



ARTIST

Demetrius Oliver

TITLE

Trial III

DATE

2009

DIMENSIONS

29.25 in H x 43.625 in W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2009.025

CURRENT LOCATION

NA 04

DEMETRIUS OLIVER

BORN

1975

BIRTHPLACE

New York, NY

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

African-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2009
Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 2011
Main Gallery, 2011
Urban Video Project, 2011

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

BIOGRAPHY

Demetrius Oliver arrived in Syracuse with two boulder-sized pieces of anthracite coal, as well as several other props, for use in building and documenting the “improvised sculptures in space” that form his series *Firmaments*. Working in response to specific domestic environments, Oliver combines prosaic materials, such as coal, light bulbs, and sometimes food, to reinterpret our perceptions of photography and also of the objects and spaces that we think of as everyday. Sometimes these improvised sculptures incorporate gesture and the human figure, which Oliver considers an excellent vehicle towards assisting his ready-mades. His work ultimately occupies a space between sculpture and photography as it tempts the viewer to discover the unexpected in the mundane.

Oliver holds a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and an MFA from the University of Pennsylvania. His work has been exhibited widely, including a 2008 solo show at Inman Gallery, Houston, TX. Oliver has participated in residencies at Steep Rock, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Museum of Fine Art, Houston.

demetriusoliver.blogspot.com

ESSAYS

Certain artists have so transformed particular objects with their vision that they lay claim to those objects in our minds. In the late 1930s, Walker Evans drew attention to roadside billboards, their increasingly ubiquitous presence in modern life, and the ironies in their placement. He made us aware of the signs, so we tag our cognizance to Evans’ tutelage. Giorgio Morandi painted the same bottles and boxes in his studio for over half a century. His persistent contemplation led to subtle but seemingly endless variations of arrangement and perception; he expanded our understanding of the depth of discernment possible from an intelligent mind looking at such humble objects. While Demetrius Oliver’s career does not yet span a decade, he has already collected about him, and inserted into his art, certain objects whose steady reappearance has begun to lay his claim. Chunks of black coal, slices of bacon, light bulbs, and teakettles are all mundane objects in the daily lives of most people. He has nevertheless begun to expand our appreciation of their evocative possibilities to such an extent that they are becoming linked to his art in challenging ways. He began to collect teakettles for his first major installation at Project Row Houses in Houston in 2004. In *Conductor*, he placed a group of kettles on hot plates on the floor allowing the water to boil and the pots to whistle like trains. Oliver’s titles often have double and triple references, many being grounded in his knowledge of African American history and his love of nineteenth century American literature, particularly the writings of the Transcendentalists, especially Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. For example, *Conductor* alludes to the teakettle as container and conduit for the water’s transformation to steam and to noise. In addition Project Row Houses is located in an African American neighborhood, and the residents would also appreciate the reference to the operators of the Underground Railroad. Similarly, as curator Yasufumi Nakamori observed, the relevance of light bulbs in Oliver’s later projects lies in Ralph Ellison’s novel *The Invisible Man*, in which the African American protagonist lives in a basement illuminated with 1,369 light bulbs and equates truth with light.