

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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# Forbes

## LaToya Ruby Frazier At Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York

Art can be as normal as life, but how lives are lived is infinitely variable, defying definitions of normalcy. The artistic life of LaToya Ruby Frazier has been well documented almost to the point of journalistic recycling. It is difficult to add to the facts and flavors. She began photographing her family at 16, gradually opening her lens to include her hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania, population 2,100, an impoverished Rust Belt borough outside of Pittsburgh.



© 2018 LaToya Ruby Frazier, courtesy Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome.  
*LaToya Ruby Frazier. UPMC Global Corporation. 2011.*

The borough is the site of Andrew Carnegie's first steel mill built in 1873, which remains the first and last steel mill in the region. Braddock's population swelled to nearly 21,000 people by 1920, growing during the early 1900s as part of the Great Migration of more than 6 million Blacks from the South. Frazier's family arrived in Braddock somewhat earlier, prior to the translocation. Her great-grandmother ran a cleaners and café in a neighborhood known as "The Bottom," which would become metaphorically suggestive. Frazier's family knew a better life, pursuing the American dream, some of them finding it and others struggling.

The implosion of the US steel industry after the 1950s sped the decline of Braddock further, which coincided with a cocaine epidemic that began in the 1980s. Also, by the 1980s Braddock was experiencing severe water problems. The water utility's reservoir was open to the elements and oversized. It had been built for a significantly larger human and industrial population. Water was no longer circulating quickly enough, so bacteria and contamination flourished. Plus, the water lines leaked—profoundly. There was up to 70 percent leakage loss in the water distribution system, affecting both pressure and usage.

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Frazier was born in 1982. Braddock was troubled. Its economic decline was coupled with environmental complexities that were not addressed until 1990/1991, when the water system was repaired. The convergence of factors—directly or indirectly—had to have deeply affected Frazier. Her artist's homepage begins with a resolute statement of purpose, if not a manifesto:

*“Through photographs, videos and text I use my artwork as a platform to advocate for others, the oppressed, the disenfranchised. When I encounter an individual or family facing inequality I create visibility through images and story-telling to expose the violation of their human rights.”*

While Frazier's photography is frequently and understandably linked to the work of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and Gordon Parks, it reaches farther precisely because Frazier is both documentarian and committed activist. Few artists choose this path and do it successfully, especially early in their careers. Martha Rosler, for one, has consistently connected life and art as an advocate activist.



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*LaToya Ruby Frazier. Mom and Me on Her Couch. 2010.*

Effectively, Frazier's exhibition is a retrospective in three interrelated parts, but not presented in chronological order. Start in the middle on Floor 2 with *The Notion of Family*. It is a 13-year photographic document of Frazier in and a part of a three-generation Black matriarchy in Braddock. She is there, front and center with her grandmother and mother, participating in family life. Her black and white analog photographs are rich with everyday banality like a refrigerator plastered with magnets, photos and coloring book pictures and crowned with cereal boxes (*Grandma Ruby's Refrigerator*, 2007). There are emotionally drained, yet palpable, portraits like daughter and mother anchoring opposite ends of the living room sofa (*Mom and Me on Her Couch*, 2010).

*Flint is Family* is shown on the 1st Floor. In 2016, Frazier worked on assignment in Flint, Michigan, initially spending five months with a local, three-generation family as it lived amidst its lead-poisoned drinking water crisis. The extended Cobb family— Ms. Renée (the matriarch), Shea (a poet), and Zion (her daughter)—were surrogates for the artist's family in a different—but unnervingly similar—setting. As a place, Flint's growth and decline almost mirrored Frazier's native Braddock. It had flourished into the 1970s, largely because of then-reliable employment by General Motors. Like Braddock, the Flint workforce had grown as a result of Black migration from the South and other cities. By 1999 General Motors had closed the largest industrial facility in Flint, Buick City. The city's rock bottom would follow The Great Recession of 2007/2009.

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In 2013, Flint's water had become contaminated after the city switched its water supply to cut costs. Then it failed to treat the water with the correct chemicals. Frazier "weaponized" her camera, documenting this deception and man-made ecological disaster that was published in *Elle* (August 8, 2016). The photographs in this series again document family, living as normal-as-possible life under extreme circumstances. *Shea doing crochet braids in her cousin Andrea's hair for Andrea's daughter's wedding* (2016/2017) is about as everyday as you can get. *Shea brushing Zion's teeth with bottled water in her bathroom* (2016/2017) is anything but.

The number of individual works is extensive, but they—in combination with a video, which can be seen on line at <http://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a37628/flint-michigan-water-crisis-latoya-ruby-frazier/>—document not just lives in crisis, but lives genuinely threatened by elected officials.

A third photographic series—*A Pilgrimage To Noah Purifoy's Desert Art Museum* (2016-2017)—is on Floor 4. Alabama-born Purifoy, who had initiated programs like Artists in Social Institutions, had helped to bring art into the California state prison system. His own art was dedicated to using art as an instrument of social change. Purifoy said, "I do not wish to be an artist, I only wish that art enables me to be." In the late 1980s, Purifoy moved to the Mojave Desert, where he spent the last 15 years of his life creating ten-acres of sculpture using found, junked materials.



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Frazier visited the site with her fellow artist, Abigail DeVille, who shares Frazier's interests in marginalized people and places and Purifoy's interest in scouring and salvaging. Frazier and DeVille make for great artist-companions, rediscovering history, documenting it and raising awareness. Frazier and DeVille did more than visit and document Purifoy's retreat. They activated it with DeVille wearing traditional African-inspired (perhaps, Yoruba) costumes she had made from found objects, for example, *Five Easy Pieces II 1997 remains and Dark Matter Study*, Noah Purifoy Outdoor Desert Art Museum, Joshua Tree, CA(2016/2017).

The effort continues. The battles are far from over. Right now, the Braddock community is fighting the plant's attempt to increase toxic emissions. In Flint, 15 people have been criminally charged in connection with the water crisis that began three years ago. Drinking water is now in compliance with federal regulations on lead and copper content, but it could be another year or more before residents can safely drink from their faucets, owing to lead-tainted pipes that need to be replaced. Yet, like Dorothea Lange's photographs from the '30s, Frazier's gelatin silver prints convey hope, not just despair. To borrow from Anne Whiston Spirn, "everyone [is] trying to find the American dream, some of them finding it, and others — you just think, 'Boy, just can't imagine how they're going to get there.'"

The exhibition is hardly static. There is an extensive program of art-making workshops, panel discussions and performances. True to her "manifesto," Frazier is using the gallery space to record history; heighten public health awareness; examine the legacy of Purifoy; discuss the Flint ecological crisis, and entertain with a performance by The Sister Tour.

Gavin Brown's enterprise, 439 W. 127th Street, New York

Clayton Press



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LaToya Ruby Frazier. *A Message in Nestle Water Bottles from Shea Cobb*, [+]