

ART REVIEW

The Flesh and the Asphalt, Both Weak LaToya Ruby Frazier Photography at Brooklyn Museum

By KAREN ROSENBERG
Published: March 28, 2013



"Fifth Street Tavern and UPMC Braddock Hospital on Braddock Avenue" (2011)
Courtesy of LaToya Ruby Frazier and the Brooklyn Museum

Braddock, Pa., is about nine miles southeast of Pittsburgh, hugging the eastern bank of the Monongahela River. But in the photographs of LaToya Ruby Frazier, who grew up in this steel town, its coordinates are not so precise. Braddock is in the bodies of Ms. Frazier's elder family members, who used to work at the local mills; it's in the empty foundation of the hospital that used to serve them, before it was closed and demolished. It's there in every picture Ms. Frazier has taken, and it's here in her outstanding first New York solo show.

The exhibition, "LaToya Ruby Frazier: A Haunted Capital" at the Brooklyn Museum, follows her standout appearances in the 2012 Whitney Biennial and in the New Museum's "Younger Than Jesus" triennial of 2009. It offers further proof of her gifts and a deeper look at her series "The Notion of Family," initiated in 2002.

This preternaturally mature body of work (Ms. Frazier is just 31) connects bedrooms and streetscapes, the suffering of loved ones and the afflictions of a "distressed municipality" (the

state's official term for Braddock and other ailing Rust Belt towns). Simultaneously introspective and extroverted, it's composed of arresting black-and-white photographs that sometimes look like studio portraits or social documentaries but aren't fully at home in either category.

Take "Huxtables, Mom and Me," in which Ms. Frazier stares at the camera and her mother, reflected in a full-length mirror. She is wearing a faded T-shirt emblazoned with the cast and logo of "The Cosby Show," a program she recalls having watched "to escape the reality of my dismantled working-class family." You don't even need to read that statement, in the wall label, to grasp that this is an image of regression to childhood that's laced with a very adult sense of disillusionment.

Another photograph shows an elderly woman standing next to a lamppost outside the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center in Braddock. It seems to belong to the genre of street photography — the woman does not make eye contact, and the camera catches a man striding through the intersection — but the main subject is identified as "Grandma Ruby," and we have already

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/29/arts/design/latoya-ruby-frazier-photography-at-brooklyn-museum.html?emc=eta1&_r=0

seen her as the frail odalisque of “Grandma Ruby on Her Bed.” A few pictures later we will see her lying in her coffin, attended by her daughter and granddaughter and some dolls from her collection.

We will also see the hospital building, or what remains of it, after it’s been hit by the wrecking ball. Ms. Frazier’s series “Campaign for Braddock Hospital (Save Our Community Hospital),” shown at the Whitney but not included here, fills the narrative gap. In one shot here a tavern sits on the edge of the rubble-strewn lot, looking very much like a ghost-town facade.

The show’s installation, overseen by the museum’s contemporary art managing curator, Eugenie Tsai, with generous input from Ms. Frazier, cuts back and forth between family and community scenes to filmic effect. It’s anchored by wallpaper at both ends of the gallery, an immersive patchwork reproducing Ms. Frazier’s works and found family photographs along with archival images of Braddock and other Rust Belt towns.

The wallpaper, Ms. Frazier says, was inspired by her discovery that a 2008 book on the history of Braddock contained no mention of African-Americans. A corrective to that history, the wallpaper is accompanied by a triptych of raster-etched aluminum plates that positions a childhood snapshot of Ms. Frazier between a biography of her ancestor John Frazier and a portrait of Andrew Carnegie.

Not as pointed, but more poignant, is the self-portrait she took in her grandparents’ old house after their deaths, wearing the pajamas of

“Gramps” and looking alarmingly vulnerable in the decrepit interior. (This picture and related ones in the “Homebody” series, taken at the house, aren’t in the show, but this one is tucked into the museum’s fifth-floor collection display, “American Identities.”)

In another self-portrait she wears Grandma Ruby’s satin pajama pants and poses in front of a striped bedsheet (also her grandmother’s), looking haggard. The label tells us that this picture is one of several that document Ms. Frazier’s periodic attacks of lupus, an immune-system disease.

Here and in photographs of her mother and grandmother Ms. Frazier’s candid approach to illness may bring to mind projects like Hannah Wilke’s “Intra-Venus,” an intense photo diary of her terminal cancer.

Elsewhere Ms. Frazier looks at more than her own body. “I view Grandma Ruby, Mom and myself as one entity,” she has said. Ultimately, the photographs comment on the toxins lurking in Braddock and other deindustrialized cities, toxins that may also have sickened her mother and grandmother. (Ms. Frazier learned in 2008 that both had diagnoses of cancer.)

You can’t go home again, as the saying holds. In the photographs that make up “A Haunted Capital” Ms. Frazier is grappling with a different problem: not being able to leave.

