

Jack Hatfield, "American Idle," *Artforum*, July, 2020

## ARTFORUM

LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Sherria Duncan, UAW Local 1112, at her kitchen table with her mother Waldine Arrington, her daughter Olivia, and her husband Jason, (23 years in at GM Lordstown Complex, trim and paint shop), Austintown, OH, 2019*, gelatin silver print, 20 x 16". From the series "The Last Cruze," 2019.

CLOSE-UP

## AMERICAN IDLE

ZACK HATFIELD ON LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER'S "THE LAST CRUZE," 2019

**PEOPLE IN MOTION.** This was General Motors' slogan when Sherria and Jason Duncan were hired at the company's factory on the edge of Lordstown, Ohio, around the turn of the millennium. Sherria's mother, Waldine Arrington, retired from the assembly plant in 2004 and now helps care for her granddaughter Olivia. A recent photograph finds the four of them at a bare kitchen table, frozen: Sherria and Waldine sit side by side, while Jason, hands clasped, hunches across from Olivia. In profile, the child meets her father's tired gaze; the two women look directly at the viewer. The sight lines form a crossroads.

These lives all revolve around the factory, or did. The news arrived from GM on the Monday after Thanksgiving 2018: Due to the sinking demand for compact cars, the plant would stop manufacturing the Chevrolet Cruze, its sole product. Lordstown Assembly, the backbone of the region since 1966, was being idled. The corporation soon began sending forced-transfer letters to all of its unionized employees, an ultimatum notorious for breaking households apart: Keep your job and pension by resettling to another factory, perhaps thousands of miles away, or lose everything.

LaToya Ruby Frazier has always trained her camera on families dealing with fallout. Her black-and-white portraiture, incisive without ever seeking to betray what her subjects have not chosen to show, is

about the relentless but often abstract forces of neoliberalism and how they make and unmake working-class homes, starting with her own. The artist's earliest series, begun in 2001 when she was a teenager, chronicles the postindustrial declension and pollution-borne maladies of her native steel town of Braddock, Pennsylvania, mostly through images of her grandmother Ruby; her mother, Cynthia; and herself. These culminated in the 2014 photobook *The Notion of Family*, an unsparing document of looking and loving amid economic and bodily decline. Since then, Frazier has continued to picture small-town sagas with a multigenerational scope, subtle ingenuity, and global import, whether covering the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, or shooting in the depressed coal-mining area of Borinage, Belgium. While ostensibly grounded in the now-unfashionable American traditions of Lewis Hine and Dorothea Lange, her photographs reject the flattening lens of iconicity, centering individuals' own words in accompanying texts. Frazier often works on assignment for magazines and newspapers, her photos strategically combating the stereotypes and omissions characteristic of the mainstream media's representation of the working class. The most persistent and insidious omission—the absence of people of color in portrayals of American blue-collar life—is challenged in Frazier's art, where the intersections of class with race and other facets of identity are

dramatized alongside the structural inequalities within racial capitalism.

This latest counternarrative, "The Last Cruze," is devoted to Lordstown Assembly and its union, Local 1112 of the United Auto Workers. Conceived for the Renaissance Society in Chicago in 2019 and subsequently exhibited at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, the series pairs more than sixty portraits of Lordstown workers and retirees with typed oral histories that collectively form an archive of the culture of the plant and the events that unfolded there. Partnered with the *New York Times Magazine*, Frazier began visiting Lordstown a month before the last Cruze rolled off the assembly line in early March 2019. But unlike the national press, which largely construed the idling of the plant as a flash point for Trump's broken campaign promise to blue-collar constituents, she was there for the aftermath, her narrative fracturing the mythology of a white working class. She built rapport with union members across lines of gender, sexuality, and race as they continued to clock in, and then, after the last Cruze was finished, she stayed while her newly unemployed subjects wrestled with the question of whether to uproot themselves or wait to see if the UAW's impending contract negotiations with Detroit's Big Three automakers would result in Lordstown's getting a new vehicle to manufacture. In recent years, GM has

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shifted its production abroad, where some employees earn as little as a couple of dollars an hour.

