

Born by a River, Watching the Change

The interplay of images in LaToya Ruby Frazier's "Landscape of the Body (Epilepsy Test)" is haunting: a portrait of the artist's mother in a disheveled hospital bed hooked up to monitors, juxtaposed with a shot of the Braddock, Pa., hospital's demolition taken shortly after her stay, its tangled wiring exposed (this slide).



This work is being exhibited at the Seattle Art Museum in "LaToya Ruby Frazier: Born by a River," a powerful show about the lives of the artist's imperiled hometown. Ms. Frazier, 32, currently a fellow at the American Academy in Berlin, is the latest recipient of the museum's Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence Prize, a biannual award to an early-career black artist that culminates in a solo exhibition.

Braddock, in the Pittsburgh suburbs along the banks of the Monongahela River, was once a flourishing steel town, home to Andrew Carnegie's first steel mill and the first Carnegie Library. As of the 2010 census, it had not quite 2,200 residents, a 90 percent decline from its 1920s heyday.

As "Born by a River" documents, the quality of life in the largely African-American town has deteriorated over the years, a victim of lost jobs, toxic waste, political neglect, redlining and white flight. Braddock's lone hospital — the scene of Ms. Frazier's mother's portrait, the town's largest employer and main provider of medical care — closed in 2010 when its owner relocated it to a more affluent suburb. "Born by a River," organized by Sandra Jackson-Dumont, a curator at the Seattle Art Museum, functions on three visual levels. Large color aerial photographs taken from a helicopter represent Braddock from a distance. Smaller black-and-white images record its broken land and buildings. And portraits, also in black and white, document the private lives of Ms. Frazier and her family, who have lived in Braddock for three generations.

The colorful and rhythmic patterns of buildings, lots and roads spied from above at first suggest a flourishing town. Closer inspection reveals signs of deteriorating infrastructure and aggressive redevelopment: the modest home of a longtime resident and activist, Isaac Bunn, assessed by the town as worthless, vacant land, is seen in bird's-eye view as the last holdout on a street overtaken by the industrial storage of large white bags of shredded rubber tires (below).

Ms. Frazier's stark black-and-white photographs zero in on the details of a community engulfed by privation, illness and ruin: barely habitable homes surrounded by decaying buildings and abandoned construction sites; a forlorn recliner, the walls above it marked by the ghosts of long-gone artifacts and mirrors, the floor below littered with detritus; the unsmiling faces of people coping with chronic pollution-borne diseases, including Ms. Frazier herself, who has lupus.

The project's title was inspired by Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come," an epochal civil-rights-era song in which the protagonist, "born by the river" in a time of rampant segregation and racism, imagines a better and more just world. Glimmers of optimism and self-possession shine through the gloom of Ms. Frazier's pictures — from the splendor of her deceased grandmother's doll collection to the determination on her young cousin's face — rescuing her subjects from the visual stereotypes of black poverty.

As part of an initiative to revitalize Braddock's faltering economy, its ambitious, Harvard-educated mayor, John Fetterman, has supported the development of green industries and partnerships with nonprofit organizations. But it is the transformation of Braddock into a thriving cultural hub that has been the cornerstone of his administration. Widely reported in the news media, his efforts have attracted artists with the promise of affordable housing and studio space.

Offers to shoot major films there soon followed, including "Out of the Furnace," a 2013 thriller starring Christian Bale as a steelworker avenging the murder of his Iraq War-veteran brother, and "The Road," based on Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a father and son on a post-apocalyptic journey. Back in 2010, Braddock was chosen by Levi Strauss & Company as the setting of its "Go Forth: Ready to Work" advertising campaign. The stylized print and television ads highlighted the plight of the Rust Belt, featuring local residents and a slogan that was as dubious as it was patronizing: "Everybody's work is equally important."

As the unrelenting adversity documented in "Born by a River" affirms, however, gentrification and the cultural activity of outsiders rarely alleviate the underlying problems of poverty and racism. In a video produced by the PBS series "Art21" and included in the Seattle exhibition, Ms. Frazier is filmed in performance in Manhattan in front of a Levi's pop-up store in a former SoHo art gallery, which displayed images from "Go Forth." In it, she rends the Levi's jeans she wears by repeatedly scraping her legs against the sidewalk.

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The Bunn family home on Ninth Street in Braddock, Pa

On one level, the performance counters Levi's romanticized view of work and of Braddock as an icon of blue-collar fortitude and solidarity. On another, it speaks to the insidiousness of gentrification, which can tear a community apart by driving up rents and property values and displacing its poorest residents.

For Ms. Frazier, a gifted artist who has been photographing her hometown since she was 16, it is self-determination that provides the most just and durable path to renewal.

"What I feel an urgency to do at this moment is to return back home," she says in the "Art21 video. "Not as the artist, LaToya Ruby Frazier, but as the citizen of Braddock, Pa., LaToya Ruby Frazier ... [and] do something about what they've done to my community."



Grandma Ruby Braiding JC's Hair, From the series, Notion of Family. 2007