

“Reaching for the Stars”
February 13 – May 26, 2014



Miró: Warrior King

“Miró: The Experience of Seeing” is a misleading title for the exhibition of painting and sculpture by Joan Miró that just opened at the Seattle Art Museum. The key to the exhibition is a mysterious black and white video at the back of the first set of galleries. We see Miró coming into an exhibition with all the windows darkened. According to the explanation from Carmen Fernandez Aparecio, Curator at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, this video records an act of protest by Miró against an exhibition organized without his permission in 1968 by Franco’s government. The artist’s protest was to paint out the windows and to paint a mural that he then destroyed. He had spent his lifetime opposing Franco and the brutal oppressions that he imposed on Spain and particularly Catalonia, after winning the Spanish Civil war in 1939. Miró, the Catalanian, was not about to allow the government to co-opt him. This dark video exposes the undercurrent of intense sadness and pain that underlies many of the paintings and sculptures in the exhibition.

Born in 1893, Miró began drawing and studying art from a young age, but he trained to be a businessman. Not surprisingly, he suffered a breakdown and,

as he was convalescing, decided to give up business forever and become an artist. By the time he went to Paris in 1919, he had already developed a unique personal vocabulary based on nature, but filled with fantasy. He flourished in Paris in the 1920s showing with the Surrealists, but always with his own nature-based fantasy, rather than the obsession with sexuality that dominated much of Surrealism. He worked in both Paris and Spain until 1936; with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, he was forced to stay in France. In 1937 he created *The Reaper*, a mural that has not survived, side by side with Picasso as he painted *Guernica*. Both murals were part of the World's Fair Pavilion of the Spanish Republican, the coalition of leftist groups resisting Franco, the Nazis and the forces of Fascism. In 1939 Miró began painting his famous *Constellations* on burlap, an immersion in the stars that suggests the only means of freedom as Spain, then Europe, descended into darkness. In 1942-44 in Barcelona, he created the extraordinary *Barcelona Series*, large etchings filled with stars, women, and birds torn apart by fear and anguish.

The works in the Seattle Art Museum exhibition are from late in his life, the last twenty years of his career (age 70 – 90!). His color and shapes are still metaphors for a pursuit of joy and freedom in the midst of the darkness. Even after Franco's death in 1975, Miró, as a Catalanian, continued to feel the difficulty of liberation.

For me, the sculptures in the exhibition steal the show. They are cast bronze from found objects, with the same basic vocabulary as his paintings, but they have an intimacy and unpredictability that I found compelling. The curator stressed the conversation between the painting and sculpture, and that is true, but the sculptures are also provocative figures on their own, creatures in three dimensions that have escaped the confines of Miró's two-dimensional world. They are in our space, in our lives, with all their disturbing shapes. The standing figure is usually the basis for the images, but they flout their strange juxtapositions.

The Warrior King (1981), for example, is clearly a powerhouse domestic figure; with an embroidery hoop for a head, it brandishes a large spoon. The figure defies whoever comes close.

The label for the *Warrior King* provides another interpretation: "Spain's political turmoil - the Spanish Civil War followed by World War II and Franco's dictatorship until 1975 - provides an important context for Miró's work and visual vocabulary. Miró's interviews and writings explicitly state his opposition to the Franco regime and support of greater Catalan autonomy, a subject

which is again hotly debated today. His paintings and sculptures relate to political issues more indirectly. By creating isolated single figures out of worn materials that have the residue of a prior life, Miró suggests the fragility and precariousness of the human enterprise.”

These sculptures, paired with the large late paintings, fully declare Miró’s desire to reach for the stars in defiance of the heavy pull of the earth and its oppressions. Immersing himself in gazing at the stars was his way of surviving. Both earth and sky appear in almost all of his art. Ladders often reach from one to the other in earlier paintings, but here, in these late works, we feel his defiance most clearly, in both imagery and techniques, and there are no more ladders. We are left only with our own imagination to absorb the real meaning in the colors and shapes and materials of the work of one of the great artists of the twentieth century.

Seattle Art Museum

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Hours: Wed- Sat 10 am-5pm, Thurs/Fri until 9pm, closed Mon/Tues
Suggested Admission Adults 17 Seniors (62 and over) 14, youth 13-17 and students 11, children under 12 free
First Thurs free, First Fridays free for seniors,
Second Fridays 5-9pm free to teens
Admission is Free

“La Toya Ruby Frazier: Born by a River”

Reviewer: Susan Noyes Platt
www.artandpoliticsnow.com

December 13, 2013 – June 22, 2014

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.



LaToya Ruby Frazier, American, born 1982
Grandma Ruby, JC and Me watching Soap Operas Series: The Notion of Family
2005
Gelatin silver print
17 7/8 x 23 3/4 in.
T2013.66.22

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 last 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, and she herself in the 1980s, the era of Reaganomics, 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.



LaToya Ruby Frazier, American, born 1982
Grandma Ruby and Me Series: The Notion of Family
2005
Gelatin silver print
19 1/4 x 23 7/8 in.
T2013.66.22

Frazier has just received the third Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence prize, awarded biennially 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.



Susan Platt
La Toya Ruby Frazier lecturing at the Seattle Art Museum
December 13, 2013

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.



LaToya Ruby Frazier, American, born 1982
Landscape of the Body (epilepsy test) Series: The Notion of Family 2011
Gelatin silver prints 30 1/8 x 22 1/2 in and 29 7/8 x 22 5/8 in.

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. In addition, according to both Bunn and Frazier, “social practice” artists from outside the community are creating projects that 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.



LaToya Ruby Frazier, American, born 1982
United States Steel Clairton Coke Works, C.I.T.E and Monongahela River 2013
Archival Pigment Prints printed onto Hahnemuhle, Fine Art Baryta 325 gsm

42 1/4 x 63 1/8 in
T2013.66.2

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.

NW Photo Center
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Sunday & Monday: CLOSED
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"Question Bridge: Black Males" and "Seen: An exploration of the Inside and the Out, the Then and the Now, by the (still) Invisible Men"

Reviewer: Susan Noyes Platt
www.artandpoliticsnow.com

January 16- March 8, 2014.

"Seen" includes photographs by and of black men here in Seattle, ranging from children of 7 to octogenarians.

The video project "Question Bridge" is pioneered by nationally renowned photographer Hank Willis Thomas in partnership with others. As explained on the website:

"Question Bridge: Black Males is a project that critically explores challenging issues within the Black male community by instigating a transmedia conversation among black men across the geographic, economic, generational, educational and social strata of American society. Question Bridge provides a safe setting for necessary, honest expression and healing dialogue on themes that divide, unite and puzzle black males in the United States."