Barred by GM from entering the complex, Frazier—granted entrée to Local 1112 after a unanimous vote from the chapter—earned more intimate access, photographing and listening to workers at the union hall and in their homes, often with their loved ones. As she put it in the 2019 exhibition's press materials, "What does it look like to see not just the plant idled, but the workers' lives idled, too?" Angela Ralston, shown with her mother, granddaughter, and five pajamaed children, describes receiving a forced transfer to faraway Wentzville, Missouri, and the emotions she tried to hide for her kids' sakes. Before declining GM's transfer and forfeiting all of her benefits, she turned to her father, a die setter at the complex for thirty years. "He was pushing me to go," she says, "but his concept of family is different from mine." Absence already marks other images. Vickie Raymond—a veteran paint-shop worker pictured sitting on the made bed where her mother once slept—tells us that her mom, who recently died of cancer, was more distressed by the thought of Raymond becoming unemployed than by her own illness. Trim-shop assembler Christina Defelice, who recalls feeling "nonexistent" when she turned in her plant ID card, is posed in front of a projector that throws an old photograph of her father and his all-male GM team over her body: a layering filled with ambivalence toward what was, in Lordstown, a common inheritance. Pamela Brown, a chairperson of Local 1112's women's committee—a pillar of the chapter's activism that is powerfully historicized by Black women throughout the exhibition—details her job making dashboards and her plans to become a social worker. Posed with her great-granddaughter at her kitchen table, Brown describes her union as a "family," a sentiment echoed throughout the show. The complication of that word—embraced by organized workers to build solidarity and by companies to undermine it ("We're all a family here")—is thankfully never sacrificed in "The Last Cruze."

At the Renaissance Society show, curated by Karsten Lund and Solveig Øvstebø, the photo-texts were mounted unframed on rows of red-orange wooden hanging supports, or carriers, spaced three feet apart to simulate Lordstown's nearly thirty-mile-long assembly line. A few prints were affixed to each carrier, lit by a fluorescent tube. If this display matrix, industrial but intimate, sought to cast gallerygoers as both auto-workers on the job and as the Cruze itself wending through production, it also accorded a spiritual dimension to Local 1112's notion of family. The institution's walls and cathedral ceiling were painted General Motors cobalt; sunlight was blocked out; and the carriers resembled the backs of pews. Within such an architecture, the portrait of the Duncans and

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Waldine Arrington—one of many pictures in the show that quietly suggest how faith is both tested and held closer in what one worker calls the “purgatory” of idleness—invents comparisons not only to traditions of devotional imagery but also to the artist’s mentor, Carrie Mae Weems, and her epochal “Kitchen Table Series,” 1990, whose tableaux bring painterly drama to seemingly quotidian scenes.

Other affinities emerge with Fred Lonidier and the late Allan Sekula, avowedly leftist photographers whose output—like Weems’s, rooted in the radical ferment of late-’60s San Diego—favors an accumulative approach to portrait making that responds systematically to the brutal realities of a globalized economy. Lonidier and Sekula share misgivings about the humanitarian spectatorship endemic to documentary photography and strive, as the former puts it, to communicate “not only on behalf of, but alongside, communities in struggle.” Like theirs, Frazier’s enterprise joins political commitment with conceptual rigor, reorganizing the power dynamic of a medium whose connections to labor often remain invisible. Frequently exhibited in union halls and offices, Lonidier’s art is

inseparable from his identity as an activist; *I Like Everything Nothing but Union*, commissioned in 1983 by the San Diego & Imperial Counties Labor Council, likewise presents the insights of a diverse local through a sprawling, multivoiced photo-text. Sekula, a chief exegete of postdocumentary practice, has notably read Daguerre’s streetscape *Boulevard du Temple*, 1838—a seven-minute exposure and probably the first photograph to include people—as a metaphor for the erasure of the “working body”: in this instance, that of a blurrily rendered shoeshiner whose customer’s genuflecting silhouette is more legibly transcribed. In “The Last Cruze,” Frazier’s own decelerated exposures (one to two full seconds) require her subjects, already in stasis, to hold themselves for the camera—a stillness they can control.

Sensitively building from Sekula and Lonidier’s ethic, Frazier’s social documentary privileges a collaborative ambiguity between working-class artist and subject over the consumption of the beholder. These are not “candid” snapshots, nor do they purport to be. They sound what is quite explicitly a dialogue between Frazier and her subjects: Holding their poses, the sitters

Opposite page, top: LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Angela Ralston, UAW Local 1714, at home with her mother Nancy Simmons, her children Aneesa, Seth, and Colin Ralston, Marena Wolford, and Greyson Simmons; and her granddaughter Eliana Hall (Transition Center Customer Service Representative, 9.9 years in at GM Lordstown Complex, West Plant fabrication body shop), Girard, OH, 2019*, gelatin silver print, 16 x 20". From the series “The Last Cruze,” 2019.

