Timely | LaToya Ruby Frazier, Nerves of Steel

“If the individuals and families most affected during the Great Depression had photographed themselves instead of being shot by government-commissioned photographers,” asks the artist LaToya Ruby Frazier, “what would their own self-representation look like?” For the past 10 years, Frazier, 30, who grew up in the blighted steel town of Braddock, Pa., has sought to answer that question, photographing her family — her mother and grandmother in particular. Next month’s Whitney Biennial will include a series of intimate, unflinching self-portraits Frazier took in her grandmother’s house, where she helped care for her step-great-grandfather (a former steelworker who suffered from multiple, chronic illnesses) and which is now abandoned. “I witnessed his body decay an crumble,” says Frazier, drawing a powerful metaphor for her hometown. “Without financial resources or better access to health care, I did what came natural. I documented it.”