LaToya Ruby Frazier

LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Shea Doing Crochet Braids in Her Cousin Andrea's Hair for Andrea's Daughter's Wedding*, Flint, Michigan, 2016-2017, Gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 inches (76.2 x 101.6 cm). © LaToya Ruby Frazier. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Black and white photograph depicting a moment of community set in an everyday bedroom. The entire scene is in black and white, with strong shadows and bright lights to evoke a sense of depth to complement the intimate action of haircare taking place on the bed. Looking from the angle of the headboard, the photograph captures two women on the bed, one in a dark tank top, and one in white, the latter of which is tending to the hair of the former. In the background, a little girl with a ponytail gazes out the bedroom window, and two portraits stand tall on the dresser next to her. In

the farthest part of the background, a piano sits against the wall. The woman getting her hair done is holding up a mirror at arm's length, looking at herself and the work being done.

A hallmark of photojournalism is the passivity of its practitioners. These photographers may travel to hard-to-access places and shine a bright light on the injustices they find there, but they do it as witnesses rather than participants. This is why LaToya Ruby Frazier is not a photojournalist or even a documentary photographer, though she does document the world photographically. Frazier is often an active participant in the communities she photographs, with a clear and urgent political motive. She writes: "My position and role as daughter, photographer, and filmmaker transcends the objective practice in classic documentary, which has continuously undermined the Black family experience by avoiding our emotional and psychological realm."

Frazier grew up in the postindustrial wreckage of America, in Braddock, Pennsylvania. The work that first brought her acclaim, *The Notion of Family*, features Frazier herself, three generations of Frazier women, and her home and town. Braddock, a majority-Black city, is on the banks of the Monongahela River and is home to Andrew Carnegie's first steel mill, in operation since 1875, which drew most of the residents, or their ancestors, to Braddock. The city is a near ruin, its people treated with official negligence, as deindustrialization and environmental degradation sucks the lifeblood of the city away. Frazier's photographs, made cooperatively with the people in them, are both a case study and scream of rage and pain. She describes the project this

way: “The collaboration between my family and myself blurs the line between self-portraiture and social document. Utilizing photography and video to navigate dynamics of the roles we play complicates the usual classifications of functional and dysfunctional families.”

Frazier’s work has expanded well beyond the bounds of her hometown, to other hollowed-out working-class cities, and continues to build on the conceptual legacy of documentary photographers. It directly calls out the racism that drives a wealth of ills, including healthcare inequality, poverty, and environmental toxicity. Often, her photographs are presented with texts written in the words of the subject depicted, sometimes with health statistics or other damning records. This agglomeration of qualities—Frazier’s personal participation, the engagement and autonomy of her subjects in their self-presentation, the stark reality of the slow catastrophe of postindustrial life, and clear data—combines to create the beginning of a new movement in photography, one that demands the rights of citizens to live dignified lives as individuals.

—Laura Steward

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b. 1982, Braddock, Pennsylvania, United States
MacArthur Fellow, 2015

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