

MS. POLITICIAN
NG-BACK OUR
BS FROM
INA ET AL.
RICAN-CITIES
Lots of
ROOM FOR FACTORIES

Say NO
TO
Monopolizing
Health Care Co
U.P.M.C. Borrowing
\$335 Million
Allegheny County Financial
Authority

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER

SOMMAIRE / CONTENT

LEVER DE DRAPEAUX CECILIA ALEMANI 7

RAISING FLAGS CECILIA ALEMANI 11

DE GRÉ OU DE FORCE :
SI LE TRAVAIL DE CHACUN COMPTE AUTANT CHERISE SMITH 19

UNDER DURESS:
IF EVERYBODY'S WORK IS EQUALLY IMPORTANT CHERISE SMITH 31

LA PHOTOGRAPHIE COMME NÉCESSITÉ VITALE :
LES AUTO-PORTRAITS DE LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER NATALIE ZELT 39

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A VITAL NECESSITY:
LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER'S SELF-PORTRAITURE NATALIE ZELT 45

BIOGRAPHIE / BIOGRAPHY 50

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A VITAL NECESSITY:
LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER'S SELF-PORTRAITURE NATALIE ZELT

The figure in *Self-Portrait Lying on a Pile of Rubble*, 2007 is hard to see. A body is angled away from the camera, atop a mound of tumbling aggregate. The foreshortened position and a hefty snowsuit help to obscure the details of the physical form; it is difficult to discern the circumstance of its presence, if the subject is adult or child, male or female, white or black, although the title suggests that the figure is LaToya Ruby Frazier. As a young black woman raised in the impoverished and working class community of Braddock, Pennsylvania, Frazier conceived her artistic practice amid the social, economic, physical and psychological ravages of deindustrialization and waves of racialized marginalization in America's rustbelt cities. "It became very clear to me from a young age," Frazier states, "that we were born into a harsh reality of poverty and environmental degradation... If I don't tell my story or make photographs of us, no one will."¹ Throughout the series *The Notion of Family*, she crafts self-portraits as acts of resistance against both the legacy of industrial capitalism and the shortcomings of traditional social documentary photography. A photograph of the artist's body entangled with rock, foregrounded against the discarded elements of industry is a gesture that contests histories of Braddock and of representation that strive to render marginalized figures absent from the cultural landscape. Beyond the artist's performance, the self-portrait heightens her viewers' awareness of their relationship to the photograph and its subject, implicating them in the photograph's construction.

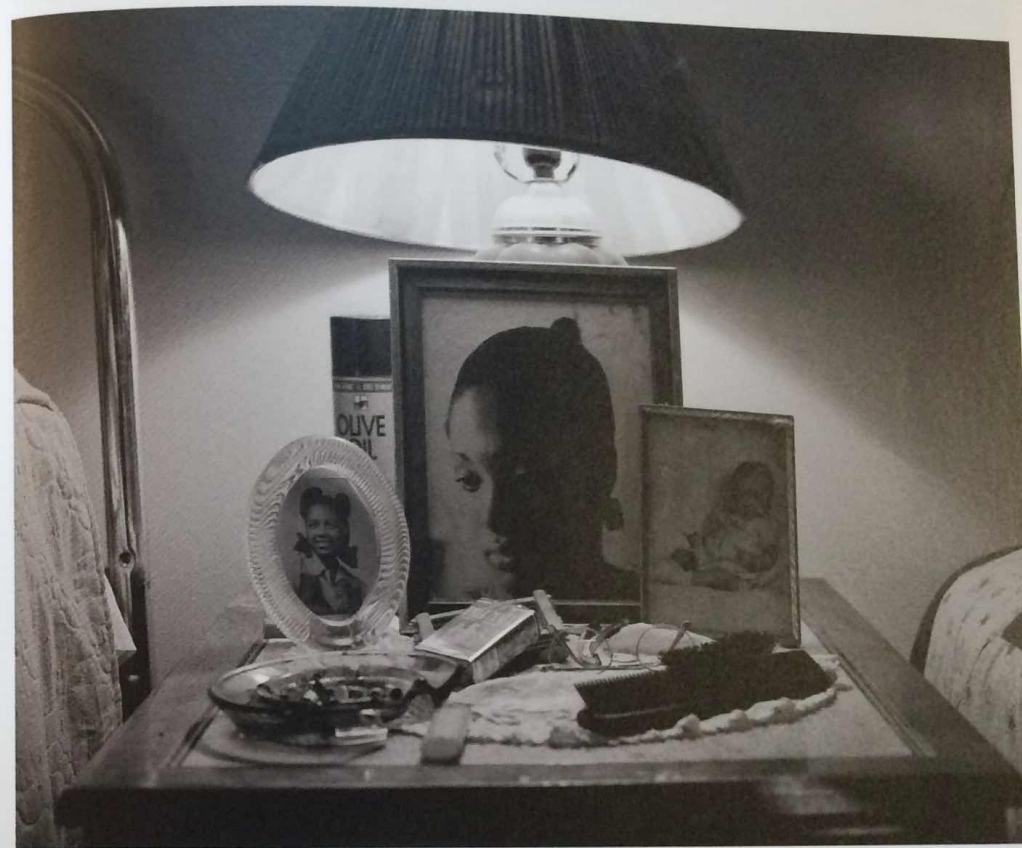
All of Frazier's self-portraits call attention to a slippage between document and feeling. Extending her activist practice into the field of representation, her self-portraits push the bounds of what can be made visible. Those composed alone during times of physical pain caused by a lupus flare up, such as *Self-Portrait in the Bathroom*, 2002 or emotional loss, as in *Self-Portrait March (10:00 a.m.)*, 2009, picture a particular moment and the sensations and affect associated with it. Her collaborative self-portraits with her mother and grandmother weave a visual narrative of relationships across time. Photographs

