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CONTEMPORARY ARTS MUSEUM HOUSTON
IN LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER’S first university-level photography class, she encountered Dorothea Lange’s photograph *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California* (1936).¹ Frazier immediately recognized the power and gravity of this iconic image, but she had a burning question: “What is the lady’s name?”² This telling anecdote illuminates one of the primary concerns of Frazier’s documentary corpus: she is fundamentally and critically concerned with issues of agency.

Frazier focuses her attention on her hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania. A suburb of Pittsburgh, Braddock is home to industrialist Andrew Carnegie’s first steel mill, the Edgar Thomson Steel Works, which was established in 1872. Once the largest steel mill in the United States, the facility has an output today that is roughly equal to what it produced at the turn of the last century.

The U.S. steel industry, like many industries nationwide, has found itself in a precarious position as it struggles to weather the country’s shift from a manufacturing economy to an information economy. To be competitive within the global market, industries have had to switch from the mass production of cheap, identical goods to the adoption of intelligent systems of labor and machinery that can quickly and flexibly respond to market desires. With the onset of late capitalism, industries that had grown too big and too specialized got weeded out. Among others, the Pittsburgh-based Bethlehem Steel Corporation, once America’s second-largest steel producer, was dissolved in 2001 after a declaration of bankruptcy.

Between 1980 and 1985, Braddock experienced a major crisis. As its steel mills downsized or ceased operating, an industry that had previously supported more than 28,000 workers suddenly had jobs for only 4,500 of them.³ A spike in unemployment and underemployment resulted in widespread economic instability and drove many Braddock
residents to abandon the area in search of a better life. Braddock was once a thriving town with a population of more than 20,000 people and dozens of churches, schools, stores, restaurants, and theaters. Today, fewer than 2,500 people call Braddock home, and they are hard pressed to find basic amenities locally.4

After the 1980s economic downturn, redlining further debilitated Braddock. The meaning of “redlining” derives from the practice of drawing a red line on a map to demarcate areas where banks, businesses, and government institutions will not invest. With a grim outlook for economic recovery in Braddock, public and private institutions that had previously dispensed financial assistance began routinely to turn down loan requests. Abandoned homes and businesses fell into disrepair or outright collapse, often taking neighboring structures down with them.

Braddock residents were accustomed to fending for themselves, but they were unprepared for the crack cocaine epidemic that also hit in the early 1980s. President Ronald Reagan was waging his War on Drugs, and in 1986, with the support of Congress, his administration signed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act into law. This controversial legislation established different sentencing minimums for the possession of crack cocaine and powdered cocaine. Though the two forms of the drug are closely related, crack is cheaper than powdered cocaine and delivers a more intense (though shorter) high. For that reason, it is more commonly found in economically disadvantaged communities, and Braddock was one of them. The Reagan administration’s politically calculating biases resulted in the incarceration of a disproportionately high number of minority citizens for crack-related offences, compared to more affluent powdered cocaine users. With the administration’s backing, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency also flooded the popular media with news items steeped in moralizing condemnation that enshrined the myth of crack babies and crack whores. “Every stereotype you can think of is what I grew up seeing in the media,” recalls Frazier. “We were demonized as bad, poor, Black drug addicts.”5

Frazier’s work offers counterpoints to such portrayals. Her unflinching eye and her gift for communicating through documentary images connects her to other socially engaged practitioners like Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Gordon Parks. As she sees it, her work is “the story of economic globalization and the decline of manufacturing as told through the bodies of three generations of African American women.”6 The primary subjects of this chronicle are Frazier’s Grandma Ruby (1925-2009), her Mom (b. 1959), and the artist herself (b. 1982).
IN FRAZIER’S IMAGES, Grandma Ruby is a woman who collected dolls and smoked Pall Malls, who cared for her extended family, and who kept her home “just so.” Frazier's photographs afford us an intimate opportunity to see the world through her eyes. Grandma Ruby on Her Recliner (2002) shows Grandma Ruby relaxing under a blanket, her arm thrown behind her head in a surprisingly youthful gesture. Though she had fixed her gaze on her granddaughter behind the camera, in the moment captured in this photograph Grandma Ruby looks back at us. Grandma Ruby and Me (2005) is an image of the artist and her grandmother sitting on the living room floor in front of a television. A shutter release cord snakes out from behind Frazier, who used it to trigger the camera to freeze this moment on film. Instead of watching TV, however, Frazier and Grandma Ruby stare directly at us, taking us in.

