

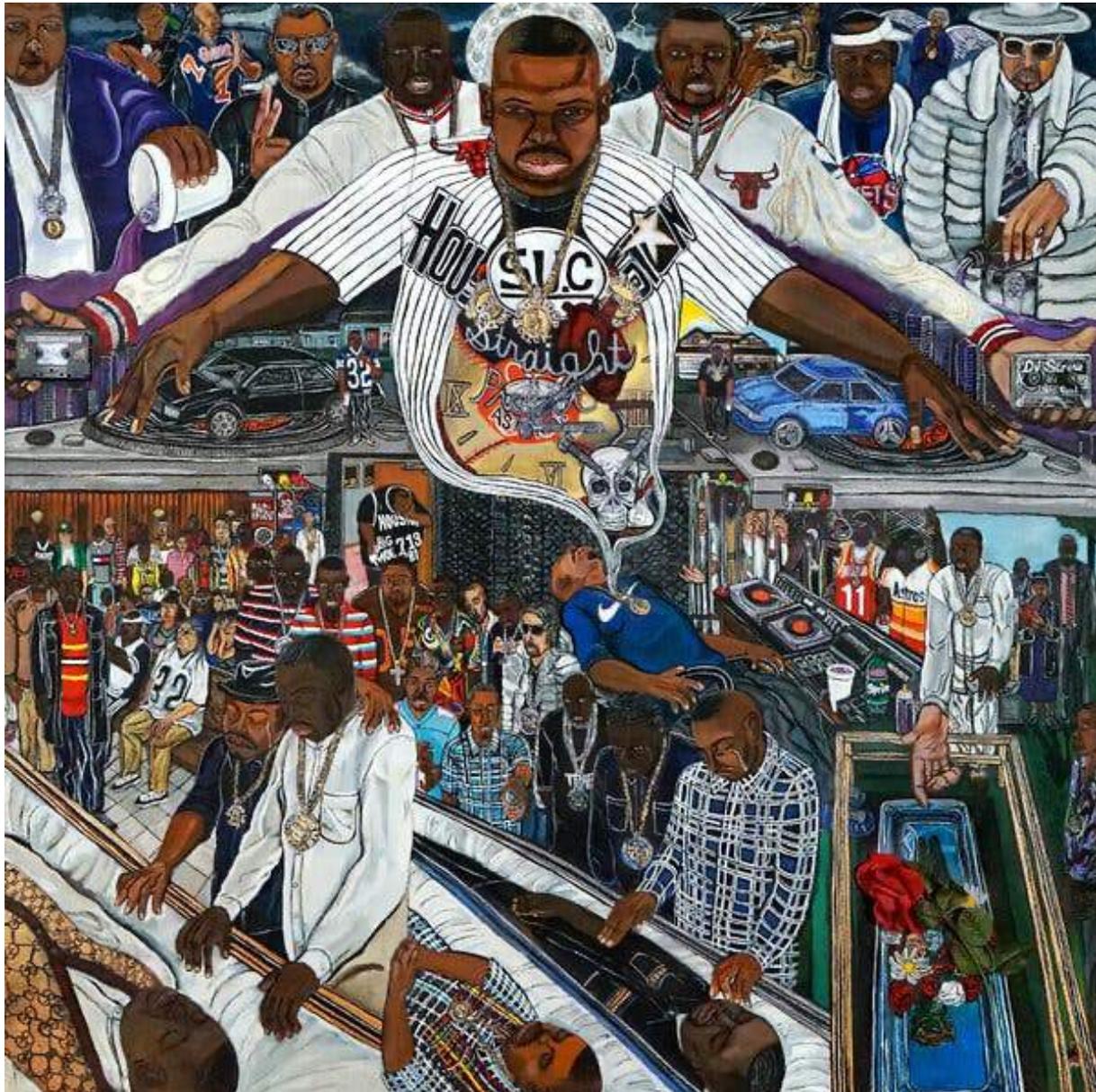
The New York Times

CRITIC'S PICK

Art Meets Its Soundtrack Deep in ‘The Dirty South’

A big, juicy exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts turns an embracing eye on Black artists in the American South.

By Holland Cotter | July 15, 2021



El Franco Lee II's "DJ Screw in Heaven 2" (2016), in the show "The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse." It depicts the life and death of the Houston hip-hop star Robert Earl Davis, known as DJ Screw, shown manipulating turntables, center-stage, in heaven. Credit: El Franco Lee II

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RICHMOND, Va. — Some of the country’s most candidly truth-telling museums dedicated to the civil rights movement, and by extension to Black history, are in cities south of the Mason-Dixon line: Jackson, Memphis and Montgomery among them. Which suggests that old, sweeping views of the South as a bastion of stuck-in-past political denial are, and have always been, wrong.

Yet large-scale museum surveys of art from and about the South are scarce. It’s as if the mainstream art world — specifically navel-gazing, Europhilic New York — didn’t know, or believe, or care that whole, rich art cultures were unfolding in Atlanta, and Houston, and New Orleans.

One of the few recent broad-spectrum shows to tackle the subject was “Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art,” organized by Miranda Lash and Trevor Schoonmaker at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, N.C. But that was in 2016. Now comes another one, a big, juicy, thought-through thematic sampler here at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.



“Slab,” 2021, a 1990 Cadillac Brougham d’ Elegance customized by Richard FIEND Jones, a.k.a. International Jones. Credit: Brian Palmer for The New York Times

Called [“The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse.”](#) it picks up names from the Nasher show, but with 120 artists, is twice the size. It sharpens the thematic focus from the American South to the African American South. And it

makes explicit — tangible, audible — what the earlier show only alluded to: the intersection, in the Black South, of visual art and music.

Indeed, the phrase “Dirty South,” which can take many social, political and personal readings (including as a form of regional endearment), has, in the show’s context, a very concrete one. It was a branding label applied early on to Southern hip-hop, a distinctive strain of the genre that gained wider popularity in the mid-1990s when Southern artists like Goodie Mob, Ludacris, Outkast and Timbaland hit the national charts. They were, in fact, only the latest manifestations of musical innovations with Southern sources: blues, jazz, gospel, bluegrass, R&B, funk, soul.

Organized by Valerie Cassel Oliver, the V.M.F.A.’s curator of modern and contemporary art, the show starts in the museum’s lobby with a classic, Southern hip-hop artifact: a type of a car known as a “slab,” said to be an acronym for “slow, loud and bangin’.” Such vehicles, elaborately painted and chromed and fitted out with volcanic stereo systems, function as both sound machines and art objects. (The one in the show was commissioned by the museum from the New Orleans artist Richard FIEND Jones, a.k.a. International Jones.) The total effect: celebratory look-at-me luxe.



“Summer Breeze” (2008) by Paul Stephen Benjamin features a bank of video monitors. One plays Billie Holiday singing “Strange Fruit,” but incorporates an editing glitch. Credit: Brian Palmer for The New York Times

A second kickoff piece, “Summer Breeze,” by the Atlanta artist Paul Stephen Benjamin, sets a very different tone. Installed just outside the main galleries, it’s a pyramid of stacked video monitors. One plays a 1959 clip of Billie Holiday singing “Strange Fruit,” the chilling dirge about racial lynching that she made famous. But the tape incorporates an editing glitch. When she sings the line “Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze” it comes out “Black bodies swinging in the sun,” a description that corresponds to the single image playing on almost all the other screens: that of a young Black girl, bathed in sunlight and slowly swaying on a playground swing.

So from the outset, we’re getting a sense of the take on the African American South that lies ahead: a picture of a relentless and continuing repression met with assertive creativity in which sight and sound play complementary roles.



From left, Beverly Buchanan’s “Untitled (Frustula Series),” circa 1978 and Allison Janae Hamilton’s subaqueous video. Credit: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; Travis Fullerton

The first thing we experience inside the galleries is the sound of rushing water. It emanates from Allison Janae Hamilton’s subaqueous video — she dragged a camera behind a boat to film it — of the Wacissa River in rural Florida, where she grew up. Traveled today mainly by kayakers and bird watchers, the river’s channels were originally dug by enslaved Black people for the transport of cotton. And its currents, luminously murky, carry us into the show’s first thematic section, devoted to images of the Southern landscape.

The impression is of all but unmappable terrain. In a painting by Alma Thomas and a photographic projection by the wonderful Demetrius Oliver we get a lush garden and a star-stippled sky. Kevin Sipp connects nature and culture in the 2009 assemblage called “Take it to the Bridge/Trance-Atlantic,” in which a bare, gnarled tree branch stretches, like a reconciling arm, between a drum, possibly African, and what could be a hip-hop D.J.’s turntable.