Self-Portrait Lying On A Pile of Rubble, 2007.
Courtesy LaToya Ruby Frazier & Michel Rein Paris/Brussels.

such as *Mom and Me on Her Couch*, 2010 and *Grandma Ruby and Me*, 2005, reflect the invisible tensions built into family. By asserting both the agency of picture making and the terms of self-representation, these photographs challenge visual histories that occlude the work and everyday reality of black women and the poor or working class. Mirrors double the gaze of multiple figures in collaborative portraits such as *Mom Making and Image of Me*, 2008 and *Hurxtables, Mom and Me*, 2008. In refracting the visual depth of the image, compressing the space between camera, foreground and background, these photographs place the viewer uncomfortably amid the cyclical exchange of gazes, upsetting the strict dualism of self and other as well as photographic conventions that separate subject and object.

The self-portraits are designed to heighten her viewer's awareness of the performative act of seeing. In Frazier's words, "for someone to come up to, and project their own race, class and gender on these photographs and introspectively consider who they are, and what presumptions and biases they have about the people in my photographs."² Not knowing where I stand in relationship to the camera and the women pictured, as a viewer, I am compelled to check my expectations, be they art historical or social; to acknowledge the political implications of Frazier's intersectional position; to consider the politics of a black working class woman standing both in front of and behind the camera. The figures in her self-portraits, be they her mother, grandmother or herself, encompass a singular persona that defies photographic temporality. For Frazier they embody "an intergenerational transference of our identities existing in the history of Braddock, Pennsylvania."³ In picturing the present and the unseen past she further troubles the boundaries of traditional documentary and the viewer is made a witness to their experience and the expression of their relationship to place and each other.

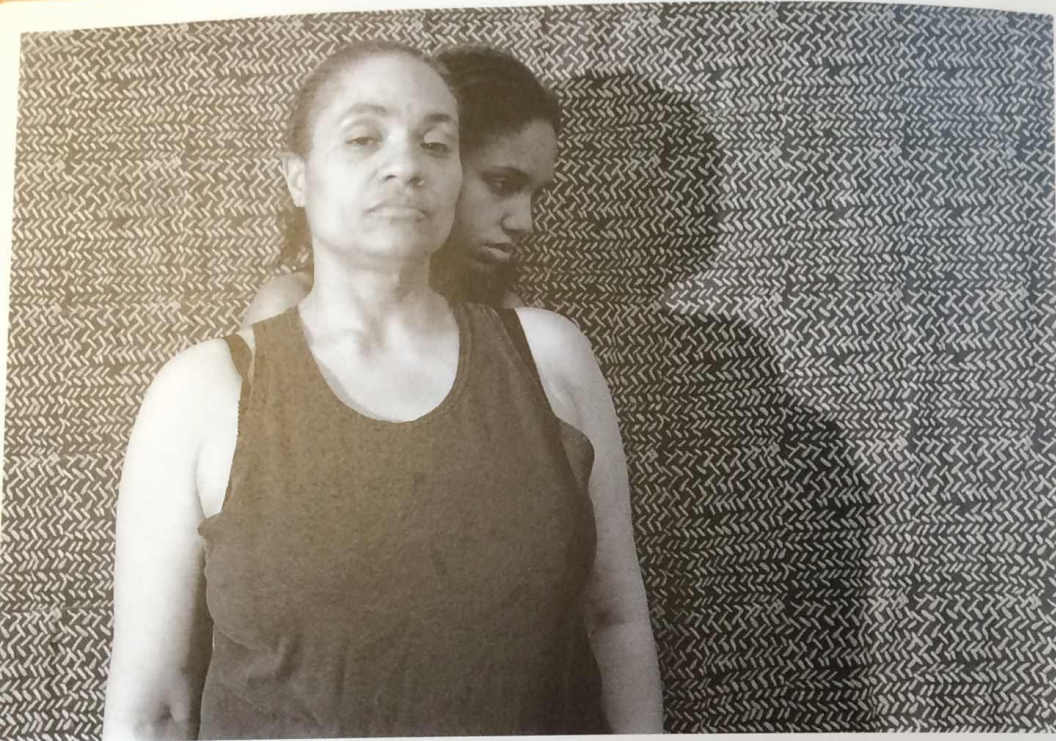
But *Self-Portrait Lying in a Pile of Rubble* is distinct. As one of the only self-portraits made outside of the home, it more directly affiliates the body with the landscape and industrial history of Braddock. Formally, it is more expansive than Frazier's other self-portraits. The distance between the camera and the figure is more pronounced. The stylistic citation in this photograph, particularly that of the New Topographics, is rendered more explicitly than the citations evident in her other self-portraits. But most importantly, the person in *Self-Portrait Lying in a Pile of Rubble* is not Frazier; it is her male cousin, J.C. Twenty years her junior, the portrayal of J.C. propels Frazier's



