

Kirsten O'Regan: These Dark Histories

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A profile of photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier, whose exhibition A Haunted Capital is at the Brooklyn Museum through August.



LaToya Ruby Frazier (American, b. 1982). Self Portrait (March 10 am), 2009. Brooklyn Museum, Emily Winthrop Miles Fund, 2011.63.4. © LaToya Ruby Frazier. Photo by LaToya Ruby Frazier.

by Kirsten O'Regan

LaToya Ruby Frazier does not particularly love journalists, despite the fact that her photographs perform an almost journalistic function. Over the past decade, Frazier has recorded the parallel decline of her family's health and the unraveling social fabric of her de-industrialized hometown—enshrining the lives of those denied easy access to education, clean air, and healthcare in pristine silver gelatin prints. But telling one's own story is very different from having it told by others, and Frazier, more

than most, has a heightened sense of the importance of context.

I met with Frazier as her new exhibition at The Brooklyn Museum was in its final stages of installation. She'd been making the commute from New Jersey—where she now lives and works as a photography curator at Rutgers—more often than she perhaps would like; the coming exhibition had prevented her from making her customary trip home that month.

Home is Braddock, Pennsylvania—a town built on steel. It boasts America's first efficient, mass-production mill, and the first of Andrew Carnegie's libraries. But by 1982, when Frazier was born, the steel industry had collapsed and Braddock was already in decline. White flight had begun, and crack had hit the African American neighborhoods.

"I lived on Washington Avenue, which was approximately two blocks away from the steel mill," the artist recalls. "There were many families on that block but you noticed the difference between our block as you progressed up past Braddock Avenue and up the hill—lifestyles and class changed. So it was very clear to me from a young age that I was born into poverty."

Frazier spent much of her childhood in and out of hospitals, both to treat the lupus she was eventually diagnosed with at age twenty, and to accompany family members suffering from illnesses associated with the steel industry. This month, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette cited studies showing relatively poor air quality in southwestern Pennsylvania where Braddock is located. The paper's analysis of National Department of Health statistics indicated that people living in this region, during the period of 2000-2008, faced a 10 percent higher mortality rate from heart disease, respiratory disease, and lung cancer than the national average: all diseases exacerbated by exposure to industrial pollution. Frazier's grandmother, Ruby, died as a result of pancreatic cancer

and diabetes, and her mother is battling both cancer and an undiagnosed neurological disease.

During the Great Depression, Farm Security Administration photographers were charged with capturing images of the rural poor that “related people to the land and vice versa,” intended to support the FSA’s poverty-relief programs. In many ways, Frazier’s work is a continuation of this mission. “It’s really about how the environment, the landscape, impacts the body,” says the artist, seated coolly in the center of the gallery at the Brooklyn Museum.

Frazier’s current exhibition—A Haunted Capital—collects forty works spanning the eleven years of Frazier’s working life. The bulk of the show is comprised of portraits of her close relatives (her mother and grandmother are especially prominent) and still-lives of disheveled, recently vacated domestic nooks (Grandma Ruby’s pillow-piled chair; a disordered kitchen counter bearing an old, sagging hamburger). There are several “self-portraits”—often photographed with the help of the artist’s mother, with whom Frazier collaborates closely.

Frazier loved art from a young age. At six, she was drawing and painting family members “but,” she says, “I never really thought it would be able to be used to speak to larger issues.” She attributes her altered perspective to her Grandma Ruby, who “had a serious expectation that I would have a great education and that I would be smart and excel at everything.” The young LaToya did not disappoint: she started college at seventeen, completed a Master’s at twenty-five, and last year—at the age of thirty—exhibited at the Whitney Biennial.

Photographing the homeless as a student was invaluable, she says, because it “taught me immediately to never make work about something I’m not really living or experiencing.”