¹ In later works, the teakettles’ original function is exchanged for their capacities as shiny surfaces. In his monumental series *Almanac*, Oliver aimed his camera at the body of various teakettles, which reflected the room and its contents back to the lens, including the reflection of the camera itself. The camera sits on a table or a tripod with no human hand near the shutter, making its role as recorder a matter of deduction. The rooms and the objects within them are ordinary, but his arrangements are unexpected. Hammers stand on end, sometimes with bacon strips plastered to the handles. Oliver is the magician, or as some critics have observed “the trickster,” whose presence moves in the space, lifting lids on boxes that emit a burst of light from an unseen source. Sometimes only his hand is visible. Oliver is another recurring visual in much of his work. But for a man so frequently recorded, he is intensely private. Like Cindy Sherman’s use of her own body in her art, we have come to know Oliver’s face and body, but not his person. Oliver has an artist’s eye for physically distinct objects that have little traditional emotional load, leaving them more open to his manipulation on both physical and metaphorical levels. Formally they are well-chosen, from the mechanically shiny but use-damaged surfaces of the teakettles, to the icky limpness of raw bacon and how it molds itself to whatever it is wrapped around, to the inky blackness of coal. He does not confirm what his props mean, using them evocatively, not for any specific narrative thread. Since the early single images, Oliver has produced large-scale digital photographs which he installs in grids or long horizontal lines or he projects onto various surfaces, including a plastic bucket “telescope” and groups of light bulbs held in his hand. The pictures in *Almanac* and in the *Firmament* segment of the larger installation *Observatory* were not made with a fish-eye lens as has been frequently written in reviews. Rather, Oliver used Photoshop to cut out the circular reflection from the teakettle. Each circular image floats in a black square in the final print. In both series, where the prints are hung abutting one another in a line(s) around the room, the orbs evoke a strange celestial reference when seen from a distance. As Oliver’s works continue to evolve, he will find new objects to employ in his investigations and probably continue to use those that have served him well thus far, but in new contexts. Like Morandi, he uses the familiar to make himself, and us, question what we see, what we know, and who we might be in the mix. Anne Wilkes Tucker 1. Yasufumi Nakamori, email to author, February 6, 2010. Demetrius Oliver lives and works in New York City. He was a Light Work Artist-in-Residence in April 2009. For more information about Oliver, visit demetriusoliver.blogspot.com. Anne Wilkes Tucker is the Gus and Lyndall Wortham Curator of Photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. She has contributed essays to over eighty publications and catalogues, some of which she also edited, and most of which were for exhibitions that she curated. She has published many articles and lectured widely. The exhibition *Penumbra*, a series of three video installations by Demetrius Oliver, connects viewers to their place in the universe by playing with earthly and human forms against a backdrop of the cosmos. In *Penumbra*, explorations of light and scale, movement, and the rhythm of the natural world suggest journeys both physical and metaphysical. By training our eyes to look simultaneously at ourselves and at the heavens, the artist establishes a continuum of existence that emphasizes connection, unity, and peace. Finding the spectacular in the everyday, Oliver transforms seemingly ordinary material building blocks into images and installations that stretch the confines of human structures and bodies. Oliver has arrived at the video installations in *Penumbra* in incremental steps that can be traced throughout the creation of earlier works. From the beginning of his career until now, Oliver has never settled into one medium for his work, preferring instead the freedom to let his materials and the method of his expressions seek their own paths. Along the way the artist has asked himself and his viewers to remain flexible and open to the miraculous powers of seemingly mundane objects. Such is the case with light bulbs and teakettles, essential components of the series *Ember* and *Firmament*, which he makes behave in unusual and extraordinary ways. The round surfaces of the light bulbs and kettles usually radiate light and heat. In Oliver’s work they reflect rather than radiate, becoming mirrors on sometimes strange but always beautiful interior scenes. These inner worlds, reflected and contained within the tiny bulbs and kettles, then transform again and begin to resemble planets and celestial spheres. As another example, in the image *Firmament XX*, the smooth surface of the kettle is rippled with sediment from water; this crust forms a line that

