

527 West 29th Street New York NY 10001

Tel 212-925-6190 Fax 212-334-9139

info@davidnolangallery.com

www.davidnolangallery.com

THE **NEW YORK PHOTO REVIEW** .COM

June 2013



David Hartt, "Kiosk" 2011.

A Class Act, David Hartt *Stray Light*

By R. Wayne Parsons

On some occasions there is more to a photograph than meets the eye. This is very definitely the case with David Hartt's exhibition "Stray Light," which documents the interior of the Johnson Publishing Company building in Chicago.

This is a small show, with only seven large color photographs displayed. But the star of the exhibition is a twelve-minute video of the building's interior scenes. Depicted in both the photos and video are such staples of contemporary corporate culture as the main entrance lobby, employees' cubicles, a test kitchen, file cabinets and other office furniture, a small in-progress editorial meeting, and fashion accessories for the firm's successful forays into this business niche.

Accompanied by a low volume, low-key jazz score, the video is very subdued, almost static; indeed, there are times when we would think we were watching a slide show if we did not notice some slight motion, as when a piece of paper flutters as result of air circulating in the room. There is no spoken dialog, nor any text other than a few credits. While there is a human presence in the video,

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it is minimal; these people seem less as actors in a dynamic organization than as props in a larger script about things winding down (Hartt made these images just before the company moved out of the building, which it had been forced to sell due to a downturn in its business). The video is quite mesmerizing, and can be seen as a fitting elegy for a long and successful run that has come to a close.

Mr. Hart shows us time and again that he is a master at composition, both in the still photographs and the video. His imagery is simple and elegant; everything is “just right” in a restrained, minimalist approach. We come away with a good feel for the distinctive and altogether pleasing environment of the building’s interior. Johnson Publishing was founded in 1942 by John H. Johnson, a shrewd entrepreneur who saw an opportunity and seized it. The company publishes *Ebony* and *Jet*, magazines aimed at a middle class black population. These and other ventures, such as cosmetics for black women, were wildly popular, Johnson made his fortune, and the company became one of the largest and most successful black-owned companies in America. In addition to achieving financial success, the company helped define a successful middle class black lifestyle and contributed significantly to the solidification of black pride and self-respect. One indicator of the company's status in the black community is that after she left the Obama administration in 2010 as result of a major security failure at a White House state dinner, former White House social secretary Desirée Rogers took over as CEO of the company.

Johnson commissioned a building in downtown Chicago to house its operation. The building opened in 1972 and served as the firm’s headquarters for almost forty years. The structure was noteworthy in that it was the first major building in the city’s business district to be designed by a black architect. Equally as important as the building’s architecture is its interior design, a masterpiece by noted designer Arthur Elrod using subtle earth tones and modernistic furniture to create an aesthetically rich and subdued environment, one that was consistent throughout the space.

Johnson Publishing was damaged by the 2008 recession and was subject to the same market forces of decreasing readership and declining advertising revenues that have affected all print media in the last decade or so. As a result, the company had to relocate to smaller quarters after, as noted above, selling its headquarters building (to Columbia College Chicago). Mr. Hartt was commissioned to photograph the interior before the company left, and this exhibition presents the results.

A major weakness of the exhibition is that there is not enough of it. We would like more photos on the wall, and the video would be more rewarding were it twice as long. We could also use more explanation of the story behind the company in times both good and bad. For example, apparently staff cutbacks left a good portion of the building unused before it was sold, but there is no mention of this in the exhibition, and there do not appear to be any images of unused space, which would almost certainly have added to the poignancy of the show. But this exhibition effectively marks another milestone of African-American life in this country and for that reason deserves to be seen.