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Great Rivers Biennial 2012

David Johnson:
institutional
etiquette and
strange overtones

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COVER: *801 63105 009*,
2012. Pigment print, 24
x 30 inches. Courtesy of
the artist.

David Johnson (b. 1982, Austin, TX) lives and works in St. Louis, MO. His photographs have been exhibited at Los Caminos, St. Louis (2011); La Esquina, Kansas City, MO (2011); Boots Contemporary Art Space, St. Louis (2010); Newspace Center for Photography, Portland, OR (2008); Mildred Lane Kemper Museum, St. Louis (2007); and Maps Contemporary Art Space, Belleville, IL (2007), among others. Johnson received an MFA in Visual Art from Washington University in 2007 and a BFA in Studio Art with an emphasis in Photography from Texas Christian University in 2005. He is an Adjunct Lecturer at St. Louis University and Washington University, St. Louis.

David Johnson: institutional etiquette and strange overtones

David Johnson is inspired by architectural environments, including institutional spaces such as museums, offices and other commercial spaces, and private homes. His images are produced using a large-format camera and reflect the serendipitous moments captured by the photographic process. While Johnson's photographs are rooted in various physical locations, they also suggest a universal sense of place in their elegant abstractions of the everyday interiors in which we live and work. For *institutional etiquette and strange overtones*, Johnson's project for the *Great Rivers Biennial 2012*, the artist photographed the spaces that comprise CAM as an institution — the museum's galleries and offices, as well as its patrons' private homes. Johnson spoke with CAM Assistant Curator Kelly Shindler about his practice.

Kelly Shindler: *Your work addresses the built environment and the relationship between the human occupancy of specific spaces and the subtle physical components of these spaces' interiors (such as natural and artificial light or architectural volumes and angles). Could you speak about how you come to determine sites for your projects? What do you look for when selecting a site?*

David Johnson: Site selection for my subject matter varies from project to project and space to space. When I began the work that focused on office environments (*The Office*, 2007-09), I examined several unfamiliar office buildings near my home. While photographing these environments, I intentionally began to play with angles, volume, and light. I wanted to find situations in which human personality competed with the structure of the space — perhaps detected in the discovery of a misplaced pencil sharpener, a smudge on the wall left by a chair, or the interplay between crisp daylight and buzzing fluorescent lights. The work I completed during the office project taught me a lot about formal composition, subtlety, and seeing the unexpected.

In contrast to the office environments, my work within domestic spaces was more of an outgrowth of happenstance. I took these images while staying at friends' homes on various road trips. I tend to be a curious person, so it is natural for me to look inside someone's refrigerator or tour all the rooms in a house. So, if I identified something particularly interesting, I'd retrieve my camera.

I became interested in the interiors of exhibition spaces while preparing for exhibitions of mine at Boots Contemporary Art Space and Los Caminos, both in St. Louis. I turned my camera to the walls of the galleries and used the quality of light as my subject matter. I hoped that people might move through the space and ask questions about the exhibition in relation to both the architecture and their own positions as viewers.

KS: *You frequently move between a public and private setting in this series — from the galleries and offices of CAM to the personal homes of the museum's patrons, featuring their private collections. What was it like for you as a photographer to temporarily occupy these spaces?*

DJ: When photographing each patron's home, I disciplined myself to be an inobtrusive voyeur. I was there to capture the essence of an individual's domestic space without attempting to express greater commentary on him or her as a person. I want these images to be intimate and provide something to which the viewer can relate, yet also maintain an element of ambiguity.

This work raises questions about how private spaces are organized or even curated. It is true that there are very

personal possessions within the space. However, these belongings are set out for specific reasons, namely that they might be shared with visitors or guests.

The offices of the museum become interesting intersections between public and private. They represent a very private part of the museum as a public institution, and they provide another opportunity to blur the notion of clearly defined public and private spaces. I am interested in photographing a place of work and not the worker, but sometimes a personal object on someone's desk becomes conceptually appealing — a dead orchid, a slightly offset stack of books, and a conference room with flip chart pages affixed to the wall testify to how the owners of these items intentionally place the objects. However, the use and intention of the objects become muddled in a frame that lacks context.