Aunt Midgie and Grandma Ruby, 2007.

Courtesy LaToya Ruby Frazier & Michel Rein Paris/Brussels.

Page suivante / Following Page : *Momme Portrait Series (Shadow)*, 2008.
 Courtesy LaToya Ruby Frazier & Michel Rein Paris/Brussels.



engagements with self-portraiture and photographic temporality beyond the past and present and into the future. This slippage, between text and the pictured subject, marks the photograph as a poetic gesture of simultaneity, a layering of experience, memory and feeling.⁴ It is an act that emphasizes the particularity of Frazier's experience and a shared entanglement with family, the history and landscape Braddock, and documentary discourse.

J.C.'s position as a solitary figure whose form is written on the landscape, attests to the feeling of place that Frazier's artwork documents; his body's placement in the landscape is at once protected by a warm coat and exposed to invisible industrial toxicity and racialized violence that springs from the systemic economic abandonment of the town. He is an allegorical reference to Frazier's childhood, whose presence suggests the feeling of the family environment and the material and psychological landscape that surrounded her. More explicitly than Frazier's other self-portraits, than most of the other images in *The Notion of Family*, *Self-Portrait Lying in A Pile of Rubble* enacts what Lisa Cartwright calls a "topography of feeling," which

outlines, among other things, an investigation that foregrounds understandings of subjective and collective emplacement.⁵ Unlike the other self-portraits, the viewer's position mimics a topographic ethnographer. But J.C.'s disruption of the frame reminds us that Braddock is not a depersonalized post-industrial frontier. Rather as viewers, we survey the sensual, tactile and physical residues of experience across an intensely personal landscape.⁶

LaToya Ruby Frazier's conceptual process of picture making is an ideological challenge to the conventional structure of documentary photography. In service of her activist practice, her self-portraits, particularly, *Self-Portrait in a Pile of Rubble*, stretch the evidentiary power of photography, pressing the limits of what can be pictured and who can be seen. Unwavering in her expression of the particularity of her position as well as the shared nature of her experience, Frazier's artwork and artistic practice continues the critical legacy of artists, writers and theorists who push the limits of representational structures. Audre Lorde's avowal of the crucial power of poetry, that it "forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes, our dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action," applies to Frazier's camerawork: it is not art for art's sake. It is a vital necessity and a collective activist practice.⁷

1. LaToya Ruby Frazier, interview by James Krivo, *The Uncritic Review: Exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, LaToya Ruby Frazier: A Haunted Capital*, WBAI, April 21, 2013, <http://www.wbai.org/articles.php?article=1115>.

2. LaToya Ruby Frazier in "Kirsten O'Regan: These Dark Histories." *Guernica: A Magazine of Art*. April 17, 2013, <http://www.guernicamag.com/daily/kirsten-oregan-these-dark-histories/>.

3. LaToya Ruby Frazier, "Statement," accessed June 20, 2014, <http://www.latoyarubyfrazier.com/statement>.

4. This simultaneity of subjective experience and objective examination echoes Patricia Hill Collins' delineation of a "both/and conceptual orientation" prevalent in Black feminist cultural production. For more see Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

5. Lisa Cartwright, "Topographies of Feeling," in *Feeling Photography*, eds. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 299.

6. Cartwright, 300-301.

7. Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 37.