

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jessica Lanay, "Intimate Debris: Nature, Industry, and the Body in the Photography of LaToya Ruby Frazier," *ArtSlant*, November 30, 2017

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INTIMATE DEBRIS: NATURE, INDUSTRY, AND THE BODY IN THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER



LaToya Ruby Frazier's photography braids together the intimacies between landscape, industry, and the Black woman's body. Impactful, private, and silver ensconced, her images reveal a sometimes wonderful and other times tragic interdependency. In two recent Pittsburgh exhibitions—*The Notion of Family* at Silver Eye Center for Photography and *On The Making Of Steel Genesis: Sandra Gould Ford* at the August Wilson Center, a shared exhibition of photography by Frazier and Sandra Gould Ford—Frazier captures the interconnectivity between the landscape and the body and how the elements of one penetrate the other: "I believe that the history of a place is written on the body of its inhabitants and their environment," Frazier says. "Often in my photographs, whether it's a landscape of a house or an aerial view of railroads or a steel mill, I see the landscape as a portrait, a portrait of the body."

GLADSTONE GALLERY

It is perhaps the simplest of ironies, no pun intended, that the medium through which Frazier explores genealogies between family, nature, and industry requires the element of the human hand to exact transformation—like in the steel industry. “I see chemicals and elements that can build empires, harm, or kill, alongside chemistry that makes silver halide appear on film (gelatin silver print) and ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide visible on paper (cyanotype),” says the artist.



United States Steel Mon Valley Works E. T. Plant, 2013, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/ Rome

Steel mills supported hundreds of thousands of families for more than a century, providing the backbone from which other industries and commerce flowed. Money paid from the steel mills to employees drove local economies that, for some generations, produced memories of prosperity. The progeny of those generations, however, face the shuttered storefronts that accompanied the steel industry's decline. This physical and emotional inheritance, the indelible echoes of steel mills, lives on in the children of the small cities that deteriorate under state and federal fiduciary neglect. With a piercing eye and fervorous emotion, Frazier witnesses and documents this enduring legacy.

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GLADSTONE GALLERY

This body of Frazier's photography centers on her home of Braddock, Pennsylvania, site of massive steel industrial complexes, past and present. The environs of steel cities have trained the artist to search for intimate debris: the entanglements between human bodies, nature, material resources, and businesses engulfed, enriched, and discarded. Frazier's images picture how far these entities reach into one another and become passed down through generations: how do they haunt one another?



Momme Portrait Series (Shadow), 2008, Gelatin silver print 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/ Rome

The Notion of Family focuses on the bodies of Frazier, her mother, her Grandmother, and Braddock itself. Each photograph is a tessera in a genealogical mosaic. The city-body of Braddock becomes encoded in the blood of its residents, who continue to live shoulder to shoulder with the afterlife of steel mills, and the film of metals they aspirated into the air. Frazier says:

When you inquire about intimacy I think you are by extension pointing out the bonds, camaraderie, and trust I have in the portraits produced with my grandmother, mother, and Sandra Gould Ford [a photographer and Frazier's co-exhibitor at the August Wilson Center show]. Not only is there trust, but also an identity of sameness. Although each of us individually have our own encounter with

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Pittsburgh in the 30s, 50s, 60s and 80s, I see us as one entity of time consistently confronting the injustices of our history.



Grandma Ruby, Mom and Me, 2009, Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/ Rome

The encounters that Frazier describes are often rendered present in her work through their absence. For example, she exhibits several photographs of her grandmother Ruby's house before and after her death. In one photograph, taken after the home was emptied, hair bobbles and pins, a pack of Pall Malls, and hangars rest on the carpet, leaving behind traces of living: the absence of adorned hair for the bobbles, the absence of lips to smoke the cigarettes, the absence of clothes for the hangars, and bodies to inhabit those clothes. In another photograph in the series, Frazier and her mother stand beside Grandma Ruby's coffin, sentinels of three generations who, through love, dedication, and endurance, outlived the steel industry. "These are generational narratives of triumph and a will to survive regardless of circumstance, invisibility, and death,"

GLADSTONE GALLERY

says Frazier, describing the series. “There is a direct self-awareness and knowledge of these matters in the portrait *Grandma Ruby, Mom and Me* (2009) as my mother and I stand guard in front of Grandma Ruby’s body in her casket decorated by a few of her porcelain dolls and all the portraits we made together.”



Video still from *Detox Braddock UPMC*, 2011, Single-channel video (color, sound), 22:24 min. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise,

New York/ Rome

Another puissant example is Frazier’s video, *Detox Braddock UPMC*, 2011. In a still photograph from the video, Frazier and her mother sit in a cluttered room with their feet in baths. They look down curiously as man in a lab coat blurs the left foreground. “The doctor is pointing out heavy metal pulled out from the pores of our feet due to the ion charge on the foot bath,” says Frazier, describing the scene. “My mother and I did the detox because we were skeptical if it was real. We were also looking to alternative medicine to combat the discrimination we constantly face in doctor’s offices and inaccurate medical records. When I saw the metal floating in my foot bath I observed the landscape of Braddock and the Edgar Thomson Steel Works.” Frazier documents life lived in close proximity to the chemical industry, posing a question of price: what is the cost of living in the shadow of industry? What is the cost of nature learning to form itself around and with the manmade particles of that industry? Where does care start and stop for discriminated bodies living during and in the afterlife of industry?

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Video still from *Detox Braddock UPMC*, 2011, Single-channel video (color, sound), 22:24 min. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise,

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*“...women birthed the workforce, worked in the steel mills,
took care of their men with job-related ailments, and were
exposed to industrial toxicity...”*

Similar questions of care, health, and landscape appear in other photographs: many are taken of the UPMC-Braddock Hospital demolition site and at the still operational steel corporations, where Frazier shoots fences and natural geographic features delineating fields of space. In a picture of the ET Plant-United States Steel Mon Valley Work Site, residential spaces ride the spine of the fences to steel mill property. So too does the steel mill contort the line of the Monongahela River that is ribboned on its other side by railroad tracks, hills, and distant residential buildings. This image represents a system of dependency that crystallizes in photographs of Frazier's family, which, like many other families in Braddock, once relied on the steel mill and the UPMC medical industrial complex for healthcare and employment. But the domestic interiors of Frazier's photos shows us the hyper-real cycle of generational influence these industries have and how different generations of families have different perspectives of their hometowns based on the failings of industry and governments.

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Landscape of the Body (Epilepsy Test), 2011, Gelatin silver print, 24 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/

Rome

Some of Frazier's photographs draw the viewer's attention towards related themes of the human body and demolished architecture as sites of former habitation. In *Epilepsy Test, Landscape of the Body Series, 2011*, we see the exposed back of Frazier's mother in a hospital gown juxtaposed beside the UPMC-Braddock hospital building's gutted interior. Vulnerabilities, intimate spaces of dependency, and sites of habitation for perhaps neglect are suggested and offered here for thought and consideration. Juxtaposed as a diptych, the photographs, says Frazier, make a "direct connection":

On the left you see the wires from my mother's head lash down her bare back connected to a medical device. On the right you see the entrails, the gut of the hospital building ripped open with electrical wiring, cables, concrete and debris spilling out. I'll never forget documenting the UPMC Braddock hospital demolition and feeling how the ground shook and trembled like a convulsion or spasm similar to how my mother described her epilepsy-like seizures. The irony about being four generations of Black women in an industrial landscape during a post-industrial economy in Braddock and Pittsburgh is the historic omission and carelessness towards the fact