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**NEWSMAKER**

## LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER

ONCE A THRIVING MANUFACTURING town, Braddock, Pennsylvania, was so thoroughly decimated by the collapse of the steel industry in the 1970s and the subsequent crack epidemic that in 2009, it was used as the setting for the post-apocalyptic movie *The Road*. It is also the place where the artist LaToya Ruby Frazier and three generations of her family were born and raised. Working in the tradition of black-and-white documentary photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, Frazier bears witness to the troubled history of her birthplace in photographs, testimonials, performances, and films.

In "LaToya Ruby Frazier: A Haunted Capital," opening at the Brooklyn Museum

in March, she uses portraits of herself and her family set against a backdrop of crumbling domestic spaces to show how the downfall of the city has been imprinted on the bodies and interior lives of the people who live there. At "Perspectives 182: LaToya Ruby Frazier," which opens in June at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, she features "Campaign for Braddock Hospital (Save Our Community Hospital)," a series of "photolithics" also shown at the 2012 Whitney Biennial. In the work Frazier juxtaposes Braddock residents' photographs and testimonials protesting the loss of their town's emergency room in 2010, and an advertising campaign for Levi Strauss shot in the area. In doing so, she makes a powerful statement about the gentrification

of urban spaces in the United States—on the outside the practice is thought to revitalize neighborhoods, but in reality it renders the original residents completely invisible.

Brienne Walsh spoke to Frazier shortly after the artist's well-received solo exhibition at Galerie Michel Rein's booth at Art Basel.

**BW:** Why did you first choose Braddock as a subject for your work?

**LRF:** In a sense, Braddock chose my family and me as subjects. Grandma Ruby, Mom, and I grew up in significantly different social and economic climates in the town. Grandma Ruby witnessed Braddock's prosperous days of department stores, theaters, and restaurants. Mom witnessed



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the steel mills closing and the white flight to suburban developments. I witnessed the crack epidemic and the demise of my family and community. The Braddock I lived in was in ruins, without much of the infrastructure my mother and grandmother had known. Between our three generations we not only witnessed—we also experienced and internalized—the end of industrialization and the rise of de-industrialization.

**BW:** How do the differences between the time periods manifest in your work?

**LRF:** My grandmother grew up in the 1950s as a single mother. She was much less willing to be photographed—she's in only a few of the images. Even in them, she remains mysterious, almost like she's at a masquerade. She is veiled. My mother, on the other hand, came up with a lot of ideas about how we should shoot; she let herself be more open. She had been in and out of the hospital because of cancer, so she would do these vulnerable things to herself. The photographs became an important way for her to communicate with me.

**BW:** Were there any similarities?

**LRF:** All of our bodies were deteriorating. I have lupus, my mother had cancer, my grandmother, who has since passed away, had diabetes. We were all sick.

**BW:** What do you hope viewers will see in "A Haunted Capital," which is composed largely of prints of your family?

**LRF:** The impact of the landscape on our bodies—all women in these three different women. The show will consist of 39 silver gelatin prints in the same size, 22 by 24 inches, and one larger work, 5 by 4 feet, which will be prominently featured. It's called *Momme Silhouettes*.

**BW:** What does it depict?

**LRF:** My mother and I are behind a bed sheet, and the camera is capturing our shadows. At the time it was taken, my mother wasn't doing well—she was being tested for epilepsy. I was taking some photographs one day, and she got curious about what I was doing. So she started duct-taping the sheet to the ceiling. She ended up shooting a whole bunch of portraits with me.

**BW:** What first called you to bear witness to what has happened—and continues to happen—in Braddock?

**LRF:** I am a documentarian preserving our histories, our experiences, and our testimonies. My refusal to see my family and community reduced to an abstract number or statistic is what calls me to action.

