

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Emily Goodman, "Two Artists Document the Rise and Fall of Pittsburgh's Steel Industry,"
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Two Artists Document the Rise and Fall of Pittsburgh's Steel Industry

Sandra Gould Ford and LaToya Ruby Frazier reveal a side of the city that is rarely seen by outside observers or even many of its contemporary, white-collar locals.

Emily Elizabeth Goodman



Installation view of *On the Making of Steel Genesis* at the August Wilson Center (all images courtesy of Silver Eye Center for Photography, photos by Sean Carroll Photography)

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PITTSBURGH — At its core, Pittsburgh is a steel town. Once describes as “hell with the lid off” due to the extreme pollution from the steel mills that lined the three rivers that come together in the city, Pittsburgh has changed drastically over the past 30 years. Now a city whose primary industries are in the tech and healthcare sectors, Pittsburgh is a leader in American innovation, in terms of sustainability and green engineering.

So committed is the city to this new identity, that when President Trump opted out of the Paris Climate accords because, he claimed, he “was elected to represent Pittsburgh, not Paris,” Mayor Peduto immediately clapped back, affirming that “Pittsburgh is with Paris.”

Yet while the steel industry largely left town during the “steel crisis” of the late 1970s and 1980s, Pittsburgh’s identity is still shaped by its history as the Steel City. The legacy of steel and its impact on Southwestern Pennsylvania is the focus of *On the Making of Steel Genesis: Sandra Gould Ford*, organized by Silver Eye Center for

photography in Pittsburgh and featuring work by LaToya Ruby Frazier and Sandra Gould Ford. Comprised of new photographs by Frazier and older works by Ford, the exhibition weaves together Pittsburgh’s present and past, highlighting the transformation of the city and its people resulting from the steel industry’s dissolution. Although Frazier and Ford once lived in the same apartment complex in Braddock, Pennsylvania, they belong to different generations and their understandings of Pittsburgh’s relationship to steel are distinct.



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Frazier has received acclaim for her photography and films documenting the transformation of her hometown, Braddock —a steel community on the banks of the Monongahela River, just outside the Pittsburgh city limits — and the impact of the industry’s decline on the area’s black community in the 21st century. Her serial projects, such as *The Notion of Family* (2001-14) and *Campaign for Braddock Hospital (Save Our Community Hospital)* (2011), examine the impact of both racism and economic hardship on her family and surrounding community. Her works in this exhibition continue her focus on present-day Pittsburgh, including aerial views of the city that document new retail and real estate developments that have replaced steel mills along the three rivers.

In contrast, Ford’s photographs and excerpts of her writing, interspersed between her own and Frazier’s images, offer a glimpse into the historical past when the steel industry still dominated. Ford took most of her photographs surreptitiously, while working as a clerk and secretary at the Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation (J&L) from the late 1970s through the mid 1980s, when she was laid off. She captures the prototypical image of steel production — large coke ovens, coal-filled barges, and smelting furnaces blasting smoke and fire into the air — as well as the often unseen details of mill life, like a light bulb atop an engineering department Christmas tree, second-hand refrigerators bought by steelworkers to store their lunches, and peaches that grew in the polluted air next to the mill.

Ford’s photographs and writings illustrate the interrelationships between the steel industry and local community members and businesses. In one photograph-and-text series, she addresses the expansion of J&L in relation to one local business, the “Greek” cafe. She writes of the café, “Back when J&L’s coke ovens and blast furnaces were further up the Monongahela River, the Greek’s cafe huddled among other small Hazelwood businesses. [...] When J&L acquired chunks of Hazelwood in the early 1900s, the original Greek refused to sell. The company built the Eliza blast furnaces over his little restaurant.” She continues to tell the story of the restaurant’s second and final proprietor, who served steelworkers for decades from his beloved little stand, providing a greasy-spoon meal while constantly trying to “chase the Foundry’s grit and Blast Furnace smoke” out of his establishment; her text is coupled with images of the restaurant’s entrance, frying pans, coffee urns, and a portrait of the proprietor, Walter Spolsky. Ford’s portrayal of the Greek exposes the complicated issues that impact industrial communities. The restaurant suered from the corporate acquisition and expansion of Hazelwood: It was one of few businesses to not be devoured by corporate development and the proprietor was forced to constantly

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combat the environmental destruction of the mill. At the same time, the Greek was a favorite spot for many of the steelworkers and the restaurant's livelihood was ultimately tied to the success of the mill that dominated the land and air around it. This paradox parallels Frazier's representation of the contradictions inherent in the steel industry's influence on Pittsburgh. For *On the Making of Steel Genesis*, her focus on the negative impacts of the industry's decline in the area highlights how, in many cases, the city's shift towards white-collar labor has literally and figuratively written its blue-collar history out of the landscape, as malls and football fields physically replace old steel mills and the city's marketing campaigns have attempted to attract more technology jobs into the area. Her work also calls attention to the detrimental effects of the steel mills on working-class communities, especially with regard to people of color. Many of her photographs are cyanotypes of archival records related to J&L, from Ford's personal collection, including statistics about fatal accidents dating back to the early 20 century, insurance claim settlements, and workplace safety concerns. Her works emphasize the physical perils of this line of blue-collar labor through the blue hue of the printed image.

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Moreover, Frazier’s use of the cyanotype — a photographic technique that dates back to the mid-19 century, concurrent with the rise of the Pittsburgh steel industry — calls attention to the implications of the past in the present. The exhibition includes several cyanotype portraits by Frazier of Ford. In one, Ford wears a work jacket with a button reading “Woman of Steel”; in another, she wears a hard hat and protective eye-wear while holding various samples of metal ores; in yet another, Frazier portrays her engaged in sewing projects at home. These images convey the complexity of a woman whose life, as an individual and member of this specific community, was shaped by the history of Pittsburgh steel.

With *On the Making of Steel Genesis: Sandra Gould Ford, Sandra Gould Ford and LaToya Ruby Frazier* reveals a side of Pittsburgh that is rarely seen by outside observers or even many of the city’s contemporary white-collar locals. Ford and Frazier lay bare what that means to be a steel town to the people whose lives were directly shaped by the industry, while it reigned in Pittsburgh and long after it left.

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On the Making of Steel Genesis: Sandra Gould Ford continues at the August Wilson Center (980 Liberty Avenue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) through December 31.