

“La Toya Ruby Frazier: Born by a River”

December 13, 2013 – June 22, 2014

Seattle Art Museum

We all know about Andrew Carnegie’s steel mills and libraries for the “ambitious and industrious” public. What we have not heard about are the struggles of African Americans who worked at his mills. The dynamic photographer La Toya Ruby Frazier tells that story in her current exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum.

La Toya Ruby Frazier grew up in what is known as the “Bottoms” of the Monongahela River in Braddock Pennsylvania, nine miles outside of Pittsburgh. Braddock is the site of the first and the last Andrew Carnegie steel mill, Edgar Thomson Works. Generations of Frazier’s family have worked in that mill since the turn of the century. As African Americans they were paid less and, over the decades, had many job related injuries and much illness. But they could not afford to move away from the toxic environment near the plant. La Toya’s grandmother, who raised her, was born in the 1940s when the town was prosperous, her mother in the 1960s, the era of Reaganomics, and she herself in the 1980s when the war on drugs decimated her family.

The artist describes a childhood memory: “One night the river flooded. Crossing through miles of man-made manufactures, contaminated soils and debris, it filled the basement and soaked the floors of my childhood home on Washington Avenue . . . if 70 percent of the world is covered with water and more than 50 percent of our bodies is comprised of water, then the properties found in waters that surround our artificial environments reflect not only a physical condition, but a spiritual condition in which we exist.” In other words, the toxins in the water are part of the fiber of her body and those of her family. They contaminate not only their bodies, but also their spirits.

Frazier has just received the third Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence prize, awarded bi-annually for an early career black artist: she received a cash prize and this exhibition endowed by the Foundation. Seattle Art Museum’s Sandra Jackson-Dumont curated this selection of photographs that opened in December.

As we approach the Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence gallery on the third floor, we first see a long corridor with selections from Frazier’s personal life experience. All of these black and white photographs were taken in or near her grandmother’s home, where Frazier was raised about a block from the steel mill. Here, as a child, the artist experienced warm love and a special world that her grandmother created inside this house surrounded by toxins, illness, and deterioration. It is that world of love that La Toya celebrates. In the intimate photographs we see her grandmother cradle two of her extraordinary collection of dolls, her hands with a cigarette and a wedding ring. In one image, the artist, now a young adult, sits on the floor with her grandmother, with a recreated hairdo like those her grandmother lovingly wove for her as a child.

*Landscape of the Body, Epilepsy Test.* Her mother sits in a hospital gown with her exposed back to us, many wires attached. The other half of the frame shows the destruction of the community hospital in Braddock. The wires of her mother’s body and the dangling wires of the hospital echo one another.

One color photograph ends the corridor, a timely (as we think of Charleston, West Virginia) image of industrial degradation along the Monongahela River with a big sign that says “Clairton Works, Continues Improvement to the Environment.”

As we enter the Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight Gallery, large format color photographs taken from a helicopter give us the context for the issues that Frazier wants us to understand.

We see the blue Edgar Thomson Steel Mill, still operating, and the lines of railroad cars that carry the steel. Nearby are just a few houses and trees. That is Frazier's neighborhood. But Frazier's focus is the empty hole left by the destruction of the community hospital and the home of Isaac Bunn surrounded by rolls of white rubber dumped all around it.

Isaac Bunn came to the opening and I talked to him. He wanted to buy more land around his house, but his paperwork was lost, and the owners invited a company to dump rubber wrapped in white plastic there. They look like a snowstorm gone wrong. Inside the house are four generations of Bunn's family.

Bunn is now director of the Inclusion Project. As Braddock has acquired the status of poster child for redevelopment of rust belt cities, partly because of its flamboyant mayor, these long time working class residents feel left out of the process. Bunn wants them to be part of the conversation. So far, as documented in the photographs, we mainly see the march of the usual condos (they are green here). In addition, according to both Bunn and Frazier, "social practice" artists from outside the community are creating projects they have no real connection to its history, especially its African American working class history,

A riveting speaker and personality, Frazier interspersed her narrative of work, illness (the most common are cancer and lupus, from which the artist herself suffers), toxins, poverty, racism, community and love, with frequent references to art history and major artists who have been important to her work, ranging from Louis Hines and Jacob Riis, pioneering social documentary photographers to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, the avant-garde abstract photography.

She commented on New Deal photography as "top down", asking us how many knew the name of the woman in the famous "migrant mother" photograph by Dorothea Lange. She has studied with Carrie Mae Weems and other contemporary socially engaged photographers. The intersection of economic and political forces that create and destroy life, community, and environment come across clearly in her art work. She is precisely aware of how she fits into the larger context of social documentary as well as photography in general. Her work perfectly balances aesthetics and content.

On the digital display in the gallery, look for Frazier's sardonic performance that protests Levi ads set in Braddock with the slogan "Go Forth". "Go Forth where?" she asks, if you have no money, and you are dying of cancer and the only hospital in the community has been closed. The digital display, a pioneering project itself, includes Frazier's work shown recently at the Brooklyn Museum and elsewhere.

La Toya Ruby Frazier's highly focused mission to tell the story of working class African Americans counters the narrative constructed by outsiders who have no idea of the life that continues in this ravaged place. Her work belongs to the people who can't afford to leave. She wants them not just to be remembered, but honored.