

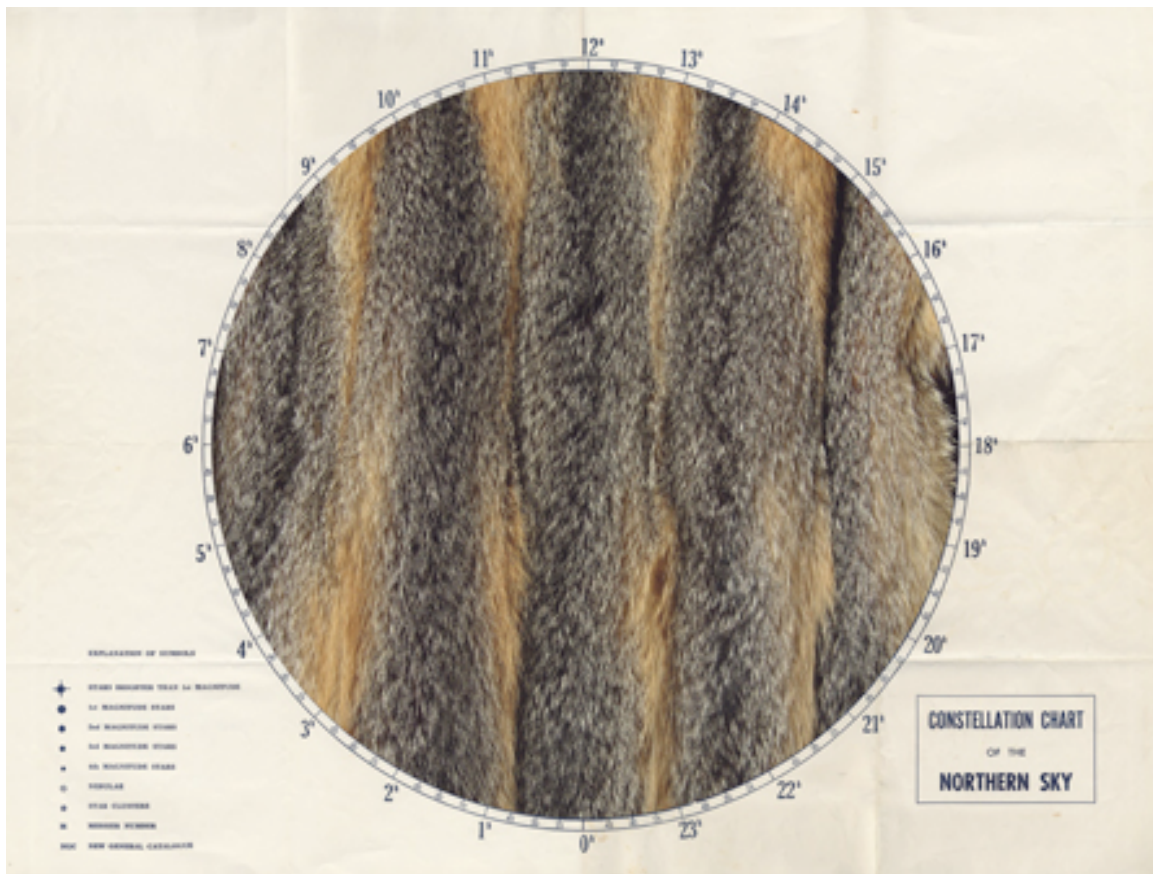
ART LIES

A Contemporary Art Quarterly

Winter 2007-2008

Demetrius Oliver: The Studio Museum in Harlem

John Ewing –



Demetrius Oliver, *Canis Major*, 2007; digital chromogenic print; edition 1 of 7; 18 x 25 inches

How do you organize a show of artists whose work may have nothing more in common than being produced under the same roof at the same time? The Studio Museum in Harlem has saddled its 2006–07 Artists-in-Residence exhibition with the title *Midnight's Daydream*. Though all three artists in the show might have worked late into the night to complete very different, very solid bodies of work, only Demetrius Oliver seems to tap into the title's suggestive mystery.