Tony Buba—a documentary filmmaker dubbed the “Bard of Braddock” by the Anthology Film Archives (who screened a series of his works last year) due to his unwavering focus on his hometown—has collaborated with Frazier, and speaks of her rapid rise in tones of wonder. “To think that fifteen years ago she was just a kid taking photographs in Braddock,” he says. “It’s a leap, a jump, it’s just incredible.” Frazier herself is less giddy. “I’m trying to be ok with being able to enjoy this moment,” she says quietly, looking around. “We’re sitting in eleven years worth of work right now. A very tight edit of eleven years.”

Frazier is nothing if not a conscientious editor, curating her physical presence as assiduously as she arranges her photographs. In the flesh, her appearance contrasts starkly with the lank-haired, singlet-wearing, rust-belt child of her self-portraits. When I met her in her Brooklyn

Museum space, she wore well-tailored grey pants, a white blouse, fitted grey waistcoat, black ankle boots and no-nonsense black-framed glasses. Her dark hair was swept back into a sleek ponytail.

Speaking carefully and with authority, she is a little like a vigilant military commander who, having scrupulously marshaled the troops, sends them out with a stoic awareness that they might desert, or worse still, betray her. Perhaps because of her declared unease with the interview process, she considers each question closely before answering—in complete, perfectly enunciated sentences. She encourages me, repeatedly, to fact check. Professionally amiable, she wordlessly repels overly personal inquiries.

This abstemiousness is surprising given Frazier’s raw, visceral, and deeply personal photographs. Her camera trespasses into the most intimate corners of her life—both physically (many photographs are taken in her family home) and emotionally (recording the aftermath of traumatic episodes: Frazier staring blankly at the lens after her grandmother’s death, her mother after surgery). This approach is in many ways the cornerstone of her practice: crossing the line between public and private space, she draws connections between the two, pointing to the need for a dialogue between personal and political.



LaToya Ruby Frazier (American, b. 1982). *Grandma Ruby and Me*, 2005. Brooklyn Museum, Emily Winthrop Miles Fund, 2011.63.1. © LaToya Ruby Frazier. Photo by LaToya Ruby Frazier.

While studying at Edinboro University in Pennsylvania, Frazier was drawn to photographing homeless youth under the guidance of her mentor Kathe Kowalski. She soon realized she could gain greater emotional depth by returning to her own home, but admits that working with family is far from easy. “You make yourself very vulnerable,” she explains. “It’s the most difficult work to make because your family has expectations, and they have their own presumptions about what you’re doing and who you are, so there’s never a moment when you’re off the hook.”

Despite her transgressions, Frazier recognizes the need to maintain some element of discretion—to fence off selective pockets of privacy. “It seems like I’m revealing a lot of intimate private moments,” she says, “[but] there’s a lot that I don’t photograph.”

The ethics and ambiguities of narrative-formation are central to her practice. Photographing the homeless as a student, early in her artistic career, was invaluable, she says, because it “taught me immediately to never make work about something I’m not really living or experiencing.”

Her protest culminated in a performance piece outside the temporary Levi’s Photo Workshop in SoHo. She rubbed her denim-clad body against the sidewalk until the fabric went to shreds.

In many ways Frazier is an archivist: a documentarian unearthing a history otherwise unseen. Occasionally, she takes on a more explicitly activist role: protesting the closing of Braddock Hospital, or interrogating the American myths underlying a Levi’s campaign set in Braddock. The 2010 campaign, entitled “Go Forth!”, romanticized Braddock as a new American frontier, depicting ruggedly photogenic locals and rustically picturesque locations alongside inspirational slogans like “Everybody’s work is equally important” to convey a message of intrepid urban revival. Frazier was intensely critical of this approach; its triumphant pioneer rhetoric stood in stark contrast with the less-than-glamorous lived experience of urban poverty. Her protest culminated in a performance piece, in which the artist executed a series of choreographed movements outside the temporary Levi’s Photo Workshop in SoHo. She rubbed her denim-clad body against the sidewalk until the fabric went to shreds.

Frazier’s choice of primary medium was informed by this subversive impulse. “As an artist you have to be well aware of all the many layers within art,” she says. “Conceptually, how you get to an idea should also be reinforced in the aesthetic.”

