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Teri Henderson, "LaToya Ruby Frazier," *Artforum*, January 15, 2025

ARTFORUM

1000 WORDS

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER

On her monument to the Community Health Workers of Baltimore

By Teri Henderson ☒

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LaToya Ruby Frazier. *More Than Conquerors: A Monument for Community Health Workers of Baltimore, Maryland 2021-2022, 2022, 18 stainless steel IV poles, 66 ink-jet prints and text panels.* Installation view, Baltimore Museum of Art, 2024. Photo: Mitro Hood.

*LaToya Ruby Frazier is an imagemaker and a prominent advocate for visual justice and democratizing museum spaces. For more than two decades, she has created artwork that honors the seldom represented lives of people from working-class backgrounds and America's industrial heartland. Initially created for the Fifty-Eighth Carnegie International (2022–23)—where it won the Carnegie Prize—her acclaimed installation *More Than Conquerors: A Monument for Community Health Workers of Baltimore, Maryland 2021–2022*, recently entered the Baltimore Museum of Art's permanent collection, where it is currently on view through March 26, 2025.*

The photographic installation features a series of portraits of health care workers and their related testimonies, each mounted on one of eighteen stainless-steel medical IV poles positioned at socially distant intervals, the result of a multiyear collaboration with a Baltimore-based network of doctors and health care professionals who were frontline workers during the Covid-19 pandemic, and whose responsibilities included dispensing the vaccine to underserved communities. More specifically, it is a testament to the selflessness of Community Health Workers (CHWs), public health workers who serve as a bridge between the health care system and the community served, risking their lives for what is often less than minimum wage. Monumental in its scale and impact, More Than Conquerors makes invisible folks visible and allows people of color in Baltimore, a predominantly Black city with a history of medical racism, to have their words and images viewed in their flagship museum. Here, the artist discusses the work's collective beginnings, her mission to democratize museums, and the creation of alternative monuments.



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *More Than Conquerors: A Monument for Community Health Workers of Baltimore, Maryland 2021-2022* (detail), 2022, 18 stainless steel IV poles, 66 ink-jet prints and text panels. Installation view, Baltimore Museum of Art, 2024. Photo: Mitro Hood.

I'M FROM BRADDOCK, PENNSYLVANIA, a historic steel town. It is where Andrew Carnegie's first steel plant, the Edgar Thomson Steel Works, is located and still operates, and it is where his first free public library was built. Being from a town that has all these monuments for industrial capitalists, to then switch to Baltimore, another industrial Black working-class town with these monuments erected to George Washington, allows me to consider and think about ways to subvert those types of power. It has given me a deep poetic sense and responsibility to help Americans see this history in the twenty-first century.

In 2015, the Contemporary and the Baltimore School for the Arts brought me together with Dr. Lisa Cooper of the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Equity. They asked us, "What could happen if an artist and a doctor collaborated? Could you make art that would be useful for society?" That planted the seed, and here we are, nine years later.

Dr. Cooper and her colleague Dr. Chidinma Ibe introduced me to their whole team. Dr. Ibe taught me about “Amplifying the Lived Experiences of Community Health Workers (ALEC),” her board-approved study with health workers, while Dr. Cooper kept emphasizing “Photovoice,” which is a method doctors use when they work with patients who have to remain anonymous for the sake of scientific objectivity, so doctors give them cameras and send them across the city. That’s when I knew that the best way to put working-class people at the center of an exhibition would be to use Photovoice. In this case, participants photographed and depicted social determinants of health (the socioeconomic factors that affect one’s health and well-being, such as income and neighborhood) and then wrote two hundred words about why they took that photograph.

I said to Community Health Workers: “I want to create your presidential portrait.” During the time creating this series, Dr. Ibe and I met with four cohorts of health workers on Zoom. I showed them some of my past work (*The Notion of Family*, 2001–14, and *Flint Is Family*, 2016) to teach them how to compose photographs. What’s amazing about integrating amateur photographers’ work with mine is that I’m treating them like they are contemporary artists worthy of being seen as contemporary artists, even though they may not be formal practitioners. The way the Monument is designed means that CHWs are now recipients of a Carnegie Prize. Andrew Carnegie must be turning in his grave.

When you think about the tall order that health workers have been given to overcome in Baltimore due to structural, spatial, and institutional racism, as well as an invisible virus that was killing all of us indiscriminately, on top of years of disenfranchisement from the steel industry, you would have to come up with that title: *More Than Conquerors*. A monumental, forceful title that is part gospel celebration, part actual biblical scripture.

To make the work itself monumental, I acquired eighteen medical intravenous stands. When our loved ones were being rushed into the emergency room because they got Covid, the two things they were going to be hooked up to were a ventilator and an IV pole. This is universal medical equipment that every American recognizes, no matter what their socioeconomic background is.



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *More Than Conquerors: A Monument for Community Health Workers of Baltimore, Maryland* 2021-2022 (detail), 2022, 18 stainless steel IV poles, 66 ink-jet prints and text panels, each 28 × 24". Photo: Mitro Hood.

The vertical metal frames around the photographs are double-sided. I chose to modify the IV poles using medical frames, which adds another rectangular armature and locks these portraits and adjoining text in place. I’m constructing a permanent monument that cannot

be torn apart. One of the things that I am saying as a contemporary artist is that what they have to say is equally important as its visual representation. I'm saying to the museum world, we're not going to keep doing this top-down thing where you talk down to everyday people. The only way to subvert that is to literally design their voices permanently into the artwork so it can't be taken apart, so we don't need the wall label. I am also saying to you as the viewer: These are the prophets and apostles of our time.

The piece is absolutely a twenty-first-century workers' monument. How would we think and treat each other if we had monuments to workers erected in this country, workers who are currently living in our cities? What would it mean to have one activated now, in real time, while they're alive and get to receive the recognition they deserve? Imagine what our mentalities would be like, and what the social fabric of this nation would be if we honored what we refuse to perceive. We lost millions of lives, yet here are these unsung heroes risking everything to provide people with the vaccine and to care for them.

This monument is based on trust, respect, and dignity. Things aren't as black-and-white as people believe, and I've found ways to reflect this reality throughout the whole artwork, through written testimonies and portraits, through who's located near whom and how they relate to each other, and who trained who, who mentored who. I'm setting up these meta-narratives within the way that the sculpture is architecturally designed to bring a type of peace, healing, and reconciliation to a health care system that has a lot of mistrust for valid reasons.



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *More Than Conquerors: A Monument for Community Health Workers of Baltimore, Maryland 2021-2022* (detail), 2022, 18 stainless steel IV poles, 66 ink-jet prints and text panels, each 28 × 24". Photo: Mitro Hood.

My work has a very specific mission: to help museums be on the right side of history, to help them question their own power structure, their social caste system. The best way to do that is to democratize the arts. That's one part of the Monument's mission; the other is to allow everyday Americans to come into a national museum and feel welcomed into that space, to understand that that museum is a part of them because that's their city and where they pay taxes, and they have a right to access it. And finally, that they can see themselves represented with an exhibition about them and their lives.

I'm trying to set an example for artists who want to make work about social justice and cultural change in the art market, who want to change the art world and change museums. You do that by offering an opportunity to gallerists and collectors to do something meaningful with you, which, here, is to ensure that the work permanently goes to the Baltimore Museum of Art, the city where it originated.

The immense challenge of the next four years is very real, and I think that the art world should recognize and send support and resources to artists who are willing to risk their livelihoods to do important work to make this country a better place, uphold American democracy, continue to fight for the reconciliation and healing our citizens need, and keep reaching for visual justice.