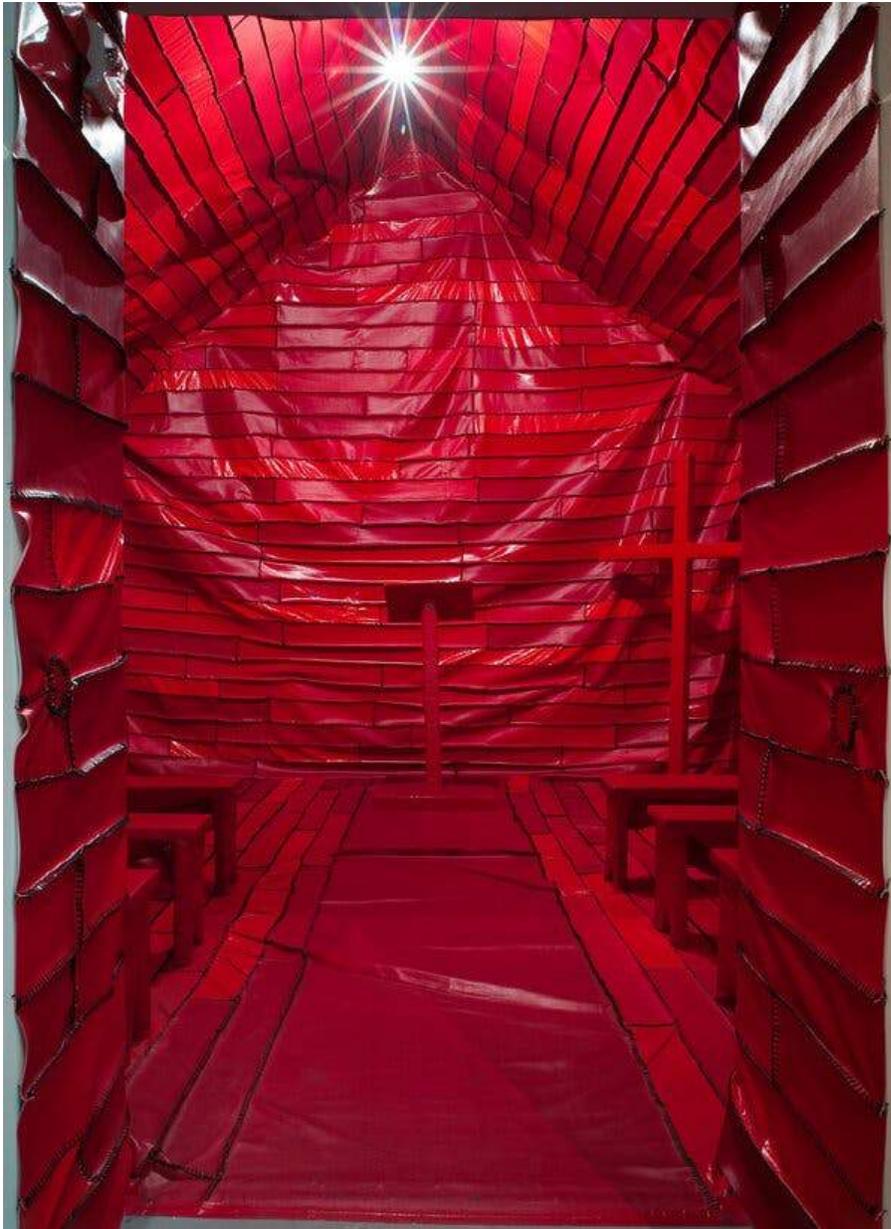
Four sharecropper cabins sketched in the 1940s by Samella Lewis have a mean, shutdown and abandoned look. Nathaniel Donnett’s 2017 re-creation of a section of a wall of such a house seems no more promising, until you read the title — “I looked over Jordan and what did I see; a band of angels coming after me” — and notice the faint, blue, unearthly light shining through the wallboards.



Nadine Robinson’s 2008 “Coronation Theme: Organon,” a sonic sculpture inspired by the 1963 civil rights protests in Birmingham, Alabama. Credit: Brian Palmer for The New York Times

Transcendence, as often as not firmly anchored to earth, is the substance of the show’s second, larger section, “Religion.” It announces itself in Nadine Robinson’s “Coronation Theme: Organon,” a sonic sculpture inspired by the 1963 civil rights protests in Birmingham, Ala. Visually, the piece comprises 30 audio speakers massed in a shape resembling a church organ. From them emerges an aural collage mixing the sounds of dogs barking and people praying with a coronation anthem by George Frideric Handel, the crown in this case going, by implication, to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was arrested during the protests.

The show also has a couple of architecturally scaled pieces that qualify as secular sanctums. One is Rodney McMillian's hand-stitched red vinyl walk-in version of a chapel that once existed on the Dockery Farm in Mississippi where, in the early 20th century, musicians like Charley Patton, Robert Johnson and Howlin' Wolf cooked up Delta blues. And there's Jason Moran's "Staged: Slug's Saloon," a usable performance space that doubles as a shrine to a fabled Manhattan music club where, in the 1960s, free-jazz deities like Sun Ra and Ornette Coleman played. (One of Coleman's saxophones and a scrap of Sun Ra sheet music turn up later in the show.)



Rodney McMillian's "From Asterisks in Dockery" (2012), a walk-in version of a chapel that once existed on the Dockery Farm in Mississippi where, in the early 20th century, musicians like Charley Patton and Robert Johnson cooked up Delta blues. Credit: Rodney McMillian and Vielmetter

You'll find altars; Renee Stout's "She Kept Her Conjuring Table Very Neat" is one. And sculptural icons, like Thornton Dial's fantastically improvisational "Foundation of the World (A Dream of My Mother)." And a choir of angels as imagined by artists as different as the self-taught Tennessee tombstone carver William Edmondson and the jazz-dazzled modernist painter Bob Thompson, a Slug's habitu .

Finally, you'll meet an earth-angel in the New Orleans street evangelist Sister Gertrude Morgan. On view is one of the safety-pinned, ballpoint-pen-inscribed ("Jesus is my air plane") paper megaphones through which she preached and sang, and, thanks to recordings, her stalwart voice is in the gallery air.



Sister Gertrude Morgan's "Jesus Is My Air Plane," circa 1970. Credit: Estate of Sister Gertrude Morgan

The theme of the show's third section, "The Black Body," feels especially present-minded. How could it not, given the constant message delivered by the news that if you're Black in America, you are always, everywhere — South, North, red state or blue — in physical danger.

True, certain body images here radiate bold, untrammelled joy, as in the case of Rashaad Newsome's elating, fast-cut video potpourri of New Orleans Mardi Gras parades and voguing. Others, like a figure-packed painting by El Franco Lee II depicting the short life and early death of the Houston hip-hop star and slab-culture guru Robert Earl Davis, known as DJ Screw, have a redemptive lift. We see Davis laid out in his coffin, but we also see him manipulating turntables, center-stage, in heaven.



From left, Radcliffe Bailey's "If Bells Could Talk," from 2015; Whitfield Lovell's "Rise of the Delta," from 2013; and Rashaad Newsome's "King of Arms" (2015), single-channel video installation with sound. Credit: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; Travis Fullerton

In a major installation by Paul Rucker, "Storm in the Time of Shelter," bodies become both instruments and victims of violence. For the piece, Rucker assembled 48 mannequins dressed in bespoke Ku Klux Klan-style hoods and robes tailored, not from white sheets, but from a globalist array of patterned fabrics: Asian silks, African kente cloth, military camouflage. The figures, arranged in a cross formation, make for a bright, eye-catching sight. But who are they? Foot soldiers in a newly tolerant right-wing rainbow army? Archival photographs of lynched Black bodies displayed in surrounding vitrines say no. Packaging changes; evil remains.

Although the Rucker installation (on view through Aug. 8) is part of the larger show, it's in a space of its own on the museum's second floor. And one other work, "The AfroDixieRemixes," by the multimedia artist John Sims, is similarly set apart.



Paul Rucker's "Storm in Time of Shelter," in which he assembled 48 mannequins dressed in bespoke Ku Klux Klan-style hoods and robes. "Packaging changes; evil remains," our critic says. Credit: Brian Palmer for The New York Times

Entirely sonic, the Sims piece is based on a single familiar song, "Dixie," composed for pre-Civil War minstrel shows and meant to mock clichés of "happy" Black slave life. (It's possible that its lyricists were Black.) Later, with altered verses, it became the national anthem of the Confederacy, and then the canonical expression of Lost Cause nostalgia in the Jim Crow era. Sims doesn't rewrite the song; he simply records it being performed by Black musicians in a range of Black music styles — gospel, blues, soul, hip-hop — undercutting, through genius appropriation, its white supremacist punch.

His piece is particularly effective installed where it is: in an 1897 Confederate Memorial Chapel that still stands on the museum's grounds. Indeed, the immediate neighborhood is saturated in Confederate culture. The headquarters of the United Daughters of the Confederacy sits, a squat block of white Georgia marble, directly beside the museum. Monument Avenue, a residential thoroughfare once dotted with statues of Confederate heroes, is close by. (Since 2020, all the heroes but one, Robert E. Lee, have been trucked away.)

The term “Dirty South” can refer to many things, including a morally sullied history. All the art in the V.M.F.A. show, though largely of recent date, has roots in such a history. And although the show will be traveling to other venues in other cities, it has particular resonance seen here.

The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse

Through Sept. 6, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, (804) 340-1400, vmfa.museum.

The exhibition travels to the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, Oct. 23, 2021-Feb. 6, 2022; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Ark., March 12-July 25, 2022; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, Sept. 2022-Feb. 2023.

A version of this article appears in print on July 16, 2021, Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Relentless Repression. Assertive Creativity..

