

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

Joe Winter

THE KITCHEN

You raise your hand in your intro-to-astronomy class. “Do the galaxies and nebulae *really* look as psychedelic as the posters on the walls? How do they know, if these are all radio telescope pictures anyway, that galaxies are color-saturated swirls of cotton candy?” The TA shrugs. “They assign colors to the images afterward.” “Arbitrarily?” you ask, choking back the word *luridly*. He nods. Suddenly you lose major respect for the whole field of astronomy. Who *are* these people determining colors? Do they have, like, staff colorists at the lab? Do they know about Delacroix, about Cézanne, about Albers . . . ? No doubt it’s amateur hour over there, not a trained artist or art historian in the lot. You feel betrayed.

Coming to the rescue of disillusioned art students everywhere—those weirded out by the trippy decor of their basement Astro 101 classrooms—is Joe Winter, who thinks anew about conventions of display in science, finding that subjectivity haunts both the presentation and the perception of ostensibly objective scientific information. In *The Stars Below*, 2011, Winter creates an environment based on a science classroom, complete with a grid of white drop-ceiling panels and fluorescent lights suspended over tables made from slate repurposed from old schoolhouse chalkboards from eastern Ohio. The installation bears another hallmarks of educational spaces in our era of budget slashing: The ceiling leaks. Drips of water fall upon sticks of white chalk stuck vertically to the slate tables like tiny towers. As the droplets fall, they dissolve the chalk cylinders, leaving white residue on the tables in dusty splashes. The work’s title evokes imaginative projections on the part of this classroom’s now-absent students, of their daydreams of far-flung constellations and nebulae in chalk dust. The slow erosion of the chalk also speaks to a kind of geological time, in which classroom boredom is measured not in minutes but what can feel like decades or even millennia, as a student imagines a chalkboard covered in data gradually becoming a mess of illegibility.

Adjacent to this work is another fixture of the science classroom—the sliding dry-erase panels of the lecture hall here on freestanding aluminum track. Though often covered with calculations and equations, in the case of Winter’s *A Record of Events (II)*, 2011, the panels are almost entirely obscured, front and back, with black dry-eraser marks, leaving but a few streaks of white. Walter Benjamin claimed in 1917 that the essential condition of drawing, unlike painting, was that its lines must be defined against a background with a judicious use of

contrast. “A drawing that completely covered its ground,” he wrote, “would cease to be a drawing.” Yet when drawings partake in excess mark-making, becoming murky and indistinct and eventually covered over completely, they turn into new backgrounds upon which to put contrasting marks. In Winter’s case, the obscurity feels symbolic—who has not glanced at an excited professor’s palimpsest of scribbles creeping steadily over the surface of a whiteboard and had the panicky thought, “My God, I’ll never be able to follow this endless gibberish”—as well as pictorial, representing deep space with washes of light and the gloom of vast distances. What appears to be a record of *scientific* events is in fact the record of aesthetic events. Winter evokes the ways in which scientific “evidence” is necessarily produced and received through subjective perception, which can efface, manipulate, or masquerade even as it tries to explicate.

—Eva Díaz



View of “Joe Winter,” 2011. Foreground: *A Record of Events (II)*, 2011. Middle ground: *The Stars Below*, 2011. Back wall: *Untitled Model for a History of Light (Void)*, 2010