Opposite page, bottom: LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Vickie Raymond, UAW Local 1112, sitting on her mother Margie’s bed in her bedroom (24 years in at GM Lordstown Complex, trim and paint shop), East Rochester, OH, 2019*, gelatin silver print, 20 x 16". From the series “The Last Cruze,” 2019.

Above: LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Christina Defelice, UAW Local 1112, with a photograph of her father Jerry L. Canter and fellow scheduled clerks Frank Powers, Charles Steiner, Charles Walters, Al Basco, Jim Nichols, Mike Dobransky, and Rendal Stout, inside UAW Local 1112 Reuther Scandy All union hall (Transition Center customer service representative, 11 years in at GM Lordstown Complex, trim shop), Lordstown, OH, 2019*, gelatin silver print, 16 x 20". From the series “The Last Cruze,” 2019.

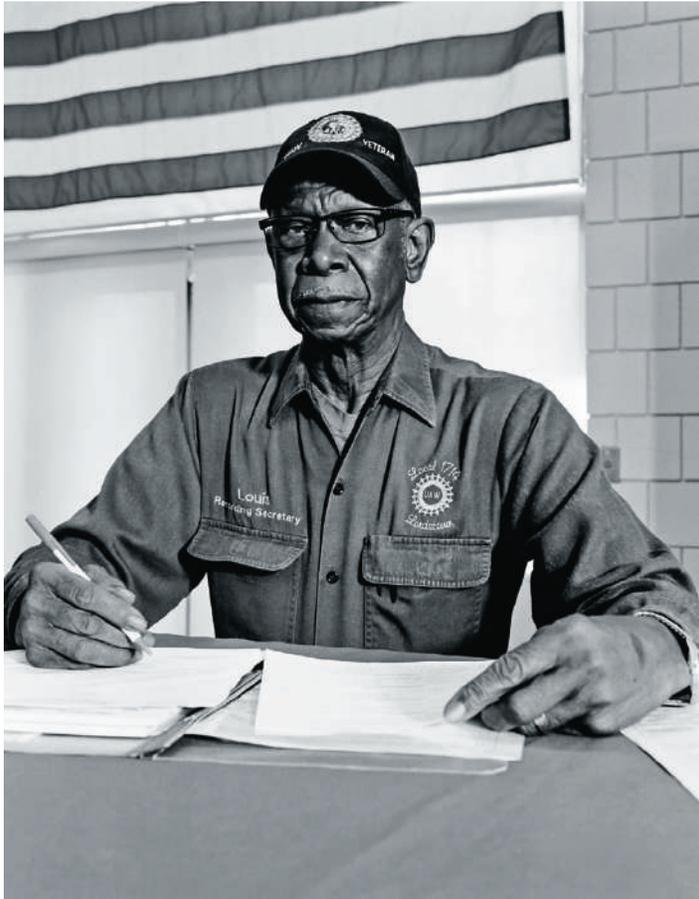
Right: View of “LaToya Ruby Frazier: The Last Cruze,” 2019, Renaissance Society, Chicago. Photo: Luke Stettner.



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are working *with* the artist. If there is a decisive moment here, it is not just the photographer who does the deciding. By extension, the viewer is not a proxy for the artist. These are images of a circuit between photographer and subject from which the viewer is delicately excluded, relegated to the status of outsider—an outsider granted a generous degree of access, but an outsider nonetheless. Dislodged from the mode's typical relational structure, we're invited to imagine an agency beyond empathy.

