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At the Studio Museum, Identity Gets a New Face

by [Whitney Kimball](#) on May 17, 2013 · [0 comments](#)





David Hartt, "Kiosk," 2011

Who was Sally Hemings? You could choose a number of titles: the mother of Thomas Jefferson's children; his wife Martha Jefferson's sister; Martha and Thomas's slave. Her story is now nearly two centuries old, yet still demanded an answer in 1998, when a DNA test finally confirmed her link to the Jefferson bloodline.

Hemings is the subject of one of two shows at the Studio Museum, which both dig up old narratives, and both pull out a very fresh take on identity. The cerebral [*American Cypher*](#) by Mendi + Keith Obadike, and the romantic [*Stray Light*](#) by David Hartt are worth a trip up to Harlem, just to add their voices to the fray.

The Obadikes' *American Cypher* is a dark room off the main exhibition space, but has a magnetic pull thanks to its freaky ringing soundtrack, which gives the space the feel of a metal wind tunnel. Immediately, you'll find the large projection on the back wall, depicting two white strands of text making a gradual rotation around a center axis like DNA. The curve of the text allows us only to pick out phrases, like "We are skin and inherited dreams" and "Does it free us?" The text drifts between grids of dates and white rectangles, like light blinking through Venetian blinds.

[Mendi + Keith Obadike : American Cypher at The Studio Museum in Harlem](#) from [Keith Obadike](#) on [Vimeo](#).

You'll find more fragmented stories on black gravestone-like tablets, containing parables about the weight of one's own history: for example, a woman who has no past, or a janitor who's forever doomed to pass through doors but never to arrive.

The wall text informs us that the ringing audio had been recorded from a bell, belonging to Sally Hemings, a slave and mother to six of Thomas Jefferson's children. The bell was a gift from Jefferson's wife, who also happened to be Hemings's half-sister; the text reminds us of the 1998 DNA test, which only recently confirmed the complicated details of their relationship. The Hemings story, coupled with the gravestone parables, and the white strands of text, perfectly illustrate how genetics can draw a thin, but suffocating line. Attempting to split the threads into black or white would be impossible, and the resistance to definition is intentionally unsatisfying.

Upstairs, a show of photographs by David Hartt is a little tighter, and sexier. Hartt documented the old offices *Jet* and *Ebony* headquarters in Chicago's Johnson Publishing Company building, the first Chicago skyscraper to be designed by an African American architect. The sleek, voluptuous interior hadn't changed since its design in 1971, and Hartt's not sparing on the rich browns, reds, ochres, and mustards, often wrapped in sheets of glass and bronze. Devoid of people, these photographs of empty rooms tell a story of a divergent history: an African corporate America, an island in what now looks like a very white world. The mix of femme (peacock and reed wallpapers, pink cushions on tall glass chairs, and beauty parlor lighting) and muscle (African sculptures, minimal Modernist clocks, the trophy room) is an absolute pleasure, and worth the trip just to look.



David Hartt, from "Stray Light"

At moments, Hartt over-simplifies. He also captured video of the *Jet* and *Ebony* offices while they were still in use; the building was sold in 2010, due to too much unused space. The space problem is clear, and the panoramic shots of backs at their desks doesn't help bar the comparison between lone gazelles, grazing in a wide-open savannah. An abstract soundscape of flutes and bells, some bass, and high hat also draw comparisons to a nature documentary. One scene depicts a wordless staff meeting taking place behind a glassed enclosure, almost all the editors with backs turned to the camera. The focus on their gestures, and the covers of their magazines, seems to entirely glaze over the content.

But all of this seems to add to a greater purpose by the time we reach the end of the loop, with a crescendo of sound that feels a little like a woodwind take on a Gershwin symphony. Antique, first-edition copies of *Tuskegee and Its People* and *History of the Civil War of the United States* are intercut with black *Ebony* spines. One 1970s *Ebony* cover caption reads: "No color line in heaven," a reminder that the line has not yet been crossed— though in this building, heaven feels especially within reach. The optimism and lush palette offer the inverse of the Obadiques' *American Cypher*, but what they both leave us with is a sense of possibility.

Tagged as: [American Cypher](#), [David Hartt](#), [Mendi + Keith Obadike](#), [Stray Light](#), [studio museum](#)

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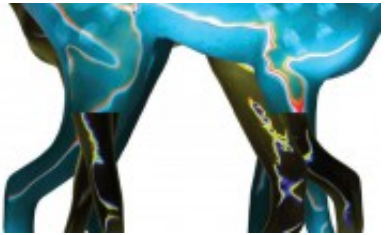
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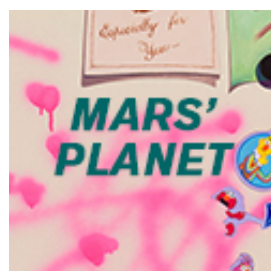
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