

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Siddhartha Mitter, "LaToya Ruby Frazier Explore Community, Corrosion, and the Flint Water Crisis," *The Village Voice*, January 26, 2018

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LaToya Ruby Frazier Explores Community, Corrosion, and the Flint Water Crisis

by SIDDHARTHA MITTER

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Shea's aunt Denise and uncle Rodney in their home on Foster Street watching President Barack Obama take a sip of Flint water (2016–2017)

COURTESY THE ARTIST
AND GAVIN BROWN'S
ENTERPRISE, NEW
YORK/ROME

In early 2016, the photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier spent five months in Flint, Michigan. The city — a deindustrialized shell long past its automotive glory days — was reeling from the water crisis that began two years before, when a state-appointed emergency manager decided to save money by drawing water from the heavily polluted Flint River. The poorly treated water, catastrophically high in lead, made residents severely ill and degraded local pipes. By the time Frazier arrived, Flint had reconnected to the Detroit water system, but the corrosion had left the water suspect, and public trust in government officials was demolished.

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In Flint, Frazier embedded with Shea Cobb, a young school bus driver and poet, her daughter Zion, and her mother, Renée. *Flint Is Family*, the resulting black-and-white portfolio, depicts the water crisis — where just brushing one's teeth is a resource decision with health and cost implications — from the point of view of this resilient matrilineage. It is the core of Frazier's vital three-part exhibition at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, in Harlem, and a masterclass in collaborative work based on attention and intimacy. When President Obama came to Flint in May 2016 — the zenith of media attention to the crisis — Frazier was around, but she didn't go to see him. Instead she visited with Shea's aunt Denise and uncle Rodney, watching the president's appearance in the gentle clutter of their family room. In her photograph, Denise and Rodney stand as they watch Obama, onscreen, take a sip of Flint water. They face three-quarters away from Frazier's lens, leaving us to divine from their posture what they make of the scene.

Two days later, Frazier documented the wedding of Cobb's niece Nephtriti. "Nobody thinks about water crises in marriage," Cobb comments in a montage that screens in the show. "You don't think about lead pipes and poison, all you think about is love and the bride and the groom." The ceremony, in Frazier's capture, is a bolt of joy rending the fluorescent tedium of the courthouse setting. She portrays Cobb with Zion and Ms. Renée outside the reception. Though her images also show us protesters in hazmat suits, a home vacated because of contamination, the city of Flint water plant — Frazier rented a helicopter to get aerial views — the experience is rigorously, empathically grounded in the life of this one family.



Shea and Zion at the Badawest Restaurant on Corrua Road (2016-2017)

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Those who know Frazier's work will recognize the method. It is the one she applied in *The Notion of Family*, her long-running project on her hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania, a collapsed outskirts of Pittsburgh where Andrew Carnegie built his first steel plant, and on her own family. Begun in 2001, the project earned Frazier a MacArthur "Genius Grant" in 2015 — when she was just 33 — and yielded a prizewinning book, also titled *The Notion of Family*. It functions at once as a visual approach to social science, the chronicle of a community's survival amid blight, and as a portraiture of wrenching, almost disturbing, intimacy. Frazier's images move from herself and her mother as they face ill health (the result of exposure to pollution), to her grandparents' decline and death, to the context: the emptied downtown, the local hospital that closed, the gas plant that still hisses by the site of the demolished housing project where Frazier lived as a child.

Frazier's consideration of working-class and Black community, in black-and-white photographs with an implicit lyricism that is palpable yet never overrides the situation's blunt reality, owes recognizably to the Harlem images of Gordon Parks or Roy DeCarava and to the Depression-era FSA photographers such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. The unflinching self-portraiture amid one's own Black family echoes, too, the work of Carrie Mae Weems. But Frazier's closest inspiration was the woman she calls her mentor: the late photographer Kathe Kowalski, who was her teacher at Edinboro University, near Erie, Pennsylvania. Kowalski's photographs of her own mother's late years, and her work photographing but also participating in community work in the same Western Pennsylvania rusting terrain, modeled both intimate and outward practice in ways Frazier emulated.

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Frazier's photographs of Braddock have been widely shown, including at the Brooklyn Museum in 2013. A selection appears on the second floor at Gavin Brown. Its display, together with her Flint work, affirms several levels of kinship. One is between Frazier and Cobb, strangers at first (Frazier looked Cobb up after hearing her poetry on the water crisis), and their families. Another links their hometowns: Both exemplify Rust Belt decline and the neglect of those who remain, particularly Black families who were steered to live in the polluted, downwind districts. Flint and Braddock, and many other American communities, share economic and environmental injustice; yet Frazier demonstrates how each brims with its own quiet, inner light.



"Momme" (2018)

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On the top floor at Gavin Brown is something different: Frazier's photographs from a visit to the outdoor museum in the California desert that the African American sculptor Noah Purifoy left at his death in 2004. Several double as portraits of Abigail DeVille, the sculptor who accompanied Frazier and who works, like Purifoy, with found objects; or of Pat Brunty, the museum's caretaker. One can read this work as art experiment (DeVille, clad in an odd cape-like garment, often looks like she's part of the sculptures), and a palate-cleanser from the hard socio-political facts on the lower floors. But it is, too, a declaration of family: three Black women in the desert, gathered in pilgrimage — Frazier's word, used judiciously — in communion before the spirit of a Black artist elder.

And there is a subtler echo throughout this exhibition, to do with journeys and home-making. Purifoy, born in 1917 in Alabama, moved to California at the height of the Great Migration; he went to the desert late in life, priced out of Los Angeles by gentrification. Frazier left Braddock at sixteen, yet has devoted her career to her hometown and places like it (most recently, the coal towns of eastern Belgium). The final photo Frazier took of Cobb was before dawn on June 25, 2016: Cobb is filling up at a gas station before getting on the road to Mississippi. She is moving south, following her father, so Zion can grow up with clean water and air. Cobb's decision stems from adverse circumstance; yet what it denotes, and Frazier celebrates, is self-determination.

'LaToya Ruby Frazier'
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