KS: *Can you talk about the process of creating your images for this project? How was the experience different for each site?*

DJ: In the private residences, trying not to outstay my welcome, I generally tried to keep the photo shoot to under four hours. I only had one opportunity and because I use a large format camera, I had to be very purposeful with my limited time. I knew what type of image I wanted to make, but I also kept an eye open for the unexpected. To be honest, I was quite amazed by the distinctiveness of each home. And I was even more surprised by how certain individual's art collections held my attention. This came from observing how I moved around a newly constructed International Style condo versus a home built in the 1920s, for example.

Photographing in the museum was a wholly different mode of image-making. I had ample time with each shoot and the ability to return to the space often. This luxury allowed for more discoveries within the space. CAM is a space that is in constant flux. The art changes from exhibition to exhibition, personnel changes happen, and although they are less noticeable, cracks accumulate in the museum's structure. Therefore, it became necessary to photograph what was compelling at a given moment.

KS: *Can you share some of your artistic touchstones, both contemporary and historical?*

DJ: Historically, I am fascinated by Jacques Tati's films, particularly how they address setting and architecture. In my favorite film, *Play Time* (1967), which takes place in a modern version of Paris, Tati's protagonists only observe the iconic symbols of the city (such as the Eiffel Tower and the Sacré-Cœur Basilica) through reflections on buildings, windows, and doors. I've also been influenced by the New Topographic photographers Robert Adams, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and Lewis Baltz. Their images challenged conventionally romanticized notions of landscape, whereas my work challenges our understanding of how space is inhabited or occupied.

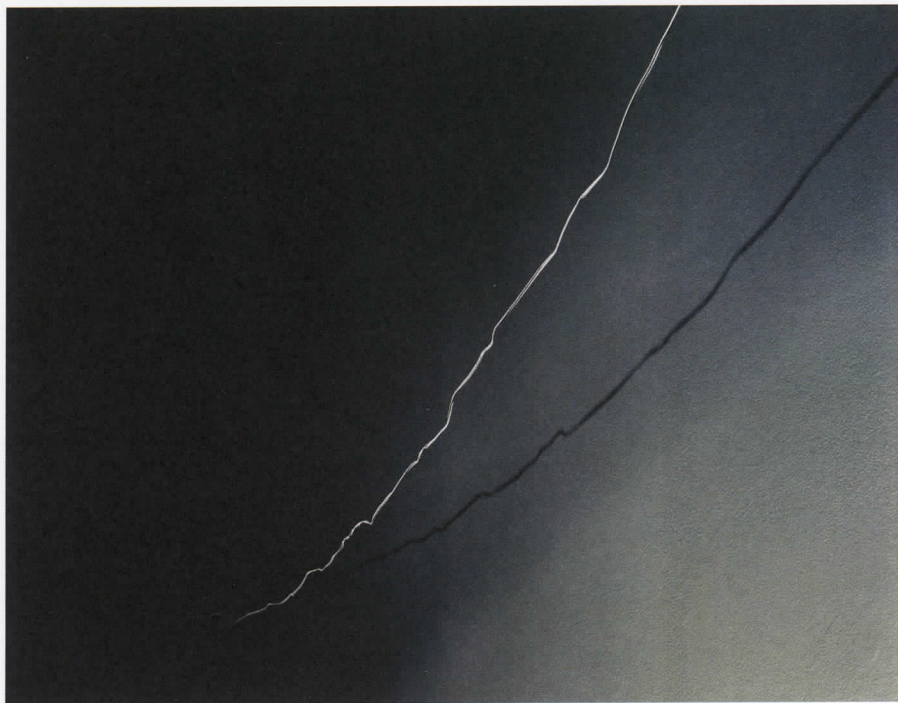
My work is in direct conversation with contemporary artists Louise Lawler and Candida Höfer, who photograph interior architecture and institutions, respectively. Also, Olafur Eliasson's installations are significant for me. They produce an experience that I strive for in my own photographs — to have the viewer

become more aware of him- or herself in relation to the space of the exhibition.