simultaneously references a linea nigra on a pregnant woman's stomach and an equator. From the idea of equator, we are transported to observing a planet from some unknown point high in the heavens. This is how Oliver gets us out of our skin so that we can begin to reexamine our place in the order of things. The artist casts our glance both inward and outward as we attempt to resolve multiple shifts in scale and perception. He starts with a lowly light bulb, totally changes its nature by bouncing light off of it, and in the process assembles a series of miniature universes. In this way, Oliver invites us on a journey similar to the one offered by poet Walt Whitman, who also extrapolates whole and sometimes contradictory worlds from common forms such as a single blade of grass. That is quite a ride for those who are willing to take it, one that has the potential to open up new vistas of thought about the workings of the mind and the universe. In the video installations *Mare*, *Perigee*, and *Penumbra*, the form of the circle, so prevalent in *Ember* and *Firmament*, returns to echo themes of the micro/macrococosm while also offering a comforting sense of continuity as we explore the universe through Oliver's keen eyes. Significantly, the artist, who frequently appears as *Everyman* in his earlier series, has almost completely disappeared from the work in *Penumbra*; as Oliver deflects attention away from himself, he asks us to step out of our mortal coil and into something greater. His message is especially timely and inspirational in Spring 2011, as America seeks to pull together a politically polarized citizenry and reestablish some kind of commons. Ultimately, this newest video work invites us on a journey outside of ourselves, letting the idea of the individual melt into a more universal experience—of contemplating the night sky and reveling in the peace of being one small point in an endless and ever-expanding infinity. *Penumbra* aspires toward a kind of communion, uniting the earthly with the heavenly in a journey that begins with the self and reaches far beyond. Mary Goodwin *Idealism* . . . beholds the whole circle of persons and things, of actions and events, of country and religion, not as painfully accumulated, atom after atom, act after act, in an aged creeping Past, but as one vast picture, which God paints on the instant eternity, for the contemplation of the soul. ¹ In *Mare*, artist Demetrius Oliver pays homage to the Transcendentalists who have influenced his thinking about life and art, especially to Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the movement's founding fathers. The multimedia work, which incorporates elements of photography, sculpture, video, and sound, embraces Emersonian ideas about the totality and connection of nature, humanity, and the universe. *Mare*, installed in the darkened Light Work Main Gallery, presents a space of both literal and metaphoric reflection. Within the gallery, a single square pedestal emerges from the darkness to offer an unlikely kind of sculpture. On top of the square pedestal sits a rotating display base that supports a circular platform. The underside of this circular platform is adorned with an image of the moon, which we see reflected in a mirror on top of the pedestal. Here, as is his habit, the artist plays the trickster with our glance and sense of scale as he presents the moon in miniature and as an object that we look down into rather than up to. From on top of the platform, a projector casts a circular image of a wave as it crashes against an unnamed shore. The image spins within itself, alluding to the passing of days, and simultaneously orbits the gallery. As the image rotates, the lines of the wave begin to resemble the layered surface of a Jovian planet such as Jupiter; the sea, itself a metaphor for impossible enormity and infinity, becomes a heavenly sphere at once massive and also dwarfed by space. Visitors to the gallery become part of the work as the projection reflects off their bodies. The bright projection crossing in front of our eyes creates a physical rhythm that is both temporarily hypnotic and comforting. By joining the sea with both corporal and heavenly phenomena, the installation creates a sense of connectedness and unity. The circular projection of the sea that lends *Mare* its power also plays an important role in *Perigee*, a video installation at the Urban Video Project's Everson Museum of Art site. A perigee occurs when one orbiting body, in this case the moon, is closest to earth, which makes tidal waves stronger. In *Perigee*, the circular image of the wave spins in a clockwise direction, becoming a kind of mandala. The movement of the video describes the rotation of both planets and the alternate rising and falling of the sea. Its projection on the site, framed perfectly against the stars on a clear night, reminds us that both the earth and its inhabitants are affected by larger bodies in space. Interestingly, and unlike the Transcendentalists who have had such an impact on him, Oliver never brings the idea of a Divine Being into the continuum he so eloquently describes in *Mare* and *Perigee*. Today, when attitudes about God and faith seem to divide more than they connect people, Oliver has instead chosen to bypass any potential politics in search of a universal vocabulary of wholeness. Mary Goodwin ¹. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Idealism" from *Nature and Other Writings* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2009): 73. The multimedia single-channel video installation *Mare* was on view January 18 to March 8, 2011 in the Light Work Main Gallery. *Perigee* was exhibited at the Urban Video Project, Everson Museum of Art site February 1 to March 30, 2011. The Urban Video Project (UVP) is a multimedia public art initiative of Light Work and Syracuse University that operates several electronic exhibition sites along the Connective Corridor in Syracuse, NY. The mission of UVP is to present exhibitions and projects that celebrate the arts and culture of Syracuse and engage artists and the creative community around the world. For more information about UVP and its projects, visit www.urbanvideoproject.com.