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# The Living Artist

**On Photography**

By TEJU COLE FEB. 10, 2016

“United States Steel Mon Valley Works Edgar Thomson Plant,” 2013. CreditLaToya Ruby Frazier

If you look down toward the river from the upper section of Braddock Avenue, you see a landscape entirely altered by heavy industry. The Edgar Thomson Steelworks was Andrew Carnegie’s first mill. With the other mills in the area now shut down, it is also his last. The industrial landscape on which it sits is interrupted by plumes of smoke and looks blasted and forlorn, like a medieval battlefield or futuristic dystopia. And right next to the mill, to the west and north, is the town of Braddock proper, a grid of single-family homes and empty plots, only a few miles away from downtown Pittsburgh.

I spent a night in Homestead, across the Monongahela River from Braddock. In July 1892, a confrontation there cost at least nine steelworkers and three security agents their lives. The Carnegie Steel Company, under the direction of Henry Clay Frick, had bloodily suppressed a union strike. Years later, Carnegie and Frick, each by then immensely wealthy, parted on bitter terms. On his death bed, Carnegie sent a conciliatory letter to Frick, to which Frick is said to have retorted, “Tell him I’ll see him in hell, where we both are going.” But that was almost a century ago. Frick and Carnegie have now settled into benign reputation. In December I went to the Frick Collection in New York, and in January I saw a concert at Carnegie Hall.

Many things are named for Andrew Carnegie in the Pittsburgh area: universities, libraries, foundations, museums and think tanks. Before long, I tire of seeing his face everywhere and encountering at every turn his guilt-ridden philanthropy. There are hundreds of his public libraries across the nation, and they are, in a sense, the core of his giving. The very first was built in Braddock in 1888.

A photograph of two women. One of them is in profile, her eye lowered. The other, her face halved by that profile, looks directly forward. They both wear closefitting black wig caps. Their resemblance is evident: the same slight arch of eyebrow, the mouths that seem to be halves of the same mouth. A mother and daughter.

Before I went to Braddock, I looked up recent news about the town in The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. There was very little, and most of it was grim. “Braddock man’s guilty plea in shooting death gets him 4–8 years in prison.” “Braddock man charged with burglarizing Wilmerding home.” But at the bottom of the page was an item from September 2015: “Braddock artist wins MacArthur Foundation ‘genius’ grant.”

Until LaToya Ruby Frazier got hold of a disposable camera in high school, her great passion was drawing and watercolor. In the shadow of the Edgar Thomson Steelworks, Frazier began to take photographs. Her most sustained early subjects were herself, her mother and her grandmother: unposed photographs of the family, double portraits, interior scenes. She portrayed, too, the vulnerability and ill health of her family members, unflinching images that convey that what is shameful is not the body that suffers but rather the systems that mete out violence.

“I spiraled out,” Frazier said, when I reached her by phone in New York. Her voice was both confident and cautious, perhaps the voice of someone who has been misread in the past and is keen now to be precisely understood. Frazier left Braddock at 16 and went to Edinboro University, in Pennsylvania, where she learned a great deal more about the technical possibilities of photography. In her book, “The Notion of Family,” published when she was 32, she used a number of different photographic approaches to create, among other things, a conversation with history.

‘Momme,” 2008. CreditLaToya Ruby Frazier

Braddock’s poorest section abuts the steel mill, the railroad and the Monongahela River. This part of town, called the Bottom because of its low elevation within this undulating terrain, is where Frazier grew up. A century ago, about 20,000 people lived there. Today, that number is closer to 2,000. There are revitalization efforts, but the town still bears its scars: empty plots, abandoned homes, shuttered businesses, frequent fires. Braddock is sometimes called a ghost town.

As her work developed, Frazier was especially alert to the history of the photographs that had been made in the Pittsburgh area. “There were these photographers, men like Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, W. Eugene Smith and Lee Friedlander, who had made work about the steel mills. They were all men shooting from an outside point of view.” But taking on the same material could never lead to the same results for her. So she “spiraled out,” beginning at home, then moving out into the street and, finally, in a rented helicopter, up in the air. And in all these images, she established a continuity: a sense of surface complexity and crisp visual description. The work, when it came to its proper maturity, earned her museum exhibitions and a number of prestigious awards, including the grant from the MacArthur Foundation. But Frazier’s success is not in these accolades; it is in the amplitude and intensity of her investigations.

On a street stands a two-story house that has given up on being a house. Its facade has staved in, the surface is splintered timber and a scatter of plaster, each section like a variation on the theme of ruin. All this disorder is contained within the rectangular houselike shape. Brick columns indicate the roof line. On the left there remains a white door, intact, and the three steps that lead up to it. It must all once have been some family’s. No more.

As a child, I sat for hours in my bedroom in Lagos, Nigeria, at the beginning of the 1990s, drawing still lifes. In the hour or so it took to make one of those drawings, the arranged bottles and vases would become covered in black dust from an asphalt plant a few hundred yards from our home. I breathed that black dust for three years before leaving for college in the United States. But my family remained in Nigeria, and in the late '90s, my father fell ill with serious respiratory problems. An accurate diagnosis was difficult to establish, but the doctors finally said he had sarcoidosis, an inflammatory disease that mainly affects the lungs. After complicated medical interventions, he eventually recovered, but even now, he cannot stand to be around smoke or dust.

"Home on Braddock Avenue," 2007. CreditLaToya Ruby Frazier

It has been years since I thought about that black dust coating my books and still-life arrangements and probably my lungs as well. But seeing how close the Edgar Thomson Steelworks is to the homes in Braddock brought the experience back to mind. Inscribed into the terrain is the cumulative damage of pollution and the real medical harm it can bring about. Frazier is currently living with lupus and is extremely sensitive to pollutants. Her mother has an unidentified neurological disorder and has had a number of cysts removed. Her grandmother Ruby died in 2009 of pancreatic cancer.

I visited the Braddock Carnegie Library on a sunny Thursday in late January. The town has few functioning institutions, but the grandeur of its former life can still be seen: in the imposing bank building, the post office, the churches, the library. Of these, the library is one of the few that has managed to remain operational. On the day I went there, the staff was preparing a puppet festival for the children in the community, and there were enormous papier-mâché masks resting against the walls.

"People call Braddock a ghost town," Frazier told me. "But I grew up there. People live there. We are not ghosts." Frazier's self-revealing photographs answer a nagging question from the history of the medium: What might photos like the ones Dorothea Lange made in the 1930s about migrant farming families have looked like if they'd been taken by those people themselves? Frazier traces out a web of related concerns: the difficulty of family life in such a place, the imperishability of love, the injustice of a hospital closure, the exclusion of black history, the bonds among generations of women.

My own copy of Frazier's "The Notion of Family" was in the car, but I asked for the library's copy. A librarian fetched it for me. It was donated by Frazier herself and inscribed to the Braddock Carnegie Library. The work is a riposte. It restores black life and the lives of women back into the narrative of this town: They are not ghosts. Outside, the steel mill spewed out smoke. The sluggish river ran green. I turned the pages in the library, and for a moment, I was right there with her, in Braddock. I was there, and the book was a living thing.