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Oliver, a 2004–06 Glassell School Core Program fellow and Artadia Houston award recipient originally from Brooklyn, has mounted his own mini-exhibition within the exhibition, with works that loosely reference celestial bodies. Presented as a suite, each of his four digital chromogenic prints—*Ursa Major*, *Lepus*, *Canis Major* and *Vulpecula*—resemble authentic star chart, even bearing the creases and folds of implied use. But where stars should be appears a lustrous, photographic image of fur (black, silver, brown and red) chosen to match each constellations' Latin (animal) name. To the layman, this is no more or less inscrutable than an actual star chart, but the enveloping field of fur speaks to the imagination much more seductively.

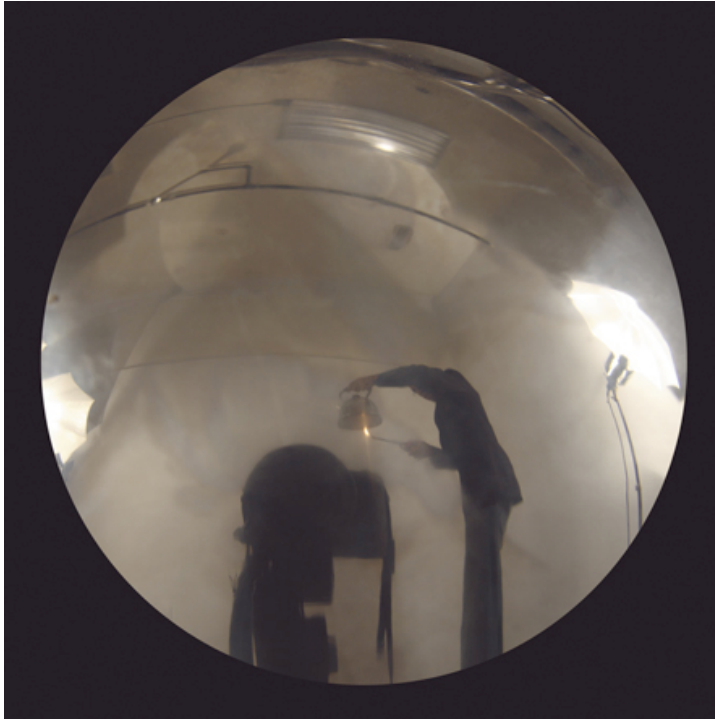
Taking this idea of celestial seduction further, *Harmonic Spheres* is a short video depicting the artist's head as the surface of a moon or planet à la Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*. Amid swirling vapors, ethereal lighting and echoing saxophone squeals, the camera slowly pans across this intricate, seemingly otherworldly expanse. Though perfect for a *Saturday Night Live* skit, this compelling piece maintains a serious and eerie tone, even with the tongue-in-cheek comparison of space travel to exploring the head of a black man.

Oliver's stand-out work is the sublime *Almanac*, a series of 44 digitally printed photographs, mounted side by side in various-sized frames to suggest a "horizon line" along one gallery wall. Each round image is a distorted, fish-eye view of Oliver at work in his studio photographing a random assortment of still-life objects—tools, a lantern, light bulbs, books, etc. Yet in each composition sits the camera, indicating that the image photographed is actually a reflection off something else—in this case, the shiny, metallic surface of a tea kettle. Playing with the idea of the Moon's reflected light and rotating the images as though in phase with the Moon, Oliver has created a supple, elegant and gorgeously mysterious simulacrum of heaven on earth, represented here by the many twists and turns of the artist's own imaginative light inside an inventive studio universe.

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Untitled 11, from the series *Almanac*, 2006-07; digital chromogenic print; 16 x 600 inches; images courtesy the artist

Objects provide a robust contrast to Oliver's highly refined imagemaking. *Mimic*—presumably the same shiny kettle used in the abovementioned photographs—is displayed on a pedestal under a vitrine. It emits what sounds like human whistles or perhaps muffled screams. Hanging nearby, *Midnight* is a navy blazer with a constellation of illuminated mini lights poked through the back. *Orbiter* is a funny, squat work—a slide projector placed on a mover's dolly, projecting an image of a piece of coal gripped in the artist's hand. This humanized meteorite can swing around the room at any angle or size; all it needs is an activating hand. Through these images and objects, Oliver shows us that the capacity to reimagine conventional actions, views and narratives is the artist's great gift.

John Ewing is a freelance writer and editor based in New York and has written for *Art Nexus* and *Modern Painters*. He is the Copy Editor of *Art Lies*.