

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jake Mallooley, "LaToya Ruby Frazier's Labor of Love," *Chicago Magazine*, September 09, 2019

CHICAGO

LaToya Ruby Frazier's Labor of Love

The photographer's first Chicago solo show centers on workers at a beleaguered GM factory in Ohio.

BY JAKE MALLOOLEY



PHOTO: NOLIS ANDERSON

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Last November, LaToya Ruby Frazier got wind of the kind of news she finds both troubling and creatively motivating. General Motors was planning to close five North American plants in the coming year. The first would be in Lordstown, Ohio, where the since-discontinued Chevrolet Cruze was made. Thousands of workers there would be either out of a job or forced to relocate.

“I was thinking about how that many workers being laid off or made to move so far from their aging parents and children was going to have a catastrophic domino effect,” Frazier says. It was a familiar story for the 37-year-old photographer. Though she has lived here since 2014, when she took an associate professorship at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, her true home and artistic wellspring is Braddock, Pennsylvania, a steel mill town outside Pittsburgh that the state has categorized for three decades as “financially distressed.”



From *The Last Cruze*: Dan Morgan, Local 1112 Shop Chairman, in his office at UAW Local 1112 Reuther, Scandy, Alli union hall (25 years in at GM Lordstown Assembly, trim shop), Lordstown OH PHOTOS: COURTESY OF LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER AND GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE NEW YORK/ROME

GLADSTONE GALLERY

“You can’t be from Braddock and not make the human connection when you hear of a factory closure,” she says. “That’s in my DNA. I wanted to be there for the workers in Lordstown at that difficult time and be a witness and a champion and an advocate to them, their stories, and their perspectives.” Those images are the subject of her first-ever Chicago solo show, *The Last Cruze*, at the Renaissance Society.

In recent years, Frazier has emerged as one of the most incisive American artists of her generation, directly addressing the precariousness of the working class. For her 2014 book, *The Notion of Family* — which helped lead the MacArthur Foundation to award her with a “genius” grant — she trained her lens for 14 years on herself, her hometown, and her family. Her subjects included her grandmother’s stepfather, Gramps, whose body Frazier observed breaking down from age and decades of labor in Braddock’s Edgar Thomson Steel Works, Andrew Carnegie’s first mill. In the 2016 series *Flint Is Family*, she devoted six months to the aftermath of that city’s water crisis, particularly how it affected three generations of black women from a single family (the project is still ongoing).



Kesha Scales hugging Beverly Williams in her living room (22 years in at GM Lordstown Assembly, pressroom), Youngstown OH; Cindy Higinbotham and Monet Hostuttler, best friends and banner carriers, in the Lordstown High School band room, Lordstown OH PHOTOS: COURTESY OF LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER AND GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE NEW YORK/ROME

Frazier sees that work as stops on the road that led her to Lordstown, where she began shooting in January. Her first destination was the hall of United Auto Workers Local 1112, a building traditionally open only to those affiliated with the union. On day one, she sat in the lobby anxiously awaiting the executive board’s decision on whether she would be granted entry. It voted unanimously to give her full access. “Were we apprehensive? Absolutely,” says Local 1112 president David Green, whom Frazier photographed. “But once she explained what she’s trying to do, the kind of social justice she’s fighting for, people were very open and even excited to have their invisibility wiped away.”

During the first five months of shooting, Frazier kept a grueling schedule. She would teach an advanced black-and-white photography class Monday through Wednesday at SAIC, then fly to Cleveland with 200 pounds of photo equipment. She would rent a car (always a GM) and make the hourlong drive to Lordstown. She’d spend the rest of the week getting to

GLADSTONE GALLERY

know the townspeople — eating with workers and their families, tagging along on errands, listening to their deep-seated anxieties and fears. Only then would she take photos, each of which radiates the intimacy she cultivated with the people she calls her “collaborators.” That close relationship between the person behind the lens and those in front of it advances Frazier’s work beyond the social-documentary photojournalism that her idol Gordon Parks pioneered in the 1940s and the topical staged portraiture of the ’60s and ’70s conceptual movement. It is an immersive approach to image making all her own.



United Auto Workers and their families holding up Drive It Home campaign signs outside UAW Local 1112 Reuther, Scandy, Alli union hall, Lordstown OH. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER AND GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE NEW YORK/ROME

For the show, Frazier has culled thousands of photos into a little more than 60 black-and-white gelatin silver prints accompanied by text that relays the subjects’ stories in their own words. She also reconfigured the exhibit space to evoke the feel of an auto factory. Her photos will be mounted on what she estimates will be 20 orange armatures hung from the ceiling, resembling the overhead conveyors that moved the Cruze along the Lordstown assembly line. The walls will be painted blue to match GM’s logo. The windows will be blocked out, because, as Frazier explains, “the workers didn’t see daylight when they were in the plant.”

The Last Cruze opens the same day the current UAW contract with GM expires. In the meantime, the union sits at the negotiating table, trying desperately to broker a deal that would give the Lordstown laborers a new vehicle to build. Regardless of the outcome, Frazier vows to continue using her camera to call attention to the plight and the resilience of working people. Though the last Cruze may have rolled off the line, she says: “This isn’t the end. This is the beginning of the battle.”