Studying feminist theory and Barthes under Kowalski, she became politically conscious about the images she made. Now, teaching her own students, she stresses the sometimes-sinister historical uses of photography. “I immediately make them understand the power of photography as a weapon that was used for propaganda to demonize and exterminate people,” she says. In our conversation, she refers specifically to early documentation of native Americans and slaves—in which photography was used as a pseudo-scientific tool of physiognomy; a means of definitively proclaiming the “otherness” of non-white people.

Frazier works within the by-now anachronistic analogue photography conventions of this early “scientific”

photography and the Farm Security Administration’s photography program as a way of referencing these earlier forms of social-documentary and as an attempt to subvert their underlying power structures. Framing is integral to her compositions—figures appear bordered by mirrors, doorways, photo-frames. The subjects seem trapped, but Frazier does not merely expose power structures; she also destabilizes them by embedding multiple viewpoints. “My mother is also operating the camera,” she explains, “and I appear in front of the work to point that out; to break that hierarchy of photographer and sitter.

“For me as a student the question was always, ‘how do you take privilege, education and theory and bridge it with the reality of what people are really facing in the world?’ And the way to do it is to actually give them the apparatus and to let their perspective and point of views be archived. Let them document it.”

Despite being geographically rooted in Braddock, her work can, she believes, take on broader significance. “I see this family work as a signifier, saying, ‘It’s time to step up and tell your own story, and document your own life, and speak out against inequality.’”

Frazier’s photographs are a personal attempt at salvation: “It’s realizing that whatever the cyclical beast has been that has ravaged my family, that I would stop it and confront it every time I froze an image in time.”

In the black-and-white images of *A Haunted Capital*, careful juxtapositions of texture and pattern attest to the fragility of flesh and material life: pillowy under-eye circles against taut, striped cloth, lumpy dimples of cellulite on a cheap floral coverlet, deeply-etched wrinkles against the plastic sheen of a pin-up’s breasts. Another layer of contrast can be found between works: The exhibition presents this intimate, studio-esque portraiture alongside Frazier’s street photography on the crumbling boulevards of Braddock. Cluttered domestic interiors peopled by frail figures are interspersed with a deserted landscape of gutted buildings, twisted metal, encroaching ivy—all rendered in macabre, chiaroscuro lighting.

It is in this unflinching collision—the intersection of public disrepair and quiet, desperate, private perseverance—that the full political freight of Frazier’s photography makes itself felt. But it is in the more subtle contrasts—the modal shifts between, for example, hunched anxiety (a frail Ruby standing disconsolately on a street corner in “Grandma Ruby and U.P.M.C. Braddock Hospital on Braddock Avenue, 2007”) and playful performativity (the gorgeous shadows cast by Frazier’s mother’s body behind delicate patterned cloth in “Momme Silhouettes, 2010”)—that the quiet, human dignity of her project become clear.

Political statements aside, Frazier's photographs are also a personal attempt at salvation: a refusal to succumb to the disadvantages of urban poverty, poor health or lack of historical awareness. "For me," Frazier says, "it's realizing that whatever the cyclical beast has been that has ravaged my family, that I would stop it and confront it every time I froze an image in time." Her work is an assertion that, "I will no longer be consumed by these types of dark histories."

Frazier embraces the multivalent meanings inscribed in photographs. For her, they too are text, but written in an idiom more complex than the English language. Regardless of her own political beliefs, she does not believe that art can change policy. Rather, she seeks to create a space for psychological reflection.

"My work is a series of questions," she says. It is designed "for someone to come up to, and project their own race, class and gender on these images and introspectively consider who they are, and what presumptions and biases they have about the people in my images." Her work, Frazier is quick to point out, only attains true significance dialogically, as part of a social process the artist is eager to engage in. As I leave, she is discussing a feature of the exhibition that will enable visitors to ask her questions via iPad. "I'm really into the idea," she gushes. "I'll do my best to answer as many as I can, as thoughtfully as possible."

Kirsten O'Regan is a freelance writer and NYU graduate student. Born in England and raised in South Africa and New Zealand, she now lives in East Harlem. Her work has appeared in The Paris Review.