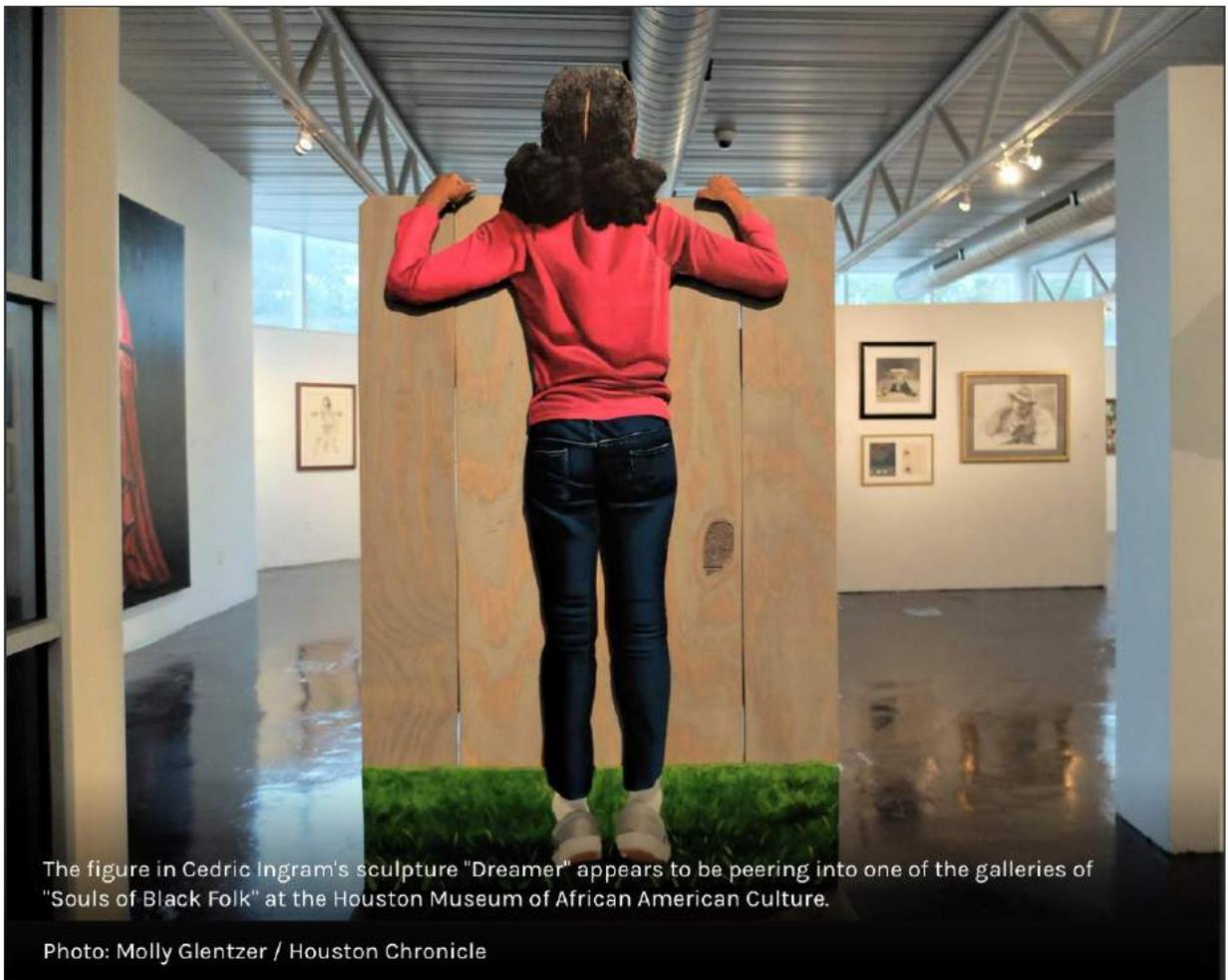
HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

ART & EXHIBITS

Houston Museum of African American Culture's 'Souls of Black Folk' shows little has changed

The Houston Museum of African American Culture features contemporary works about Black identity and racism in "Souls of Black Folk."

Molly Glentzer July 1, 2020 | Updated: July 6, 2020, 10:18 am



The figure in Cedric Ingram's sculpture "Dreamer" appears to be peering into one of the galleries of "Souls of Black Folk" at the Houston Museum of African American Culture.

Photo: Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle

I N M A N G A L L E R Y

A few blocks from the MFAH, the modest but resolute Houston Museum of African American Culture has mounted “Souls of Black Folk.”

Curated by CEO emeritus John Guess from local collections, this unofficial companion show and response to “Soul of a Nation” fast-forwards the conversation with more contemporary works. Guess borrowed his title from a collection of essays by W.E.B. Dubois, who articulated a double-consciousness separating Blacks from opportunities that whites take for granted. Although it was published in 1903, Dubois’ book “might as well be about Black life and race relations today,” Guess says.

“Souls of Black Folk” features works by 40 artists — some legendary, some midcareer, some emerging. Houston artists represent strongly.

Cedric Ingram’s “Dreamer,” a wood sculpture of a young girl on her tiptoes, peeking over a fence, leads visitors into the first-floor gallery. This room is a bit of a rambling meditation on images of Black identity. David McGee’s lushly painted “The Homosexual,” which riffs on a famous portrait of the 17th century’s Cardinal de Richelieu, dominates the room. Kaneem Smith’s minimal “Body Bag” sculpture feels most of-the-moment. An untitled portrait by Delita Martin holds strong next to a John Biggers portrait of a woman with a similarly intense expression. Floyd Newsum’s strong black-and-white “The Journey Never Ends” blends pictographic symbols, including a boat, water, fish, hands and ladders.

There’s more anger upstairs, where the focus turns to racism — Ted Ellis’ crowned portrait of George Floyd and tougher “On Our Backs,” featuring a man with a scarred back and references to the industries of the Deep South. In Michael Ray Charles’ “Forever Free,” a white-shirted man putting on a tie sees a Sambo figure staring back at him through a mirror. That piece is nicely juxtaposed with the swaggering figure of Dominic Clay’s “Thugger Life.” Works by Demetrius Oliver, Rick Lowe, Jamal Cyrus, Vicki Meek and others help to make this floor the show’s strong suit.



Kambui Olujimi, T-Minus Ø, 2017. Installation of 13 mounted flags. Digital print on cotton with aluminum pole, artist-made finial, zinc pole mount. Courtesy of the artist.

An Infinite and Omnivorous Sky

January 10 - February 19, 2020

Participating artists: Amy Balkin, Jen Bervin, James Bridle, william cordova, Rohini Devasher, Ala Ebtekar, Spencer Finch, Dianna Frid, Carrie Gundersdorf, Basim Magdy, Brittany Nelson, Demetrius Oliver, Kambui Olujimi, Lisa Oppenheim, Trevor Paglen, Katie Paterson, Dario Robleto, Cauleen Smith, and Kerry Tribe.

An Infinite and Omnivorous Sky, a group exhibition about the mysteries and militarization of outer space, features twenty-nine works by artists that critically engage in poetic, scientific, and geopolitical views of the cosmos. Although the sea of celestial bodies has incited philosophizing and dreaming throughout time, the sky has also become militarized. It serves as a site of international power struggles and an omniscient point of view for surveillance via countless satellites.

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Our knowledge is constantly evolving with the generation of new data via Mars and moon rovers, Hubble telescope images, Voyager and New Horizons probes, and the Large Hadron Collider, among others. As the human race faces unprecedented crises due to climate change and related global unrest, the sky may hold the key to our collective survival.

The works in the exhibition prompt dialogue about the need for rigorous scientific exploration, unrestrained artistic practice, and informed political action. For example, Amy Balkin's *The Atmosphere, A Guide* is a poster-essay that, in the artist's words, "depicts various human influences on the sky and their accumulated traces, whether chemical, narrative, spatial, or political." The thirteen cotton flags in Kambui Olujimi's installation *T-Minus Ø* feature photographic collages of failed rocket launches and shuttle attempts, while Kerry Tribe's video *The Last Soviet* addresses cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev's 311 days spent on the Mir space station during the fall of the Soviet Union. Cauleen Smith's video *Space is the Place (A March for Sun Ra)* follows a rainy Chicago performance of Afrofuturist composer and musician Sun Ra's "Space is the Place" by a high school marching band, and Brittany Nelson's large-scale Bromoil photograph *Tracks 1* centers around an image the Opportunity Rover took of its own tracks in the Martian landscape. The series of nine clocks comprising Katie Paterson's *Timepieces (Solar System)* tells the time on Earth's moon and the eight planets in our solar system, while the green embroidered text spelling "THERE IS NO RETURN" in Dianna Frid's *NYT, AUG. 22, 2015, JACOB BEKENSTEIN* is excerpted from the physicist and black hole theorist's obituary in the *New York Times*.

An Infinite and Omnivorous Sky is curated by University Galleries' Director and Chief Curator Kendra Paitz. An exhibition catalog is forthcoming in Summer 2020. The exhibition, publication, and programming are supported by grants from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the Illinois Arts Council Agency. Field trip support is provided by a grant from the Town of Normal Harmon Arts Grant Program.

University Galleries is collaborating with the Illinois State University Planetarium and the Children's Discovery Museum for programming during the exhibition.

All events are free and open to the public.

February 28, 2014

Canicular: Demetrius Oliver at the Print Center

Daniel Gerwin

Through March 22, 2014 at The Print Center, Philadelphia.

My 18-month-old is fascinated by the moon and stars. Every night he asks to be taken outside, and if the moon is visible, he breaks into a gleeful smile and calls out "Moon! Moon!" He also loves our two dogs, looking for them each morning as soon as he gets up. A deep impulse compels us to the lure of the heavens, and to our primal relationship with animals. I have seen the night sky while backpacking in the mountains, where the innumerability of the stars is enveloping and overwhelming -- infinity made palpable. There is a related sensation in living with animals: After ten years, my dogs are my family, yet there are moments when I look at them moving through the living room and see beasts as foreign as another galaxy. I can run my hand through the fur of the unknown. Demetrius Oliver has investigated the celestial urge for much of his career, and digs in once again for his current exhibit at the Print Center, *Canicular*, a word indicating relationship to dogs or to Sirius the Dog Star.



