

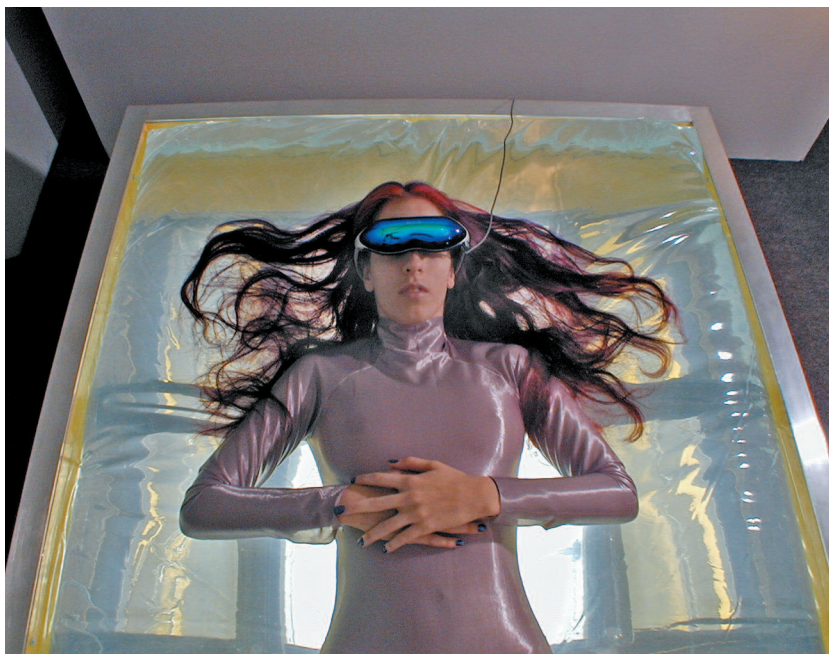


This past June, a structure that looked like a gift from outer space citizens appeared on the grounds of Music Midtown in Atlanta. Extending through the trees and up the hillside, *UV Hydrocarbon* evoked a gigantic Tinkertoy manipulated to form a series of pyramids. Outfitted with both ultraviolet lights and a misting system, the piece was enveloped in a foggy mist by day, and it pulsed and glowed by night. A glowing neon-green stream tumbled down the hill in plastic-lined beds, collecting in a pool. Designed to adapt to any environment, *UV Hydrocarbon* can be disassembled and re-assembled elsewhere, always in relationship to its host terrain. The work's structure reflects that of its namesake molecules, ubiquitous units that are found in all sorts of useful things, such as fossil fuels, biofuels, plastics, waxes, solvents, and oils. Hydrocarbons are also a major component of most urban pollution—hence the “toxic” green goo trickling down the hillside. A gigantic hydrocarbon, however, Oliveri's piece certainly isn't. Rather, it is a structure made primarily of acrylic tubing that looks as though it were straight out of a Hollywood set or Universal Studio theme park ride. *UV Hydrocarbon* relies on the same sort of fetishistic attraction as these patently fake constructions—a “fakeness” so ostentatiously exaggerated that it becomes better than the mundane reality it purportedly illustrates.

WEIRD SCIENCE

Michael Oliveri's Cosmic Laboratories

TEXT / JENNIE KLEIN



“Michael Oliveri makes some weird science,” a flummoxed Catherine Fox noted at the beginning of a review.¹ Oliveri’s brand of science is culled from the Internet—as he put it, the “myriad competing and contradictory narratives that exist simultaneously on the Internet and form a separate discourse.”² Oliveri, who loves the bizarre and virtually unchecked scientific discourse that propagates online, often begins research for his work there, rather than in the library at the University of Georgia where he is Chair of the Digital Media department. When Umberto Eco celebrated the hyperreal aesthetic and Baudrillard lamented the precession of simulacra, neither writer had envisioned the Internet, the dystopic realization of Baudrillard’s most paranoid fantasies.³ The Internet is the ultimate equalizer—a plethora of credible and dubious information that makes it impossible to distinguish where, if anywhere, the kernel of truth might be hidden. The strength of Oliveri’s work lies in its playful refusal to acknowledge that kernel of truth we so desperately desire—even as we are told, pace post-modern theory, that there is no inherent truth or master narrative.

