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David Hartt, *Kiosk* (detail), 2011. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

David Hartt at the Museum of Contemporary Art  
Johnson Publishing Company inspires David Hartt's MCA Screen installation  
By Lauren Weinberg

From the first seconds of his 12-minute video, it's obvious that David Hartt's documenting an extraordinary office. True, the artist captures grey cubicles, fluorescent lights, taped-up cartoons and a smiley-face mug. But these signs of a typical American white-collar workplace are outnumbered by shots of mod furniture, opulent wallpaper and a vast art collection. Also notable: Almost all of the employees we glimpse, typing at their computers or talking in conference rooms, are black.

Hartt, 44, spent two weeks last year visiting Johnson Publishing Company's headquarters at 820 South Michigan Avenue to create the video and photographs in "Stray Light," which recently launched the Museum of Contemporary Art's MCA Screen series.

## DAVID NOLAN NEW YORK

"If you chart the rise of Johnson Publishing, it's a mirror, it's a response to the evolution of black identity within the American consciousness," the Chicago-based artist told me last month at the MCA as he prepared his installation.

Founded in 1942 by John H. Johnson and his wife, Eunice, JPC became an important arbiter of black culture and taste as the publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet*. The company also makes Fashion Fair cosmetics for women of color. It completed its 11-story headquarters in 1971, during what Hartt identifies as JPC's "heyday."

"That's not to say that they won't enjoy another apex," he adds, "but there's definitely a process of reinvention that's going on right now," as chairman Linda Johnson Rice contends "with a troubled economy and the collapse of the publishing industry." Soon after the artist finished shooting, JPC sold 820 South Michigan Avenue to Columbia College. It plans to move out in March or April 2012.

Many aspects of JPC's home appear to have changed little since the building was finished by architect John Moutoussamy and interior designer Arthur Elrod. Set to a jazzy score composed by longtime local musician Nicole Mitchell, Hartt's video lingers over a cherry-red sofa in the lobby, Lucite furniture and peacock feather-patterned walls, among other details. The artist covers the gallery floor with a reproduction of one of JPC's luxurious Edward Fields carpets to evoke the offices' "total design." Visiting JPC, "I was completely overwhelmed at every turn," Hartt recalls. "Still, it's not like it's a mausoleum. There are elements that are incredibly well-preserved, and then there are other elements that had to be modernized in order for it to function as a business."

"Stray Light" didn't emerge from the kind of "personal connection" to *Ebony* and *Jet* that Hartt says many of his African-American friends feel. He didn't learn about JPC until he moved to Chicago to attend graduate school at SAIC. "I am black, but my [adoptive] parents are both white Jewish academics," he explains. "I grew up in a white, middle-class, Anglo suburb in Montreal." That experience made him see culture as an "aggregate construct" made up of many viewpoints, and his recent photographs of sites across the U.S. examine how various ideologies manifest themselves in the built environment. Hartt says 820 South Michigan Avenue interests him because it "exists as a strain of modernism" created by a black architect for black clients. "John Johnson and Eunice Johnson did an incredible job fulfilling a specific idea of what their ideology represented, turning that into a physical space."