



HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE

Contemporaneity

Vol 7, No 1 (2018) | ISSN 2153-5914 (online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp/2018.261
<http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu>

Blue Ruins

LaToya Ruby Frazier in Two Parts

Benjamin Ogrodnik

Exhibition Review

Exhibition schedule: *The Notion of Family*, LaToya Ruby Frazier, The Silver Eye Center for Photography, September 21– November 18, 2017

Exhibition schedule: *On the Making of Steel Genesis: Sandra Gould Ford*, LaToya Ruby Frazier, The August Wilson Center, September 22– December 31, 2017

About the Author

Benjamin Ogrodnik is a PhD Candidate with joint entry in history of art and architecture and film studies at the University of Pittsburgh. His dissertation examines films, photographs, and visual artworks responding to global deindustrialization.

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Artists and sociologists have used photography to catalogue people and places in what are taken to be “dying” mill towns, freezing them in the flow of time before they “disappear.” Corporations, fashion designers, and industrial heritage museums have similarly begun mining images of mills and workers in search of a lost authenticity, a shared narrative of progress and unity. The problem with much of this visual material is that it conceals the complex forms of time and life that coexist in industrial spaces.



Figure 1

On the Making of Steel Genesis: Sandra Gould Ford, LaToya Ruby Frazier. August Wilson Center, Pittsburgh, PA, September 22–December 31 2017. Photo by Sean Carrol. Courtesy of The Silver Eye Center for Photography.

As a black resident of the deindustrialized mill town of Braddock, Pennsylvania, LaToya Ruby Frazier’s career in art photography might be said to push back against the salvage impulse of the liberal documentarian, and the false visual plentitude peddled by this heritage industry. Through a sophisticated awareness of photography as a means of forgetting and remembering, Frazier challenges our simplistic myths and stories about the U.S. Rust Belt. In her work, she asks: What forms of time does the mill offer (or conceal), and to whom does the mill offer (or deny) value?

In a recent two-part exhibition in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Frazier demonstrated the range of her subject matter and two distinct poles of her diverse practice. Her photographic series *The Notion of Family* (2001–14) was the subject of a solo show at the Silver Eye Center of Photography. This selection of black-and-white 35mm prints displayed Frazier’s well-known social documentary practice. In the photographs, Frazier documents how her family—and the African American community at large—continues to be impacted by the ripple effects from the

loss of industrial manufacturing, with images focusing on crises within domestic, public, and institutional spaces.

A concurrent exhibition of new work at Pittsburgh's August Wilson Center, *On the Making of Steel Genesis: Sandra Gould Ford*, evokes Frazier's longstanding (if less discussed) work of artistic collaboration and archival research, while expanding her focus on industrial spaces beyond Braddock. The show picks up on the thread of collaboration seen in earlier pieces, such as *If Everybody's Work Is Equally Important?* (2010/17, with artist Liz Magic Laser), and *A Human Right to Passage* (2014, with Liz Ligon). Building on these projects, the August Wilson Center show brings Frazier into a rich dialogue with local black artist Sandra Gould Ford. Together, they highlight untold stories, perspectives, and experiences of the mythologized Jones & Laughlin Steel Company, once based along the Monongahela River on Pittsburgh's South Side.



Figure 2

The Notion of Family, LaToya Ruby Frazier. The Silver Eye Center for Photography, Pittsburgh, PA, September 21–November 18, 2017. Photo by Sean Carrol. Courtesy of The Silver Eye Center for Photography.

In *The Notion of Family*, Frazier's photography is concerned with documenting at least three forms of time: personal time, institutional time, and environmental time. Often, complex layers of time appear in a single picture. *United States Steel Mon Valley Edgar Thomson Plant* (2013) depicts the facility in an aerial shot, with belching smoke clouds. While it dominates the composition, this landmark coexists with the time of the residents' houses in the foreground, small though they may appear. Meanwhile, the grim monochromatic palette hints at the ongoing degradation of the natural landscape.

