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LaToya Ruby Frazier: The Notion of Family

Laura Wexler, Dennis Dickerson

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In this, her first book, LaToya Ruby Frazier (born 1982) offers an incisive exploration of the legacy of racism and economic decline in America's small towns, as embodied by Braddock, Pennsylvania, Frazier's hometown. The work also considers the impact of that decline on the community and on her family, creating a statement both personal and truly political--an intervention in the histories and narratives of the region that are dominated by stories of Andrew Carnegie and Pittsburgh's industrial past, but largely ignore those of black families and the working classes. Frazier has set her story of three generations--her Grandma Ruby, her mother and herself--against larger questions of civic belonging and responsibility. The work also documents the demise of Braddock's only hospital, reinforcing the idea that the history of a place is frequently written on the body as well as the landscape. With *The Notion of Family*, Frazier knowingly acknowledges and expands upon the traditions of classic black-and-white documentary photography, enlisting the participation of her family, and her mother in particular. As Frazier says, her mother is "co-author, artist, photographer and subject. Our relationship primarily exists through a process of making images together. I see beauty in all her imperfections and abuse." Frazier's work reinforces the idea of image-making as a transformative act, a means of resetting traditional power dynamics and narratives, both those of her family and those of the community at large. Frazier is a 2014 Guggenheim fellow.

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