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CULTURE ART & DESIGN LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER PHOTOGRAPHY

"GENIUS" PHOTOGRAPHER LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER IS USING HER CAMERA AS A WEAPON

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LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER

In the 1920s, the steel-production town of Braddock, Pennsylvania was 22,000 strong. Now it is home to fewer than 2,500 residents. 33-year-old photographer and newly minted MacArthur «Genius,» LaToya Ruby Frazier knows them well. For more than a decade, she has documented the decline of her hometown and the myth of rustbelt gentrification, publishing a compilation of this work, *The Notion of Family*, in 2014.

The prestigious award is more than an impressive honor, however. «Despite all the barriers, roadblocks, and obstacles that have come into my path,» Frazier reflects, the prize proves that «I am doing what's right.» Her work has always been «a rebuttal to media reporting and mentalities that accuse black families in Braddock [of being] the cause of its blighted condition,» she explains. «Braddock has become a poster child for rust-belt revitalization, a place for 'urban pioneers discovering a new frontier' — never mind the continued crisis of racism, segregation, socioeconomic inequality, industrialism, environmental pollution, and healthcare inequity plaguing its population.»

«I will continue to make purposeful, useful, and meaningful work,» she promises. This project is far from over.

You once said in an interview that you grew up watching your family «being dismantled and dying in front of [you].» For you, is photography an artistic and literal composition? Can cameras put people back together?

The mind is the battleground for photography and imagery. Being a witness to so much sickness, disease, and death as a child made me sensitive to how I perceive myself in the world and how I perceive what surrounds me. I was using my photographs to render time and confront the things I could not control. My camera will never put back what has been taken from me, but through the process of making photographs I

am able to develop my mind. By developing my mind, I am able to project a life that I want to live despite all that I've seen and where my life began.

Because many of your photographs are portraits, they necessarily brush up against issues of perspective and objectification. How do you work against that? How do you try to empower the people in your pictures?

The reason I started making collaborative portraits with my grandmother and mother was to gain the authorship, agency, perspective, and voice that I felt was denied to early [twentieth]-century subjects like Florence Owens Thompson in the iconic image, «Migrant Mother.» The government's proliferation of this image silenced both the photographer Dorothea Lange and the sitter Florence Owens Thompson. My mother is a co-author that directed and created many of the photographs. I became the subject of the work as she turned the camera on me. In the history of social documentary photography rarely do disenfranchised subjects speak for themselves or document the crisis that is affecting them. The fact that my grandmother, mother, and myself are telling the story of the collapse of the steel industry, representing three different socioeconomic periods through our bodies and perspectives in Braddock, [Pennsylvania]—a story and history that has never been permitted to be told—for ourselves is empowering.



'GRANDMA RUBY AND ME' (2005)
LATOYA RUBY FAZIER/MICHEL REIN, PARIS/BRUSSELS

Is it dangerous to think of Braddock as a metaphor for these enormous structural issues that we face in America? Does it risk the humanity of the people you've photographed? Is it worth it?

I began making my artworks as a youth. Viewers have seen me struggle and grow in my artwork over a 12-year period where I laid my illness and body bare to confront larger societal ills. This is not an art project—it

is my life. It is my expression of what it means to come of age during the toll of Reaganomics in postindustrial America. There must be a human account, an archive, a record, and stories to preserve working-class life, especially at this moment, as we watch the mass media manipulate issues around gentrification, poverty,



‘AUNT MIDGIE AND GRANDMA RUBY’ (2007)
LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER/MICHEL REIN, PARIS/BRUSSELS

You title these photographs as if you’re speaking to people in your family. It’s not «my mom.» It’s «Mom.» It’s not «my grandmother, Ruby.» It’s «Grandma Ruby.» As viewers, do we have «permission» to think of your family as our family?

In our portraits I view my grandmother, mother, and me as one entity of time existing in the history of Braddock. We are like markers on a historic time line existing through three different socioeconomic periods: the 1930s, 1960s, and 1980s. Our work touches on universal topics life, death, love, and loss to larger structures of industrialism, environmental justice, healthcare inequity, segregation, rustbelt renewal, gentrification, family, and community. All these topics and more affect society and family life, so yes, the viewer should see a part of themselves in this work.

When you started this series in Braddock, were you ever scared of what you might see through your lens?

I was hopeful and intrigued by what I might learn through what the lens might capture. One recent surprise was when I chartered a helicopter and finally for the first time saw through the lens how much of a stronghold industrial capitalists still have on the residents of Braddock. Imagine an industrial suburb sitting in a valley along an ancient river just shy of a mile long dominated by 300 acres—and counting—of steel industry that is still operating today. The collision of 140 years of industrial pollution colliding with residents that don’t have quality access to healthcare and social services is a scary sight.



'LANDSCAPE OF THE BODY (EPILEPSY TEST)' (2011)
LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER/MICHEL REIN, PARIS/BRUSSELS

These photos are testimonies to real violence—committed against your family, the landscape, your friends. Do you want or expect to get answers from politicians or corporations to what you show?

The answers to crimes committed against the working class and the poor don't reside in politicians, business leaders, or corporations. The truth about these crimes committed against humanity and our ecosystem reside in the families, communities, and individuals that have suffered most. One particular role within my artwork is best described by James Baldwin in his 1962 essay «The Creative Process»:

The artist is distinguished from all other responsible actors in society—the politicians, legislators, educators, and scientists—by the fact that he is his own test tube, his own laboratory.... The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.

What would it mean to bring justice to Braddock? Do the photos themselves do that work?

Photographs have the potential to change minds and hearts. Artists, activists, and citizens together can advocate for justice but what we truly need laws that work for people over corporations. Laws for the welfare and wellness of people over corporate greed and profit. We have seen works like this in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century from photographers like Jacob Riis who[se] photographs led to child labor laws and Lewis Hine who[se] photographs led to social and economic reform for steel workers in Pittsburgh. I believe there is a current movement of artists and photographers on the ground making these works again throughout the rustbelt.



'MOMME (SHADOW)' (2008)

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER/MICHEL REIN, PARIS/BRUSSELS

You often characterize your camera as a weapon. You talk about using it to fight. Is it for war, though, or for protection?

The characterization of the use of my camera as a weapon is a direct reference to Gordon Parks who states in his autobiography, *A Choice of Weapons*, [that he] picked up a camera because it was my choice of weapon against what I hated most about the universe: racism, intolerance, poverty.» I learned about Gordon Parks' work first from a woman I met in a homeless shelter for families in Erie, Pennsylvania in 2000. I had been making portraits of families in homeless shelters that year to raise awareness that Erie, Pennsylvania had the highest percentage of homeless children in region. One day, I brought a gelatin silver print of the portrait I made of her, and she told me it reminded her of Gordon Parks, a photographer she learned about on television. That day, I ran to the bookstore and purchased as many of his books that I could. The work of Gordon Parks taught me that I could speak through photographs.