Fighting to save a family in a dying steel town

LaToya Ruby Frazier describes her work as “blurring the line between self-portraiture and social documentary.”

Her method of collaborating with the people she photographs, often her family, as well as voluntarily becoming the subject herself, is readily apparent in her latest exhibit, “A haunted capital.” At the heart of Frazier’s work is a deep interest in the complex relationship between mother and daughter, she says, which is represented through interactions between herself, her mother and her grandmother.

“Documenting our intergenerational coexistence as three women that are invisible to history and society is at the core of each image,” Frazier says. “Without a combined effort of all three of our visions this work would not exist.”

Set against the backdrop of Braddock, Pennsylvania, the former steel mill town where Frazier was born and raised, her photographs are bleak, confrontational and raw. She portrays a struggling city and its effect on those who live in its shadow. “It is very difficult to photograph my family and my hometown,” Frazier says. “The fact that I believe in confronting problems instead of running or hiding from them is why I choose to photograph what is dearest and closest to me.”

Frazier began taking pictures as a teenager and was quickly drawn to the power of merging personal and social documentary work.

Her grandmother witnessed Braddock’s prosperous days as a thriving town. Her mother witnessed the closing of the steel mills and watched the city’s population plummet. Frazier witnessed the crack epidemic and the demise of her own family.

“Grandma Ruby died from pancreatic cancer and diabetes (in 2009),” she says. “Mom currently suffers from an unknown neurological disorder and cancer, and I was diagnosed with lupus 12 years ago.” For the past two years, Frazier has actively protested and photographed the closing of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Braddock Hospital, the only hospital serving the town’s population, which was 2,163 in the 2011 Census. Her family relied on the facility for medical treatment.

“The reshaping of rust-belt towns and the impact it has on communities is an urgent matter that needs to be documented,” she says.

She points to photography legends like Jacob Riis, whose work had an impact on social reform for living and working conditions; Lewis Hine, whose work helped lead to the creation of child labor laws; and Gordon Parks, who combatted poverty and racism with his camera.

“I will not allow my family to be reduced to a silent, invisible, abstract number,” Frazier says. Her work is on display at the Brooklyn Museum in New York from March 22 through August 11.

Raymond McCrea Jones, CNN

http://cnnphotos.blogs.cnn.com/2013/03/22/latoya-ruby-frazier/