aesthetic. However, they are also imbued with a contemporary understanding of personally-constructed roles for each self in relation to "the other," as part of a reflexive process.

The subjective, highly personal beliefs in *Penumbra*, 2010, reiterate themes of individuality that are central tenets to the artist's work. The video triptych of aerial views, which the viewer eventually identifies as the topographical landscape of the artist's head, projects blue and green hues on pearlescence surfaces. Here one witnesses the poetic response that Oliver is able to permeate in form through dynamic color and narration. The evocative quality of the landscape seems both rational and magical, creating a process of being in touch with oneself.

## Intuition

Oliver sees "nature" as the connection between technology and the human intuitive experience of reality. "It's about turning to nature for inspiration. 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," says Oliver.

Every aspect of these exhibitions demonstrates how seemingly contrary forces are interconnected and interdependent in the natural world, and how they give rise to each other in turn. In both conception and execution, each work plays on immanent principles, thus embodying some type of truth in the laws of life itself. No matter how the viewer may feel about the work, detached or in sync with its content, the artist utilizes the device of systems in order to answer the question of the past, present, and future with uninhibited panache. As a result, Demetrius Oliver's art evokes an interest in the individual and in subjectivity by placing viewers at the center of each juncture.

Lori Salmon is an art critic who lives in New York City.