

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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## Chicago Tribune

### LaToya Ruby Frazier photographs the Rust Belt in search of social change



By STEVE JOHNSON  
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LaToya Ruby Frazier at The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, in the gallery being prepared for her exhibition of photos "The Last Cruze." (Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune)

LaToya Ruby Frazier has been teaching and working out of Chicago, the city she felt destined to live in, for almost six years now. Since 2013, the photographer focused on delivering social justice through her images has won a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant," had solo exhibitions at museums in cities including Brooklyn, Boston and Seattle, and seen her work collected by many of the nation's top museums.

But not until now has she had a solo show in Chicago.

"I've been embraced really well here," said Frazier, who's 37 and an associate professor of photography at the School of the Art Institute. "And so I am excited that it is the first show and that it's a show that I think this region can really relate to."

"The Last Cruze," opening [at the Renaissance Society](#) at the University of Chicago Sept. 14, continues Frazier's tradition, developed in her hometown of Braddock, Penn., outside Pittsburgh, of examining the Rust Belt and its resonances.

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Judging by the selection of black-and-white photographs that have [already been published](#) in the New York Times Magazine, it promises to be an achingly close look at workers who rolled the final Chevrolet Cruze off the Lordstown, Ohio, assembly line before General Motors quit producing the compact car, closed Lordstown and relocated those workers who wanted to move to other factories.

“I’m very excited but also very somber,” Frazier said in a late August interview in a conference room at the Ren. “Yesterday I spent a few hours on the phone with the secretary of Local 1112. They moved everybody as of yesterday. So, you know, it’s sad, but at the same time I’m really proud because I know that I’m honoring really dignified, incredible working people.”

To say that Frazier gets close to her work, and to the people in it, is an understatement. She describes a spring spent teaching three days at SAIC, then spending the next four, hour after hour, week after week, in and around Lordstown.

“The last Cruze came off on March 6th,” she said. “The last gathering of the United Auto Workers was March 8th. After that, media ceased. No one was coming. And so here’s where my practice is the most significant. What I’m doing in my work is asking the question, What does it look like when the media is gone and it’s no longer headline news? What does it look like to see a worker idle, their life idle, not just the plant? That’s the most important part of this whole story.”

And it’s not a story that ends, in Frazier’s mind. “These aren’t projects, right? This is my mission, my purpose, my life’s work. And once I’m involved in someone’s life photographically, these are relationships that go on forever. You keep going back. I keep going back.”

Kasey King was the editor and photographer for the UAW Local 1112 newspaper, and she and Frazier became “photo buddies,” said the artist, who also interviews and often includes quotes from the people she’s shooting alongside their images.

King, who has now relocated to work for GM in Bowling Green, Ky., came away impressed by Frazier’s dedication to the task. “You don’t ever see her sidetracked with something else,” said King. “She is focused on just getting your story and hearing it and really comprehending it. .... She’s not just doing a soundbite or doing a quick story and moving on.”

Frazier grew up in Braddock “next to Andrew Carnegie’s steel mill,” she said, in a town hard hit by industrial decline, racism and classism. Painting and drawing and possibly becoming a graphic designer changed in college, at Edinboro University, in northwest Pennsylvania, thanks to an inspirational professor, Kathe Kowalski, who taught her that “social commentary through visual art was a possible life to have.”

She learned to revere the work of [Gordon Parks](#) and other great photographers, to want to emulate Parks’ practice wherein, she said, “the camera became a weapon.”

Even before coming under Kowalski’s wing, in her first photography class at the school, “we had a portrait assignment, and I remember I did a portrait of my cousin on the side of our house, and I put it up in class and (the professor) just said, “Look, you’ve raised the bar here in terms of portraiture, and I really think you should reconsider your major.”

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Her widely acclaimed first book, 2014's "The Notion of Family," showcases a long-running series of family photographs in Braddock that aim to make that tightly focused story a universal one of government and corporate abandonment.

"The whole Braddock project with especially the more autobiographical part was the thing that really got our attention first," said Michael Darling, chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, which has Frazier photos in its collection. "And I suppose that's where most of the art world kind of found out about her. It was that mix of making a social commentary about this economic problem, societal problem, but then also her interweaving her own personal story into it that felt really just so authentic and relatable and powerful."

Frazier went on to earn a masters in fine art photography at Syracuse University, then held academic and curatorial jobs at Yale and Rutgers before the SAIC opportunity came. "I knew since I was a little girl that I was going to live in Chicago one day. I knew it," she said.

She feels the Rust Belt connection between Pittsburgh and Chicago, she said, and a special affinity for the work of Studs Terkel, the Chicago oral historian similarly focused on advocating for working class people by documenting their lives.

"She is someone who both takes amazing photographs and has this really large, overarching vision," said Karsten Lund of the Renaissance Society, who co-curated the Frazier show. "I think it's really exceptional to find someone who's working at all those different levels."

But the more time you spend talking to Frazier, the more clear it becomes that this is something beyond work.

"I've made a commitment, right?" she said. "My life isn't my own. My work is in service to making sure that working class people in this country are seen and heard. I think that their lives are much more valuable and precious than CEOs' and politicians'. And it's about time that kind of power dynamic changes."