

> A CONVERSATION WITH LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER <

PHOTOGRAPHY

“My Camera As A Weapon”: Art and Social Justice

Talking with LaToya Ruby Frazier, photographer and visual artist. Her forthcoming book is *The Notion Of Family*, to be published by Aperture Foundation later this year. . .

BY JABARI ASIM

Braddock, Pennsylvania almost seems to function as a character as much as a setting in your ongoing narrative about your hometown.

Can you talk a bit about how you arrived at documenting Braddock’s infrastructure (hospitals, shuttered factories, etc.) along with its residents?

As a photographer and media artist I produce personal and political statements that function as interventions in mainstream dominant narratives and histories that omit African Americans’ contribution to Andrew Carnegie’s last functioning steel mill (The Edgar Thomson Steel Works, est. 1872) and America’s industrial past. Braddock, Penn., is my homeland. It is



LaToya Ruby Frazier

an industrial suburb located nine miles outside of Pittsburgh along the Monongahela River in western Pennsylvania. I am a descendant of the steel mill working-class.

For twelve years I have made photographs, videos and performances with my family and community addressing contemporary issues surrounding environmental racism, access to healthcare and socioeconomic inequality.

Themes and concerns in my work deal with the body and landscape, familial and communal history, private and public space, American history and art & social justice. As a character, sometimes Braddock symbolically functions as an oppressive patriarchal

figure that has taught me what it means to be marginalized, dehumanized and invisible in our society.

My family and I have witnessed and internalized the end of industrialization and rise of gentrification. It was a natural progression for me to document intimate domestic portraits and outside infrastructure landscapes to show my viewer how our bodies were deteriorating along with the social and economic fabric of the town. Subsequent redlining and disinvestment at both local and state governments along with the War on Drugs decimated my family and community.

In 2010 the closure and demolition of U.P.M.C. Braddock hospital (our largest employer and only healthcare provider) demanded that my work take a greater political and active communal approach to shed light on the hidden corporate abuses Braddock residents face.

Currently there is an aggressive dispossession affecting the most vulnerable residents through rezoning and land grabbing. I have taken it upon myself to record these crimes against humanity.

Another narrative thread seems to involve the effect of Braddock on multiple generations. Please share your thoughts regarding the centrality of your grandmother and mother in your work.

My grandmother, mother and I function as markers in a historical

Mom holding Mr. Art, 2005

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER



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Above: Grandma Ruby and Me, 2005
Left: Aunt Midgie and Grandma Ruby, 2007
Right: Momme, 2008

timeline. Our portraits tell the story of economic globalization and the decline of manufacturing through the bodies of three generations of African American women. In *The Notion Of Family* Grandma Ruby (b.1925 - 2009), Mom (b.1959) and myself (b.1982) represent different socioeconomic cli-

mates in Braddock from its prosperous period in the early 20th century to white flight throughout the '50s and '60s to the collapse of the steel industry and global expansion in the '70s and finally the War On Drugs in the '80s and '90s, which decimated my family and community.

Our portraits tell the story of economic globalization and the decline of manufacturing through the bodies of three generations of African American women.

How and why did you choose the camera to make your art (as opposed say, to painting, dance or theater)?

As an undergrad at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania I was encouraged to major in photography by faculty that believed I had a photographic eye. My mentor Kathe Kowalski taught me how to use my camera to honor the lives of the poor. Kathe devoted her practice to photographing women in prison, families living below the poverty line in rural areas and the loss of her mother. From her I learned how to use my camera as a weapon to combat poverty, racism and discrimination like Gordon Parks.

How do you determine when to use digital animation or video instead of still photography?

As an artist in addition to being a witness of my time I purposefully use the gelatin silver print to speak back to the history of social documentary photography. One of my aims is to update the aesthetic of 1930s Farm Security Administration photographers (Gordon Parks, Dorothea Lange, and Walker Evans) with contemporary issues surrounding environmental degradation with an emphasis on postmodern conditions, class and capitalism. The strategic use of video happens when I feel a black-and-white photograph distracts my viewer or may not challenge my viewer enough, so I bring in the color and sound in real time to intensify the immediacy of each encounter.

Is there an element of performance in your work?

Yes, there is absolutely performance in my work. When it comes to preserving injuries from labor and the



1908 Eighth Street Market, 2007

body in pain, the best way to capture and preserve this is through performed photography. In my work there are both performed gestures with political statements and involuntary conditions performed in our bodies; my mother, grandmother and I all have terminal illnesses (cancer and Lupus) contracted from the toxic pollutants from the steel mill.

You can also view an online documentary produced by Art21 series entitled *LaToya Ruby Frazier Takes On Levi's* to see a live protest performance I enacted to counter the 2010 global ad campaign by advertisement agency Wieden & Kennedy and clothing company Levi Strauss branding Braddock as a "new frontier" for "urban pioneers" to "go forth, where everybody's work is equally important." In the performance I dressed in work wear in a pair of Levi denim jeans and made repetitive movements, scrapping my body into the ground until the jeans shred back into the dyed blue cotton in which they are fabricated. My movements are choreographed from 1940s propaganda commercials that show how workers operate machinery to create steel. I make gestures as both the worker and the steel products ruptur-

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ing the propagandized image corporate advertisers place in consumers' minds that disrupt their ability to distinguish fantasy from reality.

One critic has written that your images work like a mirror, enabling viewers to see themselves in the work. Is that a goal?

We all come from families and communities that are shaped by local economy and industry. Any viewer should be able to relate to my work and see themselves within my concerns regarding identity, loss and death.

Can you name some of your artistic influences?

There is so much to think about here, but at the core, my photographs and practice are informed by a few key artists, movements, and/or projects. In no particular order, these are: Realism, especially as practiced by 19th-century documentary photographers and social reformers Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine; the Pittsburgh Survey, an early 20th-century sociological survey of urban conditions in Pittsburgh; the Farm Security Administration photographers who worked during the Great Depression, especially Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Gordon Parks; the "New Topographics" photographers who looked at the "man-altered" landscape, particularly Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Nicholas Nixon; anti-aesthetics in photography, in particular the use of text by artists like Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula. I had the privilege and honor to study with artist Carrie Mae Weems, who taught me how to question and challenge history.

What projects are you working on now?

Currently, I am away on a fellowship at the American Academy in Berlin, completing my forthcoming first book *The Nation Of Family* which will be released fall 2014 by Aperture Foundation in New York City.

Upcoming spring/summer exhibitions?

Currently on view at the Seattle Art Museum through June 22, 2014 is my solo show *Born By a River*, recipient of the museum's 2013-2014 Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence Fellowship. More information on the new work on view in Seattle can be seen here: <https://www.seattleartmuseum.org/exhibit/exhibitDetail.asp?eventID=27843>

Where can we find out more about your work?

You can find out more about my work by viewing the Art21 online documentary *New York Close Up: LaToya Ruby Frazier Makes Moving Pictures*. You can also go to my gallery website: Galerie Michel Rein, Paris (<http://michelrein.com>).