Heliometric. Demetrius Oliver, courtesy of the Print Center.

Materially, the show is spare and, I suspect, intentionally underwhelming. The first floor holds a faux heliometer (used to measure the sun) made of over forty stacked white plastic paint buckets containing a small projection of the sun's reflection on Oliver's studio floor. The gallery on the Print Center's ground level is lit green while the stairway is lit red, signaling canine color-blindness. At the top of the stairs hangs a single photograph of what looks like an unbent paper clip placed atop the constellation Cepheus on a star map. A series of videos lines a wall of the back gallery, slowly panning through and around his 2011 installation, Orrery, in which he created a celestial model using stripped umbrella frames, with odds and ends from his home and studio attached to their metal ribs. Finally, there is an observatory chamber made with only a slight nod to outward elegance. Entering this makeshift space on your hands and knees through a dog door allows you to see an image of the star Sirius projected live from the Franklin Institute's telescope onto a scrim suspended a few feet overhead.



Canicular, interior. Demetrius Oliver, courtesy of the Print Center.

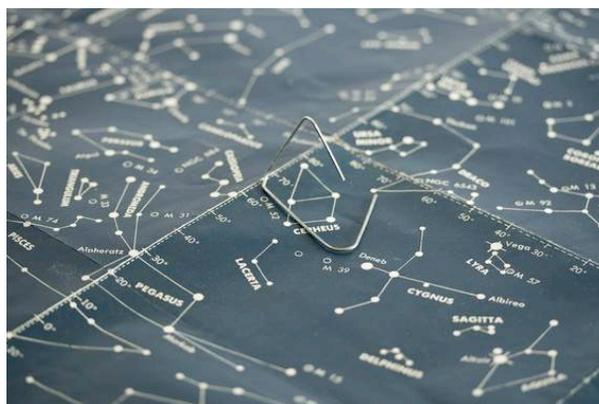
The Dog Star seemingly floating within reach is striking, and also notable is the faded pool of light that passes through the scrim to appear on the floor. Compared to what a star truly is, the faintly illuminated circle near my feet was an excellent demonstration of how little of Sirius reaches us here on earth. But I think the most visually rewarding moment is actually outside. Mounted above the entrance to the Print Center is a circular sign that lights up when the show is open. The sign presents a close-up of dog hair that at first glance resembles a photograph of a distant planet. Looking at it, I simultaneously saw fur and a swirling dust storm on an alien world, making for a captivating image that binds the dual foci of the exhibit, Sirius the Dog Star and actual dogs on earth. Oliver's circular beacon also broadcasts music that he composed and performed on a dog-whistle, beyond the range most people can hear.



Dwarf. Demetrius Oliver, courtesy of the Print Center.

The dog-whistle expresses a central theme in *Canicular*: Our limited understanding of other natural phenomena, be they stars or the inner lives of dogs. The exhibition notes tell us the whistle-song is playing, but we do not hear it. Oliver did not install his Orrery at the Print Center, but presents video footage instead. Video is a sort of print and therefore in keeping with this venue, but feels somewhat dilute in this case. Sirius on the scrim is a complicated experience -- on the one hand, it is simply a spot of white light. On the other hand, we know we are looking at a live feed from a high-powered telescope trained on the brightest star in our sky. The night I visited, the star appeared to flare and burn. It turns out this was an interference effect of humidity and pollution, and that too is something to ponder.

Oliver seems to suggest that mediation is our only approach to the sublime in nature. The Dog Star is wondrous when viewed directly in the night sky, but how many urbanites in 2014 even know this star or can point it out? Today, we are more apt to view the cosmos on our computer screens, through images from the Hubble Telescope or the Mars Rover. Our laptops and televisions expand our vision but have a deadening effect on awe. We approach cosmological knowledge from a remove, and I wonder if the reason Oliver placed the bent metal in his photograph on Cepheus rather than Canis Major (the constellation which contains Sirius) is because Cepheus contains a "variable star", a subclass sometimes named for Beta Canis Majoris, which rises before Sirius at night. Beta Canis Majoris is a harbinger of the Dog Star, one step away.



Messier. Demetrius Oliver, courtesy of the Print Center.

Unlike many artists today who present simulacra as an academic commentary on alienation, Oliver's take is the opposite, more akin to Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalism. Like Emerson, Oliver has long been concerned with our relationship to the rest of the universe, for example in *Jupiter*, his public art on New York's Highline in 2010, or his exhibit *Observatory* at D'Amelio Terras in 2002. In both cases he created photographs that unite our terrestrial existence to the planets and to the act of looking itself. Looking has been the foundation of both astronomy and art for most of history and remains a key means of discovery despite current technologies, suggesting an interesting alliance between science, art, and aesthetic knowledge in general. In his essay: "The Over-soul, Emerson wrote," : "*We see the world piece by piece*, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are shining parts, is the soul," (italics added). Using various mediating approaches, Oliver unites the animal and the celestial and asks if we can find the sublime in the sun's reflection on the floor.

While the photographs in *Jupiter* and *Observatory* had great aesthetic power, Oliver largely eschews beauty in *Canicular*. The exhibition has conceptual authority, but what it offers the senses is attenuated to the point that it makes for a mixed experience. That may be part of Oliver's point. *Canicular* pushes back against grandiosity and entitlement: we cannot hear the dog-whistle, we do not really experience his orrery, we must crawl into his observatory, and the entire exhibition is open only for an hour per day, and then only if weather conditions permit the telescope an adequate view of Sirius. Nature confronts us with the boundaries of human knowledge and power while calling us to push further into these frontiers. Over centuries, our potential knowledge as a species is infinite. But in a single era or lifetime, what we can know is restricted. With *Canicular*, Oliver's gambit is the materialization of these possibilities and limits.

This review first appeared in Title Magazine on January 28, 2014

Art in America

May 2014

PHILADELPHIA
DEMETRIUS OLIVER
 The Print Center

New York-based Demetrius Oliver's exhibition "Canicular," which consisted of five newly commissioned installations and a single 2013 photograph, brought together two seemingly disparate subjects: the cosmos and dogs. Timed to coincide with the visibility of Sirius (the dog star), the show was open for only one hour each evening, weather permitting, rather than during normal business hours. Juxtaposing canine sensorial experience with imagery relating to the heavens, Oliver engaged viewers in an interesting push-and-pull, in which they oscillated between the physical conditions and subjugation experienced by dogs—creatures who live dependently on their human masters—and the freedom suggested by outer space.

Outside the Print Center, the visitor encountered *Dwarf*, which combined a barely detectable sound piece played on a dog whistle with a circular lightbox mounted to the institution's facade in lieu of the normal entrance sign. Both sides of the lightbox featured the same softly glowing photographic image of a swirling peach-colored pattern that approximated the fiery surface of a solar body but was actually a close-up of canine fur. Inside the first-floor gallery, *Deutan*, for which the artist replaced the white bulbs of the room's track lighting with 17 green floodlights and two infrared heat lamps, evoked the red-green color blindness of dogs. The eerie colored light of this installation leaked onto the street through the frosting applied to the gallery's storefront window and also suffused a sculptural work exhibited in the same room. This work, titled *Helio-metric*, resembled a telescope used to measure the distances between celestial bodies but was made of low-tech materials: an outdated Kodak slide carousel, a stack of 47 white plastic five-gallon buckets, and a steel armature that positioned the stack of buckets at a 25-degree angle. Crouching down to look through it, visitors saw not a telescopic picture of planets or stars but rather a photographic image of a generic wooden floor, which was projected onto a Foamcore disc lodged inside the bottom bucket. Thus, with this piece, visitors seeking a glimpse of the cosmos instead found themselves with a dog's-eye view of the world.



View of Demetrius Oliver's exhibition "Canicular," 2014; at the Print Center.

The work in the upstairs galleries departed from the canine theme but likewise conflated the macrocosmic and the microcosmic. In one room was *Messier*, a digital C-print that shows a bent paper clip sitting on a Messier star chart and mimicking the type of constellation structures diagrammed below it. The adjacent gallery displayed *Diurnal*, a row of eight 32-inch flat-screen monitors playing looped sequences of images of *Orrery* (2011), an abstract sculpture by Oliver that consists of everyday items—rolls of tape, magic markers, spools of thread—arranged on inverted umbrella frames suspended from the ceiling, the assortments appearing like galaxies and solar systems.

The show's title work was a white plywood circular chamber, measuring 12 feet tall by 11 feet in diameter. The Sirius star, captured via high-power telescope at the nearby Franklin Institute, was projected via live feed onto a diaphanous screen stretched overhead in this makeshift observatory. Forced to crawl on all fours through an oversize "dog door," the viewer, once inside, gained a glimpse of the brightest star of the Canis Major constellation. Here, as throughout the show, Oliver juxtaposed the lowly with the ethereal, stretching the viewer's imagination from the earthbound to the heavens.

—Jennie Hirsh

...might be good

Issue #187

Two Helpings Of The Future, Yes Please

April 6, 2012



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.