In other instances, complex juxtapositions of time appear with immediate and arresting force. The diptych *Landscape of the Body (Epilepsy Test)* (2011) pairs a black woman's body, glimpsed through a hospital gown, with the remnants of the demolished town hospital. Frazier forges a connection between two things—a woman's body and a building—ruptured by the velocity of capitalist "progress." Such pieces have a deeply personal, memorializing function: the loss of the UPMC hospital in Braddock in 2010 profoundly affected Frazier's family, such as her grandmother Ruby, who died battling pancreatic cancer. Frazier herself suffers from

attacks of Lupus, and believes her illness stems from growing up near the mill. These photographs speak to the threats that black bodies have faced in deindustrialized towns like Braddock, due to the poisonous effects of industrial pollution and, later on, the withdrawal of accessible healthcare.

In *On the Making of Steel Genesis: Sandra Gould Ford*, Frazier expands her meta-archiving project, further testifying to multiple forms of time. Frazier learned by chance that she had lived in the same Braddock apartment complex as artist and former steel-mill worker Sandra Gould Ford. Both multimedia artists and photographers, they make work that investigates the neglected histories of African American communities.

In the show, Ford's works consist of small color photographs of the J&L mill, taken mainly in the 1980s. When Ford worked there as an office clerk in the 1970s and 1980s, she collected papers and other materials from the office. Once the mill closed, she made images of abandoned spaces filled with light, void of human presence, as though the mill were a broken cathedral. In other photographs—which depict the Greek café, a refuge for tired steelworkers seeking nourishment in eggs and thick coffee, or a peach tree growing in poisoned soil—Ford highlights the surprising forms of human and environmental resilience that can exist within the mill.



Figure 3

On the Making of Steel Genesis: Sandra Gould Ford, LaToya Ruby Frazier. August Wilson Center, Pittsburgh, PA, September 22 – December 31 2017. Photo by Sean Carrol. Courtesy of The Silver Eye Center for Photography.

Frazier complements these potent fragments with large-format black-and-white photographs of Ford revisiting the J&L site, taken in 2017. The exhibition also includes various J&L documents—safety pamphlets, company magazines, contemporary photographs, diary writings, and architectural blue prints—that Frazier reconstituted as blue-toned cyanotype prints. Through these prints, Frazier surfaces the historical injustices that occurred in the mill. She presents documents that embody the otherwise absent workers. It is through grievance reports—horrific descriptions of maimed limbs and near-death accidents—that minority workers feel present, almost as ghosts. The voices of elderly workers can be read only in their complaints that younger workers are taking their jobs.

Appearing in name only, on legal documents or in photographs of graffiti crying out “PENSIONS, PLEASE,” the working masses must be summoned by an active spectator determined to put together these puzzle pieces. Meanwhile, the actual steel mill is displayed only indirectly; it is represented through the flat space of floor plans, or through covers of *Men and Steel* magazine, which speak of steel in the profit-oriented, abstract tone of technoscience. It becomes obvious that one type of perspective—the white manager’s—is overrepresented, while others are not visualized at all: there are no African Americans featured on *Men and Steel* magazine covers. Frazier’s careful selection of materials draws attention to how historical documents, loaded with a presumed truth-telling authority, lead us into forgetting or overlooking certain experiences, unless we are willing to investigate the gaps. This results in what we might call a form of “archival portraiture,” speaking to the conflicts taking place over the symbolism of the mill and the identities it fosters and precludes.

LaToya Ruby Frazier and Sandra Gould Ford’s collaboration helps us think through the temporalities of deindustrialization in two directions at once. While Frazier counters the mythologies that exclude certain groups or hide injustices, Ford maps out the sometimes-undetected forms of resilience and solidarity in Rust Belt communities, bringing nuance to a new story of the past. The main claim of both shows is clear: we must stitch the wounds of the mill, and loss itself, back into our imagination if we are to narrate stories of deindustrialization in a nondestructive, future-oriented way.



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