Raised and educated in the Los Angeles that embraced Paul Schimmel’s *Helter Skelter*, an iconoclastic exhibition of works by L.A. artists held at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in 1992, and the San Francisco based publications of *Re/Search*, a series edited by V. Vale and Andrea Juno that included a book devoted to pranks, Oliveri’s work is infused with subtle and not so subtle humor. For his M.F.A. show at the Crossing Gallery in Los Angeles in 1994, Oliveri staged *El Pollo Doh Loco*, a play on the name of a popular pseudo-Mexican fastfood restaurant. Oliveri transformed the two-story gallery into an ACME-like factory. Live chickens, feathers dyed in pastel hues, pecked happily on the gallery floor as Oliveri and four workers—hired that very night in front of Home Depot—aggressively shot dead chickens, purchased in a supermarket, against a bullet-proof glass wall. They were then placed in a rotating bucket, which led them to a large mixer. Simultaneously, colored plaster oozed out into a “Play-Doh” container—a cartoonish transformation of chicken meat into children’s toy. In *El Pollo Doh Loco*, Oliveri was making an inside joke about his expensive art school education—years of hard work and a M.F.A. produced cartoons and modeling clay, a simple mixture of flour, water, and salt. Ironically, *El Pollo Doh Loco* turned out to be Oliveri’s most controversial installation, as viewers assumed that he was killing live chickens, shooting their carcasses against the wall, and then grinding them up to make a nauseating playdoh. As the dead chickens smacked against the glass, the hyperreality of the cartoon factory replaced the banal reality of the non-toxic plaster doh.

By 2004, Oliveri had turned his attention to hydrocarbons, which he explored in the solo exhibition *Fast Food, Hydrocarbons, and Waves in Outer Space* at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, also inspired by his interests in surfing, sailing, horticulture, Fullerenes (a kind of hydrocarbon), and cosmic waves. *Nasa Nourishment* was a laboratory of hydroponic towers created to grow tomato plants from seeds that had traveled in outer space. *Spaceship Earth* was a transparent waterbed balanced in what

looked like a satellite dish referencing the “WMAP” NASA satellite probe that instigated the recent theory of a finite universe, coupled with a video projection of a wave in slow motion (*Cosmic Microwave Background*). For *Hydrocarbon Neon*, Oliveri placed glass sculptures of Fullerenes, a type of carbon molecule first discovered in the mid-1980s and now understood to have been around for billions of years, onto Styrofoam landscapes designed from photographs of the 2003 Mars expedition.

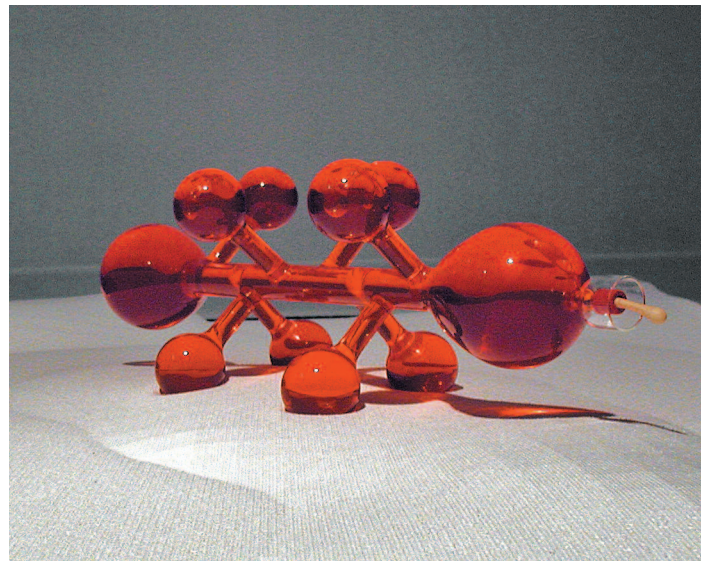
The science was esoteric, but the installation was not. As Catherine Fox suggested, the installation “looks like something you’d find at Epcot.” Indeed, Oliveri’s three installations have much in common with that pseudo-scientific tourist destination located in nearby Orlando, where popular culture and science collide. The “educational” half of Disney World, Epcot Center is premised upon the same hyperreality that has made Disney World such a Mecca for American tourists. Oliveri delights in playing with the codes of the hyperreal, in exploring the intersection between hard science and media culture in America.

