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Art in America

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David Hartt: *Award Room*, 2011, pigment print on Dibond, 48 by 60 inches; at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

David Hartt at Studio Museum in Harlem

By Aimee Walleston

One of the first photographs encountered in David Hartt's multimediu exhibition "Stray Light" was a compelling close-up of a glass window etched with "JPC"—the Johnson Publishing Company's logo—in lustrous gold letters. The Barthesian punctum of the photograph, titled *Test Kitchen at The Johnson Publishing Company Headquarters, Chicago, Illinois* (2011), is the logo itself, which is chipped in several places.

Born in 1967 in Montreal and currently living in Chicago, Hartt has structured previous projects around utopic systems, such as a free-market think tank in Michigan and a vegan community in Tennessee. Using the iconic publishing house of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines as a setting for an imagistic poem on time, place and race, the works in this exhibition investigate another American dream: the experience of a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps entrepreneur.

DAVID NOLAN NEW YORK

Born impoverished, the late John H. Johnson built a multimillion-dollar empire of publications and products designed exclusively for black Americans. He was the first businessman to treat black America as a profitable consumer market. When he created *Ebony*, in 1945, he did so because, as he wrote in his autobiography, "In a world of negative Black images, we wanted to provide positive Black images."

The images Hartt took of Johnson's world are less straightforwardly optimistic, though still imbued with an advertiser's eye for coercion. The exhibition began with a series of large color photographs that led to an enchanting small room containing a video installation. On wall-to-wall carpet in a burgundy and orange geometric pattern sat a Knoll bench in front of a projection screen. Two sculptures rested against the left wall: one looked like a picket fence on its side in tomato-colored aluminum, the other was a smoky Plexiglas panel with almond-shaped cutouts. Conjuring the groovy aftershocks of modernism, the surroundings played off the aesthetics of Johnson Publishing's North Michigan Avenue office in Chicago. The 12-story building was realized in 1971 by architect John Moutoussamy and interior designers William Raiser and Arthur Elrod.

Like the photographs, the 12-minute video—composed of a series of voyeuristic locked shots—depicts interior views and details of the offices. The glamorous decor includes furniture made of carmine red alligator skin, drawers and walls covered in shell pink ostrich skin and golden peacock-feather wallpaper. Seemingly immune to their heady surroundings, Johnson Publishing employees engage in everyday magazine work. Hartt's stationary camera excels at exposing the quotidian inside the majestic: a business meeting, a man dressing a mannequin, another man staring blankly at his computer. Nonhuman movement comes in the form of air-conditioning gently bothering a curtain, or a Mylar birthday balloon rotating like a lazy planet above a cubicle. The score, by flutist and composer Nicole Mitchell, provides a counterpoint to Hartt's impassive view. For example, in the test kitchen, the music becomes as frantic as the psychedelic environment, suggesting a trapped bird beating its wings against glass.

The term "stray light" refers to unwanted illumination disturbing an optical system—a glare that troubles the image. In its poker-faced depiction of manic luxury and the machinations behind it, *Stray Light* recalls Frederick Wiseman's 1983 documentary *The Store*, which considered the sartorial delicacies offered in a Neiman-Marcus in Dallas. Both Wiseman and Hartt are almost excruciatingly adept at keeping implicit or explicit critique of their subject matter out of their work. Hartt's elegantly magnetic images suggest his desire to allow viewers to make their own conclusion.