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art

## Review of 'Soul Sanctuary' photo display

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NORFOLK — Cracking the code of Jason Miccolo Johnson's photography comes down to threes: Three figures, three objects, three key elements.

For one project, the Washington, D.C., artist intentionally sought such trios in his compositions to mirror the core of his liturgical subject: The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Johnson spent a decade taking black-and-white pictures in Christian churches – about 70 of them in some 20 states. The results of his documentation are on display at the Chrysler Museum of Art in "Soul Sanctuary: Images of the African American Worship Experience."

Both the artist and Brooks Johnson, the Chrysler's curator of photography, believe Johnson's is the first comprehensive photo essay on this rich subject. This is the first museum stop for the show, which next opens at the Stax Museum of American Soul Music in Memphis, Tenn., the artist's hometown.

These 50-plus photos should be warming and familiar to those who attend a black church and enlightening to those who have not attended one. Johnson augmented the show with shots taken in local churches and arranged images in the order of a Sunday service.

The exhibition opens with a section called "preparation," which includes a wide shot of a choir marching down the aisle in a huge Chicago church and a tighter image of a dimpled girl passing out fans bearing a photo of a happy family.

Next comes "inspiration," where music and dance play a big role. A photo of liturgical dancers at a Largo, Md., church is a standout; their leaps and flowing garments are spirit made visible.

Also in this section is one of the show's most outstanding pictures, depicting historic First Baptist Church in Norfolk. In the shot, the men's choir stands below the massive pipe organ, the visual reverse of the choir robes' folds. Here's a trio: The choirmaster's arms are lifted at the same angle created by the pipes and repeated in the singers' open books.

This photo is a prime example of Johnson's technical prowess: as in many of his pictures, he manages to hold the details in both very dark and very light areas.

In the sermon section, he shows the dramatic "call and response" integral to a service, capturing how the action of the speaker or pastor is mirrored in the congregation.

Johnson took that principle further in the handsome, hardback book that accompanies his show, and which includes a foreword by the late, great photographer Gordon Parks. On facing pages, he positioned a speaker's action beside a congregant's reaction.

Throughout, Johnson keeps the eye refreshed. He shot close and far, from on high and at eye level, in both grand and humble settings. In so doing, he chronicled an important American institution deserving of such commitment.

Once seen, it's hard to believe no one had done it before.



LITURGICAL DANCERS AT METROPOLITAN BAPTIST CHURCH, LARGO, MD., BY JASON MICCOLO JOHNSON