"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...
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 Nolton Of Family Grandma Ruby (b.1925 - 2009), Mom (b.1959) and myself (b.1982) represent different socioeconomic climates 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.
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How and why did you choose the camera to make your art [as opposed to, say, 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 Kathi Kovacs taught me how to use my camera to honor the lives of the poor. Kathi 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 and an emphasis on postmodern conditions, class and capitalism. The strategic use of video happens when I feel a black-and-white photograph distacts 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.

Can you name some of your artistic influences? There is so much to think about here. Of course, my photographs and practice are informed by the work of many artists, movements and other projects. In particular, these are: Realism, especially as practiced by 19th-century documentary photographers and social reformers; Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine; the 20th-century sociological survey of urban conditions by Lewis and Platt 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-made” landscape, particularly Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz and Nicholas Nixon; the aesthetics of 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 far away on a fellowship at the American Academy in Berlin, completing my forthcoming first book, *The Nation’s Family* which will be released fall 2014 by Aperture Foundation in New York City.


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 *Making Pictures*.

1908 Eighth Street Market, 2007

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.

...ing the propagated 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.

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