The difference between Oliveri’s installations and the displays at Epcot is that the thread between objective, scientific reality and visual display, tenuously if sometimes fictitiously maintained at Epcot, has been completely severed by Oliveri, who blithely mixes post-minimal sculpture with up-to-the-minute scientific images, Mylar-clad walls with tomato plants from NASA, and surfers with a plastic waterbed. Unlike artists who turn to science and mathematics in order to explore metaphysical truths or aesthetic principles, Oliveri uses science and good design—he was also commissioned to design an educational children’s exhibit for the Mary Brogan Museum of Art and Science in Tallahassee, Florida—in order to play with science’s strangeness. Having worked for several years in the entertainment industry (including a stint for Disney), Oliveri clearly takes a great deal of delight in realizing these quirky juxtapositions, and that delight is contagious. Profundity is always combined with the whimsical, and sometimes the ridiculous.

NOTES

1. Catherine Fox, “Exhibition Review—Summer Solos 2004,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 4, 2004.
2. Michael Oliveri, interview with author, September 23, 2005.
3. Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” *Art and Text* 11 (September 1983): 3-47, and Umberto Eco, “Travels in Hyperreality,” first published in 1976, excerpted in *American Cultural Studies: A Reader*, edited by John Hartley and Roberta E. Pearson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 110.

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MICHAEL OLIVERI is currently working on a large-scale ultraviolet interior landscape with glowing fluorescent streams, ponds, live insects, and parakeets in which all the flora and fauna have natural UV effects. It is an addition to the *UV Hydrocarbon* installation recently exhibited at Music Midtown in Atlanta, and reconfigured as part of *Switch*, a group show on view at Eyedrum, in Atlanta from October 1 to November 5, 2005. Michael Oliveri is Chair of Digital Media at the University of Georgia in Athens.

Inside front cover, top: Michael Oliveri, view of *Hydrocarbon*, 2004, glass, Styrofoam, water; Styrofoam platform: 40 x 90 x 4 inches; glass sculpture: 16 x 16 x 16 inches / page 19: Michael Oliveri, *UV Hydrocarbon*, 2005, installation, dimensions variable; 14 pyramids: 6 x 6 x 6 feet each; Ultra Violet green stream: 42 x 3 feet / opposite, top to bottom: Michael Oliveri, view of *Nasa Nourishment*, 2004, installation, dimensions variable; hydroponic towers: 28 x 28 x 108 inches each; neon hexapanel lights on the floor: 28 x 28 x 2 inches each; Michael Oliveri, view of *10 minute Tac-Tic*, 2000, DVD and player, digital video, Sony Glastron video glasses, wood, steel, vinyl, and water, 24 x 48 x 76 inches / this page, top to bottom: Michael Oliveri, view of *Hydrocarbon*, 2004, glass, Styrofoam, orange antifreeze, and water; Styrofoam platform: 40 x 90 x 4 inches; glass sculpture: 9 x 9 x 27 inches; Michael Oliveri, view of *Nasa Nourishment*, 2004, installation, dimensions variable; hydroponic towers: 28 x 28 x 108 inches each; neon hexapanel lights on the floor: 28 x 28 x 2 inches each [all images courtesy of the artist]