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JUPITER, PENUMBRA, PERIGREE AND MARE (SEA)

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."

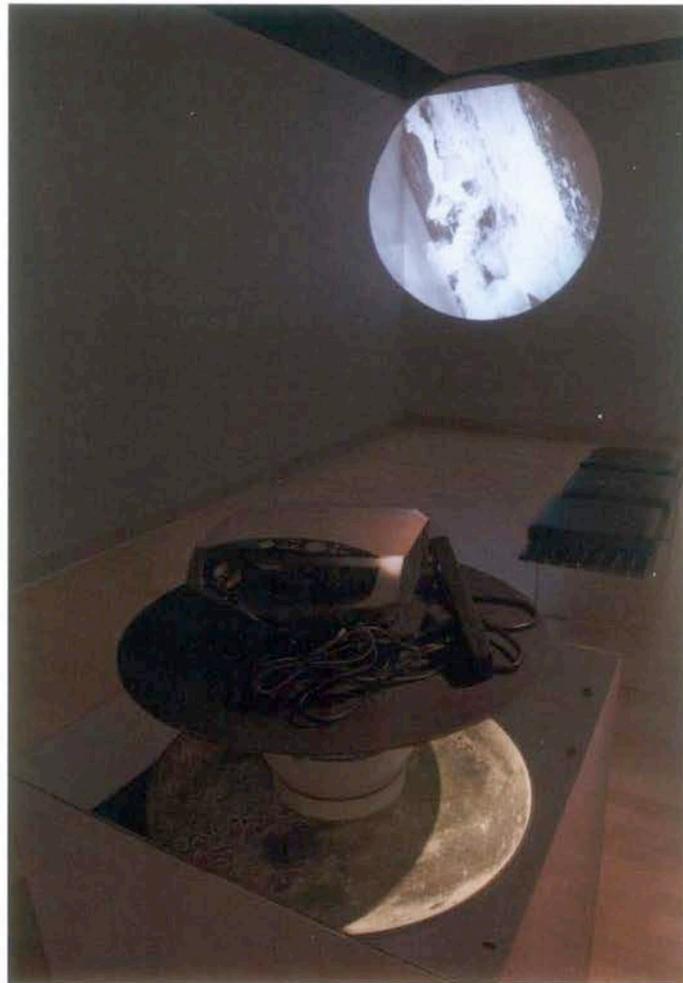
Jupiter, Einstein and Coltrane

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.

Demetrius Oliver: Jupiter

- Posted by artreview.com on September 17, 2010 at 2:48pm in [First View](#)
- [View Reviews](#)

By **Joshua Mack**

Take a moment, preferably after reading my post, since you probably won't return, to check out photographer Demetrius Oliver's [blog](#). With links to poems by Walt Whitman and news features – with gorgeous images – about planetary and lunar events and celestial light as a record of the deep past, it not only offers fascinating content, but suggests an intellect intrigued with, and humbled by, the universal order. It also goes a long way to elucidating the poetic intent of Jupiter, Oliver's first major public commission, and the latest in the High Line's series of artist projects, which opened last week.

As a bit of background for the uninitiated: the High Line is an elevated railroad spur running through Chelsea and the West Village which once carried freight and which, as a planted park (or as it actually functions, a corridor two stories above street level), has become a wildly successful tourist draw. Oliver (born 1975), slight, shy, brainy and refreshingly no-bullshit, has garnered attention of late for his evocative fish-eye views of interiors made from reflections, most often those on the surface of a metal teapot.

In the current case, five views of a bedroom in various stages of surrealist transformation – from a relatively straightforward shot of a lunar globe on a chair to images of a telescope and violin cases before darkened windows and furled umbrellas balanced at the edge of a bed – appear to rotate across a billboard next to and slightly below the High Line in a parking lot at West 18th Street. Shot at night in a time-worn prewar hotel in New Haven, the images have the dreamlike, time-capsule feel of mid-century TV reruns – the very idea of the past made present which characterises astronomical research and seems to fascinate the artist.



Photos: Jason Mandella. Courtesy Friends of the High Line, New York

Like those seen in telescopes, Oliver's images are traces of the past, events constructed by the artist and reflected off the shiny surface of a convex teapot. What he shows us is the residue of refracted light, just as the moon and planets appear to us in the glow of reflected sunlight. But while props like the lunar globe and the telescope in his vignettes allow such glancing, poetic connections, the inclusion of the violin cases – a reference to music and apparently the artist's interest in John Coltrane – and umbrellas seems forced and distracting.

Oliver's installation is timed to run for a full lunar cycle – his five images are meant to suggest the moon in its various phases – and will coincide with the fall equinox and the Jupiter opposition on 21 September. As supplemental programming, Friends of the High Line has planned a public viewing of the opposition with the New York chapter of the Amateur Astronomers Association; and in response to the artist's desire to add a musical component to the installation, students from the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music performed John Coltrane's *Jupiter Variation* (1967) on 7 September. Further performances are scheduled for the 18th and 21st of this month, and the 2nd of next.

On Tuesday the music was often overwhelmed by ambient noise, lending it an intense intimacy, as if the performance were an act of faith in art's redemptive power played out against a city which sucks its residents into cacophony and obliviousness. I suspect, especially given the broader context provided by the ancillary programming, that Oliver is striving to achieve a poetic synthesis akin to the reverie suggested by a line from Walt Whitman quoted on his blog: 'In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time./ Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars'

But his ability to create complex and evocative connections between images and performative media has yet to catch up with his fascination and search for meaning.

Demetrius Oliver's Jupiter is on view at the High Line, West 18th Street, New York, until 6 October

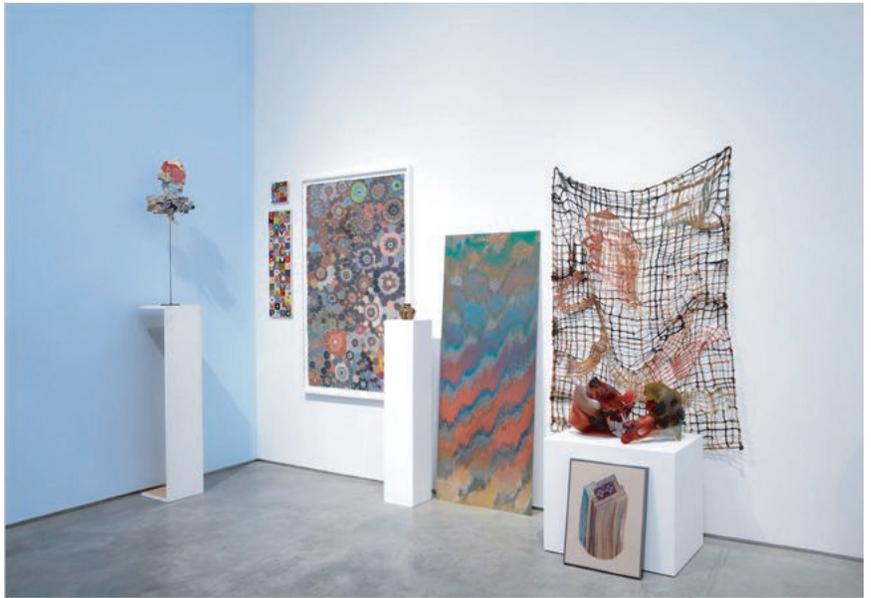
The New York Times

Art in Review

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

Published: July 2, 2009

'Your Gold Teeth II'

*Marianne Boesky Gallery**509 West 24th Street, Chelsea**Through Aug. 15*

“Your Gold Teeth II” is a smart and fantastically inclusive group show organized by the independent curator Todd Levin. It is named for a Steely Dan song, and its opening act, in rock concert terms, is a project show of Paula Hayes’s latest terrariums and plant holders. The resulting double-header might be titled “Living With Nature/Looking at Art.”

Ms. Hayes is a trained sculptor and gardener who has combined both interests in functional art for the last decade. Her latest terrariums are bigger than before and especially satisfying as sculpture. Their clear, thick-walled, hand-blown glass volumes are layered with contrasting striations of pebbles, terra-cotta beads, earth and finally plants; they enhance the wonder of plant life.

Some are small and lie on the floor, like very large bubbles. Others rise vertically to as much as four and a half feet, like smooth, abbreviated cactuses, with the plants nearly at eye level. For those lacking green thumbs, there are also terrariums filled with crystals of different sizes and colors.

On the gallery’s terrace Ms. Hayes has arranged a rather overwrought garden of worthwhile individual delights. There are paving stones made of recycled rubber and a birdbath of clear acrylic that looks like an icicle. Best of all are Ms. Hayes’s

planters. Those in soft silicone have a lopsided luminescence; others are made of sheets of thick rubber rendered useful by being either folded or outfitted with a drawstring. Like the glass terrariums these containers seem like life forms themselves.

In the main galleries Mr. Levin has assembled a visual rebus that deliberately ignores those increasingly irrelevant divides between art and craft, old and new, commercial and fine. The works are arranged in unusually tight clusters without labels; formal and visual affinities are established before you quite know what you're looking at. It's a great way to erode visual prejudice.

Mr. Levin matches up the browns in Barkley L. Hendricks's painting of a black woman with an enormous potlike sculpture by Peter Voulkos. He orchestrates a little meditation on spheres, holes and containers with works by Demetrius Oliver, Cady Noland, Roe Ethridge, Bruce Nauman, Peter Fischli & David Weiss, Paul Outerbridge and Ed Moulthrop, a master wood turner. Is that a see-through grid by Alan Shields next to the jacquardlike abstraction by Jay Heikes? No, it is by Ed Rossbach, who was a leading figure in fiber art. Elsewhere an unusually abstract drawing by James Castle is effectively paired with a geometric basket by John McQueen.