KS: *What are you looking to achieve in your project for the Great Rivers Biennial?*

DJ: In my work for this exhibition, I hope to bring all of the ideas and subjects from previous projects together. Each site granted me access and trust, which enabled me to study and photograph a variety of otherwise inaccessible spaces.

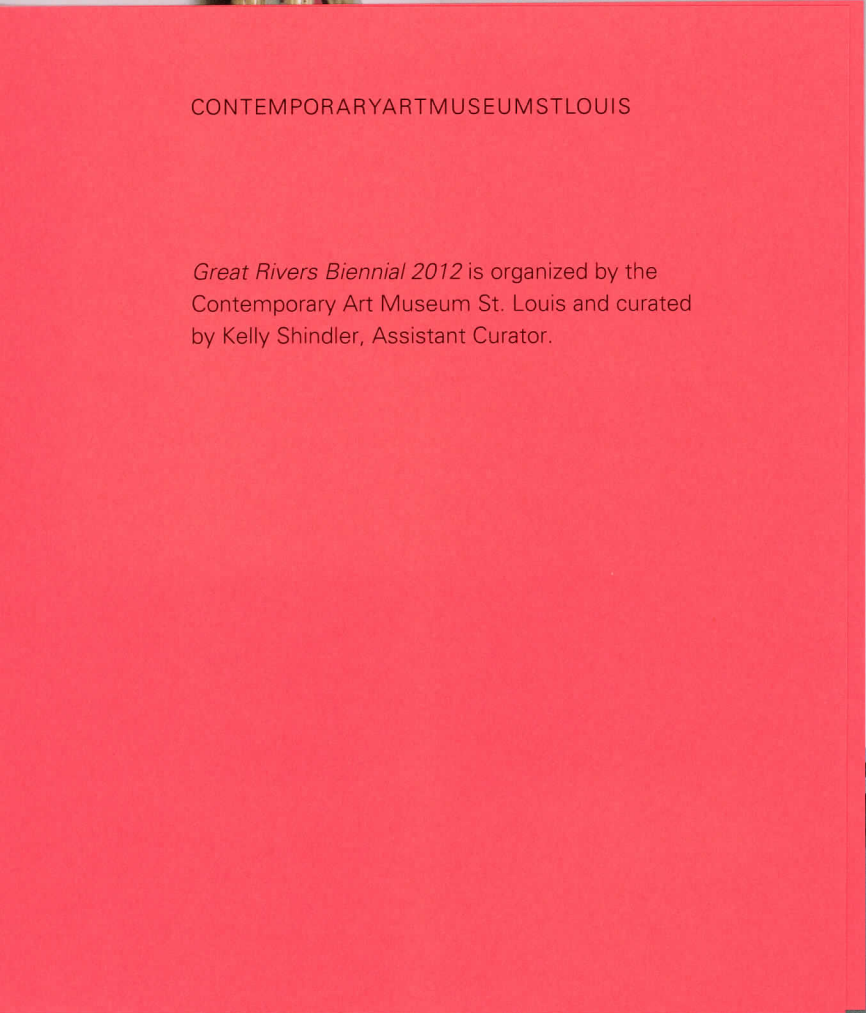
For *institutional etiquette and strange overtones*, I want to explore not only how CAM works on a formal level, but also how individual people understand the various facets of the institution. The details of the space existing below the viewer's threshold are the ones that catch my attention. Cracks, a wire, a rainbow, shadows, daylight, the white walls, and the warm gray floors of the gallery spaces become the bass line (in the musical sense) for this body of work. The domestic spaces are the high notes. These high notes give the bass personality. The difference between high notes and bass notes, or as I understand the museum images, is truly minimal; subject matter, color, and composition are all very subdued. In juxtaposition, the domestic images are heavy with objects and color, and contain less formal focus.




3750 63108 034, 2012. Pigment print, 24 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

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Great Rivers Biennial 2012 is organized by the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and curated by Kelly Shindler, Assistant Curator.





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