Even inanimate objects in Frazier's photographs seem to communicate personal force. In Aunt Midgie and Grandma Ruby (2007), an illuminated lamp on a bedside table casts a glow over a trio of framed photographs. In the first one, we see a smiling schoolgirl. The second is a portrait of a graceful woman taken during a pensive moment. The creases and folds of the third photograph—this one a portrait of an infant—suggest that it may be much older than the others. Sitting in front of these photographs atop a doily are a pair of folded eyeglasses, a soft pack of cigarettes, a lighter, a hairbrush, and a chipped glass ashtray. A bottle of hair moisturizing spray peeks out from the background. Taken together, these objects suggest a life outside the photographic frame, but the narrative is hazy at best. As Marita Sturken points out, "memory appears to reside within the photographic image, to tell its story in response to our gaze.... Yet memory does not reside in a photograph, or in any camera image, so much as it is produced by it." While this “portrait of portraits” seems suffused with telling details, the story it more likely tells us is one about our own processes of imagination and projection.

Frazier often slows down our visual progression into her images by establishing a compositional strategy of frames within frames. The banded edge of the nightstand echoes the picture frames in Aunt Midgie and Grandma Ruby. In Me and Mom in The Phase (2007), this strategy is more spatially complex. Frazier has stepped behind the bar in a drinking establishment to photograph her mother who sits on a stool opposite her with a drink in her hand. The mirrored wall behind her mother reflects a row of Christmas stockings, doubling them. Though not immediately apparent, we find Frazier's reflected face emerging from this composition of doubled forms. As viewers of this photograph, we are positioned somewhere between Frazier and her mother, inside
their shared sight lines. If we see these two women as reflections of one another, where do we sit in relation to them?

Similar compositional formats link the works *Mom Relaxing My Hair* (2005) and *Mom Making an Image of Me* (2008). The same mirror is a central element in both works, and each one captures the camera in the mirror’s reflection. As we study the formal aspects of Frazier’s two photographs, we simultaneously begin reading stories into their details, and this is when striking differences between the images emerge. *Mom Relaxing My Hair* shows a domestic scene familiar in many African American households: it documents a mother chemically straightening her daughter’s hair. Though culturally specific, the activity reads as prosaic. By contrast, *Mom Making an Image of Me*—which is part of a series of self-portraits co-authored by the artist and her mother—is stripped of narrative referents. Here the mirror, propped on its side atop a cast-iron radiator, frames a mise-en-scène of two women in the act of creating an image of themselves.

*Mom and Me* (2005) is the most straightforward work in this portrait series: mother and daughter have taken each other’s photograph, and the two resulting prints are mounted side by side. *Momme* (2008) is a juxtaposition of Mom’s profile with a frontal view of Frazier’s face. Frazier sits behind her mother, and their features line up in a way that suggests that the boundaries between them are fluid and complex. Patterns animate *Momme Portrait Series (Floral Comforter)* (2008). Dressed in white tank tops, mother and daughter have photographed themselves in front of a tulip-patterned comforter. Frazier’s plaid pajama bottoms provide additional visual variety. This same comforter appears in *Momme Wrestle* (2009), an animated digital loop strung together from thousands of sequenced JPEG images. In this work, mother and daughter mime a series of interactions that alternate between confrontation and tender support. The most recent work in this ongoing series is *Momme Silhouettes* (2010), in which Frazier and Mom have photographed their cast shadows on a bedsheets printed with a pattern of flowering branches and songbirds. Presented in a gridded format, these nine separate and idyllic photographs suggest the birds have come to land on a proffered finger, in a cupped hand, or upon a shoulder. Seen chronologically, these photographs trace Frazier and her mother’s investigation and increasingly complex understanding of the medium of photography; their collaboration begins with a straightforward assertion of agency and progresses toward an increasingly subjective, even poetic approach.
FRAZIER’S DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE also includes projects that speak to her commitments to social responsibility. Campaign for Braddock Hospital (Save Our Community Hospital) (2011) is a suite of twelve photolithograph and silkscreen prints that critically address Levi’s “Go Forth” ad campaign. Shot on location in Braddock, the blue jeans advertisements romanticize “urban pioneers,” offering slogans including “ready for work” and “everybody’s work is equally important.” Frazier found the Levi’s campaign to be patently offensive: “They’re promoting the idea of this ‘urban pioneer,’ and they have no clue about those of us in Braddock who have been here all along, fighting for access to safe housing and health care.”

Ironically, Levi’s campaign was rolled out during a period when a group called Save Our Community Hospital was actively protesting a plan to close and demolish Braddock’s only hospital. Founded in 1906, Braddock Hospital merged with the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (U.P.M.C.) in 1996. Then in 2009, residents learned that U.P.M.C. planned to shutter the facility, citing underutilization and consistent financial losses.