To a list of fairly usual suspects (Alighiero E. Boetti, Franz West, Sergej Jensen), Mr. Levin has added the pots of George Ohr, the evocative fiber pieces of Françoise Grossen and Diane Itter and the glass works of Marin Lipofsky and Toots Zynsky. He has also come up with marvelous things by David Hammons, Alexandra Bircken, Hannah Greely, Janis Avotins and Joseph Cornell. Again and again this show makes you stop, look close and think.

Nearly every juxtaposition reveals shared concerns and questions needless division. It's a very big and exciting art world out there, if it would ever get itself together. **ROBERTA SMITH**

Art Review | 'Frequency'

Where Issues of Black Identity Meet the Concerns of Every Artist

By **ROBERTA SMITH**

Published: November 18, 2005

Once upon a time, toward the middle of the 20th century, the Guggenheim, the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art regularly mounted theme shows and surveys of contemporary art. These days, only the Whitney, among New York's big museums, maintains the habit, most notably with its flawed but indispensable biennials.

The job of sorting through a moment that is astonishingly, if not dismayingly, thick with contemporary art has fallen to younger, suppler institutions. It rewards them with a vitality and relevance that larger museums are hard pressed to match. P.S. 1 has now mounted two "Greater New York" exhibitions, one in 2000, the other last spring. In 2002 and again in 2004, the Queens Museum of Art mounted shaky biennials of artists living in its borough. El Museo del Barrio has its "S-Files" shows. And without christening its efforts with a carry-over title, the Studio Museum in Harlem has opened "Frequency," its second survey in four years of young and emerging black artists living in the United States.

"Frequency" is not quite as strong as "Freestyle," its 2001 predecessor, which was also organized by Thelma Golden, the Studio Museum's director and chief curator, and Christine Y. Kim, its associate curator. Their exhibition brings together 35 artists, most born since 1970, who display varying degrees of accomplishment, promise or cluelessness. This may be par for the course with new-art surveys, and it's also part of their usefulness, especially to even younger artists who, because they are figuring out how to make their work, are the most important audience for shows like this.

Not surprisingly, "Frequency" suggests that black artists deal with black experience or identity in ways as numerous as themselves. Some make it the center of their work; for others, it is one aspect among many; for still others, it is beside the point, a buried subtext. The degree of explicitness has nothing to do with the quality.

This exhibition, for example, includes the young, enormously talented Kalup Linzy, who parlays black experience into a complex form of self-consciousness in the video "Conversations Wit de Churen III: Da Young and Da Mess." This ostensible soap opera fuses camp, scathing satire, minstrelsy and a real heart-rending narrative concerning gay lovers in what seems to be a small town into a bristling concoction, with the artist playing several roles.

But also on hand is a work by Michael Queenland, whose "Untitled (Radical Since 1774), No. 2" consists of a long, subtly altered encyclopedia entry about the brilliant mathematician who became the Unabomber; the text has been beautifully rewritten by hand. The Unabomber is referred to only as X, and his tale is illustrated by images of [Russell Crowe](#) as the schizophrenic mathematician John Nash in "A Beautiful Mind." This splinters the narrative in several directions at once, toward Malcolm X and Hollywood glamorization, while illuminating the tragic waste involved in any form of marginalization and exclusion.

And as might be expected, black experience can also be used superficially, without enough personal inflection or originality. Zoë Charlton's drawings add nothing to an imagery already well

developed by Kara Walker; Lester Julian Merriweather's cutout wallpaper suggests a craftsier, more down-home take on Arturo Herrera's cutout forms. Paula Wilson's multipaneled landscape painting-collage exudes ambition and mixed-media possibility, but neither escapes its academicism nor sheds new light on the black experience by adding a video image of a black arm breaking twigs off a tree branch. More promising and thought-through is Xaviera Simmons's color photograph of a black woman in a flowered robe standing in the middle of a wintry cornfield, but it never exceeds terms established by artists from Cindy Sherman to Katie Grannan.

Much of the work in "Frequency" tends to occupy two extremes: the fairly Conceptual, and the overtly physical or pictorial - that is, art that involves cameras of one kind or another and art that is densely, sometimes ostentatiously handmade and visually intense, if not oppressive.

The camera/Conceptual side of the aisle includes, in addition to Mr. Linzy's video, Michael Paul Britto's hilarious action-movie trailer "Dirrrty Harriet Tubman" and Hank Willis Thomas's video "Winter in America," made in collaboration with Kambui Olujimi, which uses action-figure dolls to recount a senseless murder, making the crime all the more shocking. In photography, Leslie Hewitt creates cryptic homages to childhood memory with a brightly symmetrical version of handmade photomontage, while Wardell Milan II builds convincingly (and digitally) on Martha Rosler's politicized use of the medium. Karyn Olivier's "Doubles" pairs a photograph of two old, neglected two-family dwellings that serendipitously resemble Gordon-Matta Clark's sawed-in-half house with a real wood seesaw that also implies the structures' slide into oblivion.

Demetrius Oliver adds to the history of body art, staged photography and subtle wordplay with images that are themselves like body blows. Mr. Oliver's "Till" commemorates one of the most notorious lynchings in the United States with an image of the artist's head slathered in ketchup, but also suggests the word "until," which is freighted with unfinished business.

The standouts in physical and pictorial density are Jeff Sonhouse's bristling, masked, mug-shot-like portrait, "Inauguration of the Solicitor," with its precisely deployed paint, collage and regimented matchsticks, and Nick Cave's heavily sequined, gorgeously patterned "Sound Suits." Covering the entire body, and culminating at the head in tall, shieldlike shapes, these amazing confections conjure quilts, disco-worthy finery, altars and a multicultural array of rituals and decorative motifs. They argue vociferously for clothing as an elaborately communicative text, a view echoed by two paintings from Mickalene Thomas's "Brawling Spitfire" series, in which women in rhinestone-studded garments grapple for dominance and sometimes resort to biting. And another kind of decorative density prevails in Shinique Amie Smith's imposing bale of brightly colored clothing, which invokes labor both forced and tender. Its careful organization makes it a kind of cubic quilt.

As Ms. Smith's work suggests, artists working with found objects and materials or pre-existing situations often split the difference between Conceptual spareness and physical opulence. Jefferson Pinder's "Carwash Meditations," a collaboration with Jeff Stein, shows a black man inside a car as it passes through a carwash; the radio blares angry, pulsing hip-hop while the colors and textures raging outside the windows reiterate the music's furious creativity in visual terms. Rashawn Griffin covers a low platform with bands of found fabric, creating an abstract portrait that is also a landscape (and that brings to mind Mike Kelley's early afghan pieces). Rodney McMillian makes a broken-down armchair eloquently evoke a work-worn body, near collapse, while Mike Cloud extracts images from a book called "African Ceremonies" and fashions them into handsome collages that wreak havoc with National Geographic orderliness but still pale in comparison with the cobbled-together figures of artists like Wangechi Mutu.

In surveying the work of these black artists, "Frequency" also indicates some of the challenges and options facing most artists today. Above all, it reflects the ways that issues of identity have become part of a larger mixture of concerns for black artists while reminding us that these preoccupations should be inherent in all art-making. Any art of lasting interest is a form of identity art that emanates from, and expresses the core of, the artist's personal and social being. The ability to get at this core is a necessity for art and a result of being free. After "Freestyle" and "Frequency," one looks forward to future exhibitions at the Studio Museum, including more whose titles may begin with that inspiring syllable.



The Blackness of Blackness

HUEY COPELAND ON "BLACK IS, BLACK AIN'T" AT THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY

AS EVER IN CHICAGO, there is no dearth of tragedy where racial politics are concerned: ongoing revelations about city hall's involvement in covering up police torture of black suspects; a recent 18 percent increase in the homicide rate that disproportionately affects black youth; and the threat of further black disenfranchisement for the sake of the 2016 Olympic bid. For the past several months, however, conversations about race in the Black Metropolis, as elsewhere in the United States, have turned to Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama. He too is a marked man, at once targeted for castration by Jesse Jackson and hailed by Ted Kennedy as a leader of messianic proportions. As I write, it seems inevitable that in the weeks to come, the hopes, epithets, and ire heaped upon him—be it in "celebrity" commercials or on "satirical" magazine covers—will only increase. Because for all of Obama's best efforts to be reasonable, the schizoid discourse around his candidacy gives further legs to an old adage of Frantz Fanon's: When blacks walk through the door, Reason walks out. (And, we might

Blackness continues to tell us something about what T. J. Clark has termed the "true structure of dream-visualization" as well as the forms of despotism on which it relies—not to mention the terms in which it might be contested.

add, the palpable phantasms of race, sex, and violence that are the legacy of slavery swoop in to take its place.) For some folks, the responses to the Illinois senator's exceptional rise have underscored the continuing grip of antiblack sentiment on the organizing structures of American life. For others, his nomination sums up a shift, however provisional and symbolic,

in previously held attitudes toward race within the culture at large.

