



Art

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Studio visit

Demetrius Oliver

A far-reaching young artist explores Earth, space and beyond.

By T.J. Carlin



The artist in his studio
Photograph: Caroline Voagen Nelson

You started out as a painter in grad school. When did you decide to switch to doing the photos and installations you're known for now? I was making these small, scruffy photographs on the side, getting them developed at, you know, Walgreens, and putting them in the corner. And whenever I had someone over to my studio, they'd talk more about the photos than about the work I'd spent weeks making. These were drawings of body parts, using myself as a model. But they were bigger than life, and I was kind of interested in scarification. I was trying to find a way of modernizing that, so I tried to create the illusion of different materials and objects under the skin, rendering them as realistically as I could. I started doing that with photography. One of the things I found was that photos were a way of

getting at the idea quicker; when I was drawing, I'd have a dozen ideas in my head, and photography kind of matched the speed of my thinking.

You share your studio with a couple of other artists. Do you guys have conversations about your work? Yeah, my studio-mates Wardell Milan and Titus Kaphar are both amazing artists. We met while doing a residency together at the Studio Museum in Harlem. We worked collaboratively as well for a show we did in Berlin last year. We knew what works were going to be in the exhibition, but not the placement of them. I always kind of freak out about those things. So I just planned stuff out in my sketchbook on the plane, gave it to them, and they came up with something a bit better. It's weird because I'd never seen myself working in that manner before.

There's a lot in your work that reminds me of science. Is that something you think of while making your pieces? Definitely. Especially over the past two or three years, I've looked at the natural sciences, particularly astronomy. Recently I've been thinking a lot about silver. One of the definitions of the moon is something relating to or containing silver. And silver nitrate, used in photography, is also called lunar caustic, which is kind of interesting. So there's been this current of relating different metals to various planets, and linking the reflective properties of silver and the moon. I also think about material metamorphosis, transforming prosaic substances into something transcendental that suggests a different use of the thing.

One of your signature elements is the teakettle. When did you start with that? It happened with this piece I did in Houston about four or five years ago, where I placed about a dozen teakettles on the floor. Each of them was on its own hot plate, boiling water and whistling at the same time. I always try to find a way of recycling the materials I use, to bring out another suggestion about them. So I put the kettles away for a year or two, until I realized that some of them had this mirrorlike finish. That's when I started using them as this concave mirror, photographing my activities in the studio within them so that you have not just a reflection of myself, but also of the creative process—all the starts and stops and discoveries I've made along the way.