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ARTFORUM

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'Lounge,' 2011, Ink Jet Print, 48 x 60"

David Hartt: *Stray Light* at the Studio Museum in Harlem

By Eva Diaz

Until recently, the Johnson Publishing Company (JPC) was headquartered in the first skyscraper in Chicago owned and designed by African Americans. The firm was home to a suite of ventures: *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines, the now-defunct journals *Copper Romance*, *Hue* and *Tan*, and *Fashion Flair*, a line of cosmetics for women of color. At the time of its sale in 2010, the building was also a relic of a rather ostentatious kind of early 1970's décor. Shortly before the property changed hands, artist David Hartt photographed and filmed at the site, capturing the rhythms of work in this unique environment, as well as the unmistakable signs of decline in the field of print publishing.

That this slide into financial difficulty and possible obsolescence took place in a veritable time capsule of Afrocentric pride and opulence makes the frail fortunes of the JPC enterprise all the more poignant. Hartt's images, assembled here in an exhibition titled "Stray Light", and particularly his video installation of the same name, focus on small details in the space that convey the complex nature of JPC: a black entrepreneurial endeavor packaging aspirational glamour as a political project.

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Hartt's video, some twelve minutes long, was projected in a setting that evokes the Johnson building: a room carpeted with a hexagonal-patterned rug in period orange, tan and brown hues that the artist designed, upon which sits a vintage early '70s custom-painted bench. Leaning against the wall near the bench was a sculpture composed of a horizontal sheet of brown transparent Plexiglas with elliptical cutouts that mimic JPC interior designer Author Elrod's style, paired with an orange-red lattice reminiscent of the exterior of the eleven-story Michigan Avenue building. In unhurried, fixed camera shots, Hartt studies, for example, a nook of the "Award Room" replete with grip-and-grin photos of company founder John H. Johnson with President Kennedy, the Reverend Billy Graham, and other luminaries. Such evidence of the glory days of JPC contrasts somewhat unflatteringly with Hartt's footage of the once lavish street-level lobby and reception, whose slightly worse-for-wear furniture brings to mind the jostle of crowds, yet at the time of filming is seen in a state of near disuse.

In Hartt's still photographs, layers of history produce uneasy palimpsests. In one work, Hartt crops an August 2010 issue of *Jet* so that more than three-quarters of his shot depicts the café-con-leche-toned fabric wallpaper around the magazine's cover. The enveloping monochrome of the period-brown backdrop makes the glossy publication, issue refer to a past that seems roughly contemporary with the wallpaper: the main article cover line is "Janelle Monae: This Generation's James Brown?"

Glare appearing on the magazine's glossy cover seems to refer back to Hartt's own title for the project-stray light-which, in photographic lingo, is light that was not intended in the composition. As print publications face shrinking markets in the twenty-first century, questions been raised whether the erosion of audiences for niche race publications is due in part to the increasing prominence of people of all color in politics and in the culture industry. But Hartt's work refuses to see Johnson HQ, made by an all-black architecture and design staff and featuring a grand collection of work by African American artists, as stray light extrinsic to the culture of the now.