As *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter argued this past March in a reflection on the past few decades of African-American art seen through the lens of Obama's "color-blind, or color-embracing" dream, the art world is also of several minds. Race has become a productive if persistently problematic subject for artists of various inclinations, raising questions that come thick and fast. What does blackness mean now, in the wake of multiculturalism? Are there particular formal vocabularies and stylistic antecedents that currently matter to its articulation in the visual field? Is it possible to make sense of the radically divergent discourses of race evoked by, say, Martin Puryear's recent retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the concurrent run of the late artist Jason Rhoades's final installation, *Black Pussy*, 2006, at David Zwirner's Chelsea gallery? Given the exhibition spaces from Watts to Warsaw that make some claim on, or at least some use of, black visual culture, how might we begin to analyze the competing investments that currently inform the imaging of blackness on either side of the color line? What is the critical purchase of any racial signifier in an age when a white politician from Tennessee spearheads a congressional apology for slavery and when Bill Cosby has made it clear that for many class has trumped race as the prime site of social schism?

A much-needed map of this uncertain terrain was on view this past summer right in Obama's backyard. Borrowing its title from the famous sermon in the prologue to Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, the exhibition "Black Is, Black Ain't"—elegantly mounted



Glenn Ligon, *Warm Broad Glow*, 2005, neon, paint. Installation view, Renaissance Society, Chicago, 2008.

at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, and traveling to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit next spring and to the H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute, Missouri, in the summer of 2009—is intended to survey, in the words of curator Hamza Walker, "a moment in which race is retained yet is simultaneously rejected." To trace the contours of that moment, Walker called upon a multi-racial roster of twenty-seven artists, whose individual contributions are by turns sly, disturbing, melancholic, and humorous, sometimes all at once. They range from Andres Serrano's *Woman with Infant* of 1996, a photograph that signifies on the role of black women in the nourishment of white children, to Sze Lin Pang's *Fétichito* of 2006, a dark, lumpy mass decked out with charms, peacock feathers, and Afro picks for extra talismanic punch. The different histories of blackness and relations of power summoned up in each instance make clear that the works gathered in "Black Is, Black Ain't" resist any singular program, thereby affirming

SLANT



From top: Mickalene Thomas, *Lovely Six Foota*, 2007, color photograph, 65 1/4 x 67 1/4". Dave McKenzie, *Babel*, 2000, Performance view, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, November 14, 2007. Photo: Elizabeth Proitsis.

the willingness of contemporary practitioners to imagine how what Fanon called "the fact of blackness" might open onto a wild array of aesthetic conceits. It was fitting, then, that in Chicago Glenn Ligon's 2005 neon sculpture *Warm Broad Glow* graced the entrance to the gallery, for in its rendition of the words NEGRO SUNSHINE—culled from Gertrude Stein's 1909 novella *Melanchtha*—the work models a wry attitude toward the historicity of blackness as well as a complex imbrication

of artistic discourse, racial politics, and cultural memory that "Black Is, Black Ain't" makes its own.

Such an ambition for art is, of course, at least as old as Ellison's text, though in this case we need not go back so far: The earliest work in the exhibition, a video of Shannon Jackson's autocritical performance *White Noises*, 1993, gives us a clear date of

departure. Not unlike several exhibitions from that moment which took up related thematics, such as "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art" in New York in 1994, at the Whitney, and "Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference, and Desire" at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and Iniva in London in 1995, "Black Is, Black Ain't" takes the ambivalent play of the sign as central to the visual articulation of race, perhaps the most intransigent of social constructions. In the "post-black" present, the game seems to have loosened up: For artists today, blackness is not only globally commodified and affectively charged, but also an always already deconstructed and culturally networked cipher, providing the basis for a lingua franca that anyone can mobilize, whether to "capsiz[e] the niggerati" (as in the title of Deborah Grant's witty collages on view here) or "to think things you don't want to" about black men, which, in a sense, is precisely what happens in Joanna Rytel's thus-titled 2005 video, whose Swedish narrator appears caught up in the web of fantasies that structures her interracial relations.

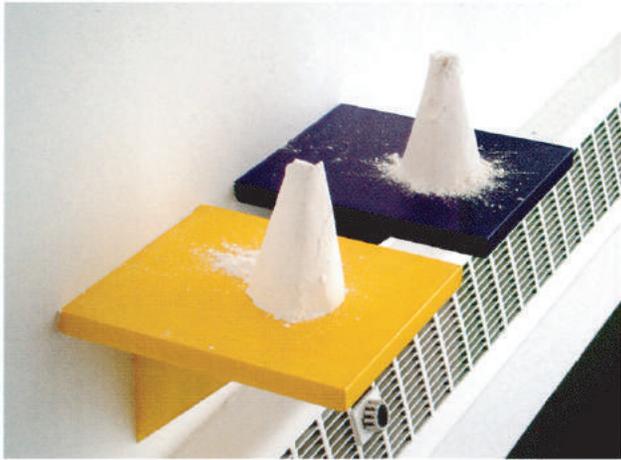
The shifts within artistic discourse that have recently taken place are made clearer by comparing "Black Is, Black Ain't" with two older works that were crucial to the 1990s redefinition of black identity and that took Ellison's same words for their titles: Marlon Riggs's semiautobiographical 1995 film and Isaac Julien's 1992 essay, subtitled "Notes on De-Essentializing Black Identities." Both works invoked the eponymous phrase to debunk stereotypes of black masculinity, to pointedly critique the homophobia of contemporary popular culture, and to carve out an expansive terrain for the imagining of queer African

diasporic subjectivities. In Riggs's film, embracing the diversity within blackness is cast as the only way to forward "our progress as a people." In Walker's exhibition, there is no such heartfelt sentiment, less faith in a communitarian ethos, and little overt figuration of queer subjectivity—though illicit difference still matters: Indeed, it seems to be taken for granted, or taken in another direction. Consider the kind of desiring gaze directed at a seated and retro-clad woman in Mickalene Thomas's 2007 photograph *Lovely Six Foota* or the variations evident between thirteen street artists' renderings of one woman in Virginia Nimarkoh's *Nubian Queen*, 1999.

Nimarkoh's artistic strategy—the accumulation of images in order to emphasize the differential visual production of a single black subject—is also one of Walker's key curatorial moves, perhaps most strikingly in the juxtaposition of two photographs centered around Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black Chicagoan on summer vacation in Mississippi who was brutally murdered by white racists in 1955, ostensibly for whistling at a white woman. The criminal investigation of this notorious case has sputtered along for a half century, but the photographs of Till's disfigured body that circulated in *Jet* magazine not only spurred on the civil rights movement but also supplied a lasting image of racial violence in all of its caprice and ubiquity that has been internalized by countless black boys born after his death. In *Till*, 2004, Demetrius Oliver—black—at once reenacts and exorcises that image by capturing his own face slathered with chocolate frosting. Jason Lazarus—white—seems to say it all in the title of his photograph: *Standing at the Grave of Emmett Till, Day of Exhumation, June 1, 2005 (Alsip, IL)*.

This pairing would appear—despite calls by some thinkers for African-American politics to move beyond black and white—to assert the relevance of the binary that continues to structure the racial imaginary. While the formal and affective differences that separate Lazarus's work from Oliver's might be partially attributed to the artists' respective identities, in working through Till's legacy, they each underline the ongoing necessity of artistic attempts to find a language capable of describing individual investments that acknowledge—without capitulating to—a racial

SLANT



From top: William Pope.L, *One Substance, Eight Supports, One Situation* (detail), 2008, eight pine shelves of differing colors, flour, dimensions variable. William Pope.L, *A Negro Sleeps Beneath the Susquehanna* (son version), 1998–2008, still from a color video, 12 minutes.

endgame. This concern is particularly prominent in the exhibition's video program, which models a host of possibilities for engagement. You might give in to what Rosalind Krauss long ago called video's "aesthetics of narcissism," repetitively confessing your white straight male obsession with "what a black man feels like," as in Thomas Johnson's 2004 piece of that name. You might follow Elizabeth Axtman's lead in *American Classics*, 2005, performing a hilarious "re-speaking" of the words Hollywood cinema has put into the mouths of its "tragic mulattoes." Or you could try Dave McKenzie's tack, in *Babel*, 2000, using sign language to communicate your attempt at communicating, with a microphone in your mouth and (in the version on display here) its cord snaking around your throat.

For these practitioners, the issue is less, What does it mean to be black? and more, What can I make out of blackness? As their works attest, in "Black Is, Black Ain't" the logic of race and the terms of recent artistic

production are mutually undone, recasting the look of blackness, if not its enduring political, cultural, and ontological coordinates. The transatlantic slave trade, the commodification of black bodies, the persistence of racial stereotypes, the loss and failure of black leadership, the collapse of public housing: All of these topoi are figured here, in compelling works by Edgar

Arceneaux, Terry Adkins, Paul D'Amato, Todd Gray, David Levinthal, Jerome Mosley, Carl Pope, Robert A. Pruitt, Randy Regier, Daniel Roth, and Hank Willis Thomas. Other realities that also matter to the evolving contours of race in America—music as a site of resistance, the black presence within suburban milieus, and the growing visibility of African immigrant populations, for example—have a more muted presence in the exhibition. This no doubt speaks to the near impossibility of canvassing the long reach of blackness, yet it also clarifies the thrust of the exhibition's brilliantly orchestrated sight lines, such as the juxtaposition of Rodney McMillian's sculpture *Chair*, 2003, and Jonathan Calm's 2008 photographs of apartment buildings reflected in pools of water, which created a rhyming of the run-down and runoff that left race somewhere up in the air between them. As Walker's loosely defined organizing categories—disfiguration, whiteness, stereotype, class, gendered performance, soul, history—indicate, "Black Is, Black Ain't" brings forward those sites of institutional and ideological formation that are most reiterated, most legible, and thus, paradoxically, most readily made over into varied aesthetic forms that hold out the possibility that we might, to quote another Ellison text, "change the joke and slip the yoke."