“LaToya Ruby Frazier: A Haunted Capital” runs through Aug. 11 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park; (718) 638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/29/arts/design/latoya-ruby-frazier-photography-at-brooklyn-museum.html?emc=eta1&_r=0

The Flesh And the Asphalt, Both Weak



BRIAN HARKIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

LaToya Ruby Frazier: A Haunted Capital "Momme Silhouettes" is part of this photography show at the Brooklyn Museum.

Braddock, Pa., is about nine miles southeast of Pittsburgh, hugging the eastern bank of the Monongahela River. But in the photographs of LaToya Ruby Frazier, who grew up in this steel town, its coordinates are not so precise. Braddock is in the bodies of Ms. Frazier's elder family members, who used to work at the local mills; it's in the empty foundation of the hospital that used to serve them, before it was closed and demolished. It's there in every picture Ms. Frazier has taken, and it's here in her outstanding first New York solo show.

The exhibition, "LaToya Ruby Frazier: A Haunted Capital" at the Brooklyn Museum, follows her stand-out appearances in the 2012 Whitney Biennial and in the

New Museum's "Younger Than Jesus" triennial of 2009. It offers further proof of her gifts and a deeper look at her series "The Notion of Family," initiated in 2002. This preternaturally mature body of work (Ms. Frazier is just 31) connects bedrooms and streetscapes, the suffering of loved ones and the afflictions of a "distressed municipality" (the state's official term for Braddock and other ailing Rust Belt towns). Simultaneously introspective and extroverted, it's composed of arresting black-and-white photographs that sometimes look like studio portraits or social documentaries but aren't fully at home in either category.

Take "Huxtables, Mom and Me," in which Ms. Frazier stares at the camera

Continued on Page 25

The Flesh and the Asphalt, Both Weak

From Weekend Page 21

and her mother, reflected in a full-length mirror. She is wearing a faded T-shirt emblazoned with the cast and logo of "The Cosby Show," a program she recalls having watched "to escape the reality of my dismantled working-class family." You don't even need to read that statement, in the wall label, to grasp that this is an image of regression to childhood that's laced with a very adult sense of disillusionment.

Another photograph shows an elderly woman standing next to a lamppost outside the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center in Braddock. It seems to belong to the genre of street photography — the woman does not make eye contact, and the camera catches a man striding through the intersection — but the main subject is identified as "Grandma Ruby," and we have already seen her as the frail odalisque of "Grandma Ruby on Her Bed." A few pictures later we will see her lying in her coffin, attended by her daughter and granddaughter and some dolls from her collection.

We will also see the hospital building, or what remains of it, after it's been hit by the wrecking ball. Ms. Frazier's series "Campaign for Braddock Hospital (Save Our Community Hospital)," shown at the Whitney but not included here, fills the narrative gap. In one shot here a tavern sits on the edge of the rubble-strewn lot, looking very much like a ghost-town facade.

The show's installation, overseen by the museum's contemporary art managing curator, Eugenie Tsai, with generous input from Ms. Frazier, cuts back and forth between family and community scenes to filmic effect. It's anchored by wallpaper at both ends of the gallery, an immersive patchwork reproducing Ms. Frazier's works and found family photographs along with archival images of Braddock and other Rust Belt towns.

The wallpaper, Ms. Frazier says, was inspired by her discovery that a 2008 book on the history of Braddock contained no mention of African-Americans. A

"LaToya Ruby Frazier: A Haunted Capital" runs through Aug. 11 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park; (718) 638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BROOKLYN MUSEUM

LaToya Ruby Frazier, the photographer and subject of "Huxtables, Mom and Me" (2009), above. Below, "Fifth Street Tavern and UPMC Braddock Hospital on Braddock Avenue" (2011).



corrective to that history, the wallpaper is accompanied by a triptych of raster-etched aluminum plates that positions a childhood snapshot of Ms. Frazier between a biography of her ancestor John Frazier and a portrait of Andrew Carnegie.

Not as pointed, but more poignant, is the self-portrait she took in her grandparents' old

house after their deaths, wearing the pajamas of "Gramps" and looking alarmingly vulnerable in the decrepit interior. (This picture and related ones in the "Homebody" series, taken at the house, aren't in the show, but this one is tucked into the museum's fifth-floor collection display, "American Identities.")

In another self-portrait she

wears Grandma Ruby's satin pajama pants and poses in front of a striped bedsheet (also her grandmother's), looking haggard. The label tells us that this picture is one of several that document Ms. Frazier's periodic attacks of lupus, an immune-system disease.

Here and in photographs of her mother and grandmother Ms. Frazier's candid approach to illness may bring to mind projects like Hannah Wilke's "Intra-Venus," an intense photo diary of her terminal cancer.

Elsewhere Ms. Frazier looks at more than her own body. "I view Grandma Ruby, Mom and myself as one entity," she has said. Ultimately, the photographs comment on the toxins lurking in Braddock and other deindustrialized cities, toxins that may also have sickened her mother and grandmother. (Ms. Frazier learned in 2008 that both had diagnoses of cancer.)

You can't go home again, as the saying holds. In the photographs that make up "A Haunted Capital" Ms. Frazier is grappling with a different problem: not being able to leave.