Frazier protested alongside members of Save Our Community Hospital. Her print series frames the group’s efforts as a counter-narrative to the Levi’s campaign. In some of the prints, Frazier adds textual notations to appropriated advertisements. One of these shows two young men standing on either side of a horse with the words “Go Forth” painted over the image. Below it, we read a notation by the artist: “How can we go forth when our borough’s buses and ambulances have been cut?” Another image shows U.P.M.C. during the teardown process, with Mr. Jim Kidd standing in the street holding a sign that reads:

U.P.M.C. IS
RACE-BASED
CLASS-BASED
HEALTH CARE

Below the image, Frazier’s caption poses the question, “Do we really need $50 jeans or $250 trucker jackets when we don’t have medical care?”

For Braddock residents, U.P.M.C. was not only the town’s largest remaining employer, but also a vital source of regular medical care and emergency attention. Frazier’s family has seen its share of medical issues: Grandma Ruby died of complications related to pancreatic cancer, Frazier’s mother has cancer and an undiagnosed neurological disorder, and Frazier herself suffers from lupus. And they are certainly not alone in this. Many other Braddock residents suffer from respira-
tory disease, lung cancer, and heart disease, which have been identified as the region’s primary health risks. The Pennsylvania Department of Health showed higher than predicted mortality rates for the region between 2000 and 2008 (a rate that is more than 10 percent higher than would be expected for the population), and respiratory disease death rates are 7 to 45 percent above national rates. Frazier joins others in attributing blame for the high death rates to the decades-long accumulations of environmental toxins released into the rivers and belched from smokestacks across the land. Based on their readings of airborne particulate matter, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Clean Air Task Force has ranked the region as one of the worst polluted urban areas in the country.

The digital loop Self Portrait (United States Steel) (2010) pairs an image of Frazier, shirtless and in jeans, standing in front of a curtained window, with an image of the billowing clouds of emissions hanging over Braddock’s steelmaking Mon Valley Works. Frazier faces us, breathing in and out slowly, the way one is instructed to do in a doctor’s office.

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**FOLLOWING A SETTLEMENT** arrived through the Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which allocated shuttles to transport residents seeking outpatient care to health care services in a nearby neighborhood and instituted extended hours at the Braddock Family Health Center. U.P.M.C closed its doors to the community. As heavy equipment was brought in to begin the demolition of the building, Braddock residents found themselves abandoned yet again. Adding insult to injury, the hospital corporation hired the same construction company that was razing U.P.M.C. Braddock to break ground on a $250 million state-of-the-art medical care facility in a more affluent suburb.

Frazier takes a holistic view of the presence of illness in the community. While the heavy metals and carcinogens released as effluents by industrial manufacturers do make people sick, she believes the psychosomatic results of the internalization of prejudice and judgmental attitudes are just as nefarious, and her most recent images speak to these conditions. Landscape of the Body (Epilepsy Test) (2011) connects an image of Frazier’s mother undergoing medical testing with an image of U.P.M.C. Braddock hospital during its demolition. In the left image, we see Mom, her hospital gown exposing her bare back, hooked up to a gaggle of wires; on the right, we see massive piles of rubble heaped up where walls have been torn away, exposing empty rooms. Like Mom’s back, this bewildering array of twisted metal, jackhammered concrete
and rebar, and severed cables feels bare and unprotected. Both images are unmistakable evidence of systems that are breaking down.

Even in the face of these hardships, or perhaps precisely because of them, citizens in Braddock have been mobilizing to take matters into their own hands. The community endures. Forged in this crucible, Frazier’s documentary practice is a form of visual propaganda that is deeply concerned with how power can be identified, claimed, and redirected. While popular opinion may assert that a participant driven by her emotional connections to an issue may be too biased to see a situation clearly, Frazier’s work communicates her concerns with the utmost clarity and conviction. Even as she addresses urgent issues, emotion never clouds her vision, but instead affords it a compelling authenticity. The precision, economy, and honesty of Frazier’s delivery make her stories so available that, like a mirror, it lets us see ourselves in her work.
1. The photograph that has become known as "Migrant Mother" is one of a series of photographs that Dorothea Lange made of Florence Owens Thompson and her children in February or March of 1936 in Nipomo, California. Lange was concluding a month’s trip photographing migratory farm labor around the state for what was then the Resettlement Administration. In 1960, Lange gave this account of the experience:

I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it. (From: Popular Photography, Feb. 1960).


10. Ibid.

11. LaToya Ruby Frazier, email to author, 10 May 2013.