Numerous works in the exhibition pursue this time-tested strategy, though perhaps none more trenchantly than those of William Pope.L, who is represented by a set of eight flour-cone sculptures and twenty of his *Skin Set Drawings*, 2003–2006, which parody the tautology of racial reasoning with phrases such as **BLACK PEOPLE ARE CROSSOVER**. Most mesmerizing is his twelve-minute video titled *A Negro Sleeps*

Beneath the Susquehanna (son version), 1998–2008. Playing the part of the eponymous Negro, Pope.L sits on a stool near a riverbank, his face immersed in a flour-covered table before he raises his head and begins to speak. It appears he has been having trouble sleeping. "I wish I could—dream stuff," he goes on to remark, "like that guy—what's his name? Martin—Luther—King... Fisher! I wish I could love something that much—I wish I could love something—But all I got—is the crawfish and the minnow. I wish I could love something that much, but—I'm too black—too naked." After concluding his pronouncement, he throws a cracked mirror on his back and wanders into the river, presumably in a renewed attempt to sleep—a gesture that brings to mind another line from Ellison's prologue to *Invisible Man*: "A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action."

Like Pope.L's video piece, "Black Is, Black Ain't" plumbs the possibilities for thinking *with* rather than *beyond* race—its figures, tropes, and trademark forms—possibilities that all too rarely emerge in the realm of politics proper. For if only as a free-floating trace unmoored from individual subjects, an index of the economies that continue to conflate persons and things, or the corroded linchpin of a modern metaphysics, blackness continues to tell us something about what T. J. Clark has termed the "true *structure* of dream-visualization" as well as the forms of despotism on which it relies—not to mention the terms in which it might be contested. Walker's deft curating encourages us to wonder what we might make of blackness if we took it to be a social formation given over to the marginal, the object, the fugitive, or the socially dead. What would it mean to imagine a utopian future other than a postracial one? The challenge, here as elsewhere, remains how to hold on to what cultural historian Robin D. G. Kelley calls "freedom dreams," which allow us to rethink the world from blackness up. For the time being, it seems that Obama is the closest we will get—and change, no matter how much you believe in it, is obviously worthwhile given the current regime—but he should not prevent us from having other dreams or even from making the most of a fitful sleep. □

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The New York Times

Art Review | 'Frequency'

Where Issues of Black Identity Meet the Concerns of Every Artist

By **ROBERTA SMITH**

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Once upon a time, toward the middle of the 20th century, the Guggenheim, the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art regularly mounted theme shows and surveys of contemporary art. These days, only the Whitney, among New York's big museums, maintains the habit, most notably with its flawed but indispensable biennials.

The job of sorting through a moment that is astonishingly, if not dismayingly, thick with contemporary art has fallen to younger, suppler institutions. It rewards them with a vitality and relevance that larger museums are hard pressed to match. P.S. 1 has now mounted two "Greater New York" exhibitions, one in 2000, the other last spring. In 2002 and again in 2004, the Queens Museum of Art mounted shaky biennials of artists living in its borough. El Museo del Barrio has its "S-Files" shows. And without christening its efforts with a carry-over title, the Studio Museum in Harlem has opened "Frequency," its second survey in four years of young and emerging black artists living in the United States.

"Frequency" is not quite as strong as "Freestyle," its 2001 predecessor, which was also organized by Thelma Golden, the Studio Museum's director and chief curator, and Christine Y. Kim, its associate curator. Their exhibition brings together 35 artists, most born since 1970, who display varying degrees of accomplishment, promise or cluelessness. This may be par for the course with new-art surveys, and it's also part of their usefulness, especially to even younger artists who, because they are figuring out how to make their work, are the most important audience for shows like this.

Not surprisingly, "Frequency" suggests that black artists deal with black experience or identity in ways as numerous as themselves. Some make it the center of their work; for others, it is one aspect among many; for still others, it is beside the point, a buried subtext. The degree of explicitness has nothing to do with the quality.

This exhibition, for example, includes the young, enormously talented Kalup Linzy, who parlays black experience into a complex form of self-consciousness in the video "Conversations Wit de Churen III: Da Young and Da Mess." This ostensible soap opera fuses camp, scathing satire, minstrelsy and a real heart-rending narrative concerning gay lovers in what seems to be a small town into a bristling concoction, with the artist playing several roles.

But also on hand is a work by Michael Queenland, whose "Untitled (Radical Since 1774), No. 2" consists of a long, subtly altered encyclopedia entry about the brilliant mathematician who became the Unabomber; the text has been beautifully rewritten by hand. The Unabomber is referred to only as X, and his tale is illustrated by images of [Russell Crowe](#) as the schizophrenic mathematician John Nash in "A Beautiful Mind." This splinters the narrative in several directions at once, toward Malcolm X and Hollywood glamorization, while illuminating the tragic waste involved in any form of marginalization and exclusion.

And as might be expected, black experience can also be used superficially, without enough personal inflection or originality. Zoë Charlton's drawings add nothing to an imagery already well developed by Kara Walker; Lester Julian Merriweather's cutout wallpaper suggests a craftsier,

more down-home take on Arturo Herrera's cutout forms. Paula Wilson's multipaneled landscape painting-collage exudes ambition and mixed-media possibility, but neither escapes its academicism nor sheds new light on the black experience by adding a video image of a black arm breaking twigs off a tree branch. More promising and thought-through is Xaviera Simmons's color photograph of a black woman in a flowered robe standing in the middle of a wintry cornfield, but it never exceeds terms established by artists from Cindy Sherman to Katie Grannan.

Much of the work in "Frequency" tends to occupy two extremes: the fairly Conceptual, and the overtly physical or pictorial - that is, art that involves cameras of one kind or another and art that is densely, sometimes ostentatiously handmade and visually intense, if not oppressive.

The camera/Conceptual side of the aisle includes, in addition to Mr. Linzy's video, Michael Paul Britto's hilarious action-movie trailer "Dirrrty Harriet Tubman" and Hank Willis Thomas's video "Winter in America," made in collaboration with Kambui Olujimi, which uses action-figure dolls to recount a senseless murder, making the crime all the more shocking. In photography, Leslie Hewitt creates cryptic homages to childhood memory with a brightly symmetrical version of handmade photomontage, while Wardell Milan II builds convincingly (and digitally) on Martha Rosler's politicized use of the medium. Karyn Olivier's "Doubles" pairs a photograph of two old, neglected two-family dwellings that serendipitously resemble Gordon-Matta Clark's sawed-in-half house with a real wood seesaw that also implies the structures' slide into oblivion.

Demetrius Oliver adds to the history of body art, staged photography and subtle wordplay with images that are themselves like body blows. Mr. Oliver's "Till" commemorates one of the most notorious lynchings in the United States with an image of the artist's head slathered in ketchup, but also suggests the word "until," which is freighted with unfinished business.

The standouts in physical and pictorial density are Jeff Sonhouse's bristling, masked, mug-shot-like portrait, "Inauguration of the Solicitor," with its precisely deployed paint, collage and regimented matchsticks, and Nick Cave's heavily sequined, gorgeously patterned "Sound Suits." Covering the entire body, and culminating at the head in tall, shieldlike shapes, these amazing confections conjure quilts, disco-worthy finery, altars and a multicultural array of rituals and decorative motifs. They argue vociferously for clothing as an elaborately communicative text, a view echoed by two paintings from Mickalene Thomas's "Brawling Spitfire" series, in which women in rhinestone-studded garments grapple for dominance and sometimes resort to biting. And another kind of decorative density prevails in Shinique Amie Smith's imposing bale of brightly colored clothing, which invokes labor both forced and tender. Its careful organization makes it a kind of cubic quilt.

As Ms. Smith's work suggests, artists working with found objects and materials or pre-existing situations often split the difference between Conceptual spareness and physical opulence. Jefferson Pinder's "Carwash Meditations," a collaboration with Jeff Stein, shows a black man inside a car as it passes through a carwash; the radio blares angry, pulsing hip-hop while the colors and textures raging outside the windows reiterate the music's furious creativity in visual terms. Rashawn Griffin covers a low platform with bands of found fabric, creating an abstract portrait that is also a landscape (and that brings to mind Mike Kelley's early afghan pieces). Rodney McMillian makes a broken-down armchair eloquently evoke a work-worn body, near collapse, while Mike Cloud extracts images from a book called "African Ceremonies" and fashions them into handsome collages that wreak havoc with National Geographic orderliness but still pale in comparison with the cobbled-together figures of artists like Wangechi Mutu.

In surveying the work of these black artists, "Frequency" also indicates some of the challenges and options facing most artists today. Above all, it reflects the ways that issues of identity have become part of a larger mixture of concerns for black artists while reminding us that these preoccupations should be inherent in all art-making. Any art of lasting interest is a form of identity art that emanates from, and expresses the core of, the artist's personal and social being. The ability to get at this core is a necessity for art and a result of being free. After "Freestyle" and "Frequency," one looks forward to future exhibitions at the Studio Museum, including more whose titles may begin with that inspiring syllable.