**BW:** Have there been any positive changes?

**LRF:** There are new efforts to revitalize

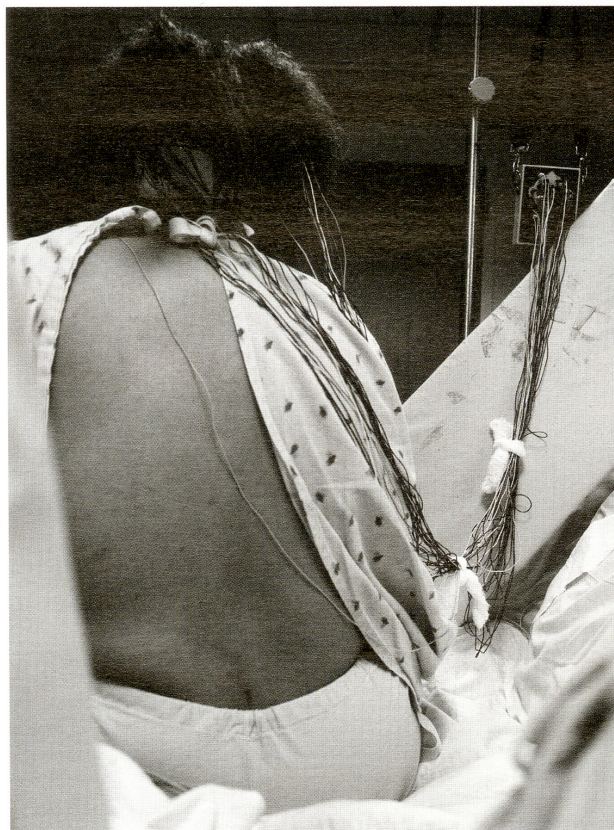
Braddock, but my concern is really a question: for whom? Decisions are being made about the future of Braddock that don't include social or economic reform for the population that has suffered the greatest impacts. I am witnessing an uprooting of our culture and identity; there is a lack of understanding, as well as prejudice.

**BW:** What is the greatest change you've seen in recent years?

**LRF:** The University of Pittsburgh hospital recently shut down our local emergency room. Now there's nowhere to go for people who have needs. Some have died already. The hospital itself is a global corporation that felt like it was losing money. It's planning on tearing down other hospitals in the region. Ours is just the first.

**BW:** What made you so angry about the Levi's advertisements shot in Braddock, which you've also protested in performances?

**LRF:** Levi Strauss never had a factory in Braddock, they just thought it would make a great backdrop for their product because it was once an industrial city. After they shot the ads, they gave the city one million dollars to build a community center. But we already have two community centers. All the money went into Mayor John Fetterman's revitalization and gentrification process.



**LaToya Ruby Frazier**  
PREVIOUS PAGE:  
*Wrapped In Gramps' Blanket*, from the "Homebody" series, 2010. Gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 in.

RIGHT:  
*Landscape of the Body (Epilepsy Test)*, 2011. Gelatin silver print, 24 x 40 in.

OPPOSITE TOP:  
*Momme Silhouettes*, 2010. Nine gelatin silver prints mounted in a grid, 60 x 48 in.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LATOYA RUBY FRATER AND GALLERIE MICHEL REIN, TWO IMAGES, KERRY RYAN MCFAE, THOMAS NOZKOWSKI, AND PACE GALLERY, NEW YORK

It refurbished the church he owns, but it didn't go back to the real people.

**BW:** *How did the hospital and Levi's fit together in the series?*

**LRF:** The Levi's campaign was released the same year as the demolition of our hospital. I saw it on billboards, subway stations, and phone booths in New York. It was necessary to counter this superficial propagandized ad campaign to bring awareness to individuals and families in Braddock being affected by a harsh reality—losing our largest employer and only health care provider.

**BW:** *What are your aesthetic concerns when you are taking your photographs?*

**LRF:** The history of photography is important to me. For instance, I am speaking to the history of social and personal documentary work embodied by artists such as Jacob Riis, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Robert Adams, and many others. I'm also looking at the work of other female artists such as Frida Kahlo, Claude Cahun, and Francesca Woodman for my more intimate portraits. It is my belief that documentary practice is an essential methodology to shed light on social and economic injustices in these times of Rust Belt revitalization and inequality in our health care system.

**BW:** *Ultimately, what do you hope the work accomplishes?*

**LRF:** The ultimate goal of my work is to preserve the gray areas that have been omitted from history for far too long. Cities can't be redeveloped without the destruction and loss of communities. It's time to set the record straight. I am growing to accept, however, that my work might not have an impact systemically until I am gone.