**Frazier has always addressed the untenability of how things are with an art that pushes beyond the purview of representation, one that prioritizes the assembly of communities and archives over commodities.**



"Anyone who works in a factory, to me, is an artist," Frazier has said, likening the Cruze's production to a social sculpture. (One of the vehicles was parked inside the Wexner.) She does not so much bridge the working and creative classes as suggest the inadequacy of such distinctions. To that end, she shared the gallery space with Local 1112's official documentarian, autoworker Kasey King, whose photographs record the shift during which the last Cruze moved down the line, capturing a mix of celebration and mournfulness for an industry that is no longer a source of stability for the American working class. Today, the UAW's autoworkers are outnumbered by unionized care workers, university staffs, and arts professionals. The testimonies of "The Last Cruze" remind us that the organizing campaigns blooming across the American cultural sphere are struggles contiguous with those of Midwestern UAW rank and filers such as the unionists of Lordstown, who staged a twenty-two-day wildcat strike in 1972 when GM management ramped up production of its Chevy Vega to inhumane levels. (Several people portrayed by Frazier have family members who struck then.) Within the past two years, workers at both the Museum of Modern Art and the New Museum in New York voted to join UAW Local 2110. The staffs of the Bronx Museum of the Arts, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the Shed all followed suit, along with those of numerous institutions nationwide whose employees have revived the fight, first waged by the Art Workers' Coalition half a century ago, about how art works.

Last autumn, after a staggering forty-day walkout by fifty thousand GM workers, the UAW reached an agreement with the Big Three that sealed Lordstown Assembly's fate: The plant would stay closed. Not long after, the facility was purchased by Lordstown Motors, an electric-truck startup; GM also announced it would build an electric-vehicle-battery plant near the former factory. Whether these ventures will reabsorb what is left of Local 1112, not to mention the thousands of others whose livelihoods relied on the plant, remains unclear. The community will never be the same. "A growing army of nomadic GM workers, ripped from their families, roam America periodically in order to survive financially," writes Lordstownian Werner Lange in his catalogue essay for the show. When he learned the plant would be idled, Lange parked his '99 Saturn near the complex each afternoon, holding forty-three consecutive vigils in solidarity with the union and its Drive It Home campaign, which implored GM to reconsider the shutdown plans. The plant's billboard appears in the background of Frazier's portrait of Lange: LORDSTOWN: HOME OF THE CRUZE. The photo's sense of looming dispossession—the sedan on the sign rhymes exactly with Lange's clunker in front of it—contrasts with the

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Opposite page: LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Louis Robinson, Jr., UAW Local 1714, Recording Secretary, at UAW Local 1112 Reuther Scandy, All union hall (34 years in at GM Lordstown Complex, die setter), Lordstown, OH, 2019*, gelatin silver print, 20 x 16". From the series "The Last Cruze," 2019. Above: LaToya Ruby Frazier, *United Auto Workers and their families holding up Drive It Home campaign signs outside UAW Local 1112 Reuther Scandy, All union hall, Lordstown, OH, 2019*, gelatin silver print, 45 x 60". From the series "The Last Cruze," 2019.

exhibition's largest family portrait, mounted on the wall at each venue: a blown-up aerial shot, taken from a helicopter the day after the assembly line went quiet, of nearly two hundred members and their loved ones encircled near the union hall, holding signs, looking up. Here, the forceful tensions of Frazier's series—between individual and collective, work and unworking, motion and stillness—are brought into lucid, concentrative focus. The accompanying words are those of Local 1112 president David Green: "Maybe if they see us, we thought, they would understand."

More people are beginning to understand. Not long after I completed this essay's first draft, the entire world was idled. Like nearly every exhibition in the United States, "The Last Cruze" at the Wexner was forced to shutter. That tens of millions of Americans would lose

their jobs so soon after Frazier debuted her project; that the country's class divide and the progressive shredding of the safety net would worsen so significantly; that "nonessential" GM union workers would *demand* to manufacture thousands of ventilators for the dying; that structural racism would synergize with the virus in such a relentless multiplicity of ways, including in the area of labor, where a frontline workforce disproportionately comprising people of color has been treated as cannon fodder; that the labor movement—in fact, the very future of work, from factories to museums—would arrive at such a momentous juncture: Frazier could not have anticipated these developments. But she has always addressed the untenability of how things are with an art that pushes beyond the purview of representation, one that prioritizes the assembly of communities

and archives over commodities. The entangled systems whose brutality and lethality have been "exposed" are systems she and her collaborators have long operated within, from the racialized injustice of the health-care industry in *The Notion of Family* to the jeopardy of organized labor in "The Last Cruze." As one historic moment collapses into another—at press time, uprisings against anti-Black police violence surge throughout America and the world—Frazier's portraits elicit neither our pity nor our awe, but speak to the imperative to stay together even and especially when driven apart. I think now of the photograph of the Duncans and Waldine Arrington at their kitchen table, how millions of people are currently at their kitchen tables, and how the sight lines form a crossroads. □

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