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July 29, 2013 Written by [Liena Vayzman](#)

## #Hashtags: Photographing the Invisible: LaToya Ruby Frazier at Brooklyn Museum

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Photographer [LaToya Ruby Frazier](#) makes her New York solo debut with *A Haunted Capital*, a tightly crafted, personal-is-political installation at the [Brooklyn Museum](#). The artist's hometown of [Braddock](#), a forgotten steel mill town in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, is marked by a geography of postindustrial degradation. An outsider might take a social documentary approach to Braddock's history and current woes. As an insider, Frazier documents that history's tangible impact on her own and her family's lives—an impact characterized by environmental illness, institutionalized racism, and disparity in access to health care—and her community's pride and tenacity. Documentary-style photographs of the demolition of Braddock Hospital, the only hospital in the area, are juxtaposed with intimate portraits of Frazier's mother and grandmother, both of whom learned they had cancer in 2008. (A link is implied between Braddock's environment and these illnesses, as well as Frazier's lupus.) Framed gelatin silver prints of Frazier, her mother, grandmother, grandfather, and family friends, taken in Braddock at various points between 2002 and 2011, line the two white walls of the installation space along with carefully selected cityscapes. The end walls are wallpapered with dozens of images, a visual archive Frazier has gathered of Braddock's history, one that is inclusive of African Americans. This was done in response to her realization that African Americans were excluded from a 2008 history of the town, *Braddock, Allegheny County*. "In the face of this and other exclusions, I have a strong sense of duty to visually write my family and community into the history of Braddock," she says. [1]



LaToya Ruby Frazier. Momme Portrait Series (Shadow), 2008. Gelatin silver photograph, 15 1/2 x 19 1/2 in. Brooklyn Museum, Emily Winthrop Miles Fund; © LaToya Ruby Frazier

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Frazier's portraits hover between staged and intimate. In *Shadow* (2008), the artist's profile overlaps with her mother's body; together they cast an ominous shadow that acts as a third persona that, the artist reveals, "foreshadows the loss of Grandma Ruby." *Grandma Ruby, Mom, and Me* (2009) was taken at Frazier's grandmother's open casket. Frazier's photographs, including some that are part of this show, are arrayed around the casket, while the artist looks out at the camera with a mixture of loss, self-assurance, and defiance. The snapshot *Mr. Jim Kidd* (2011), which shows a man protesting the hospital's destruction, is overshadowed by the finality of a photograph of the destroyed hospital and its empty parking lot dusted with snow. The man's handwritten sign reads: "UPMC is race-based, class-based health care."

Frazier's influences range from Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, and Farm Security Administration photographers to self-portraitists Frida Kahlo and Claude Cahun, as well as cultural theorists bell hooks and Michele Wallace and urban geographer David Harvey, all of whom she cites as part of her "artistic family lineage." Indeed, her show reads at times like a self-representation of a *social* self rather than a psychic one. "Grandma Ruby, Mom, and I have all been shaped by external forces," the artist reflects. "On the micro level, we are three women from an abandoned community, but on the macro level, I see us as symbolic of state oppression and neglect," she is quoted as saying in the exhibition brochure. Frazier credits the Community Art Practice class she took with Carrie Mae Weems at Syracuse University as having propelled her to investigate class, race, and capitalism. Her distinction is in how she demonstrates the imprint of these forces on herself and her close family members, allowing observer and observed to merge. In this melding of oppression and self-investigation—particularly in her attention to environmental illness—Frazier's work recalls that of British photographer *Jo Spence*, who charted her own position within a rigid class system and, later, her status as a cancer patient. Spence's self-representation emerged from Marxist class analysis into a technique she called "photo therapy," which she developed with collaborators, thereby demystifying her auteur status as photographer.



LaToya Ruby Frazier. *Grandma Ruby and Me*, 2005. Gelatin silver photograph, 15 1/2 x 18 1/2 in. Brooklyn Museum, Emily Winthrop Miles Fund © LaToya Ruby Frazier

Collaboration is key to Frazier's practice, as well. In a self-portrait with her mother, *Huxtables, Mom and Me* (2009), Frazier wears an old *Cosby Show* T-shirt. She describes how her mother set up the camera "in the bedroom doorway, facing a mirror reflecting part of her image. Both the mirror and T-shirt are scratched, dusty, and fading." The promise of the idealized African American TV family pales in comparison to the reality of Frazier's family life. In a lecture she performed at the museum, with her images projected in the background, she said, "Between my background and my foreground, I am not sure where I stand." This hovering between real and imagined, background and foreground, in both the spatial and the social senses, marks Frazier's work.

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LaToya Ruby Frazier. Huxtables, Mom and Me, 2009. Gelatin silver photograph, 15 x 19 1/4 in. Brooklyn Museum, Emily Winthrop Miles Fund, 2011.63.3.© LaToya Ruby Frazier

LaToya Ruby Frazier’s photographs function as evidence of her refusal to remain invisible. Avoiding digital manipulation or technical flourishes, she marshals photography’s innate ability to create visibility—an indelible visual record—for the marginalized and oppressed, in the service of critiquing social welfare institutions.

*LaToya Ruby Frazier: A Haunted Capital* is on view at the Brooklyn Museum of Art through Aug. 11, 2013.

[1] LaToya Ruby Frazier, interview with Rujeko Hockley, assistant curator of contemporary art, Brooklyn Museum, from exhibition brochure.

[Liena Vayzman](#) is an art historian, critic, and curator based in New York. She earned her PhD in the History of Art at Yale University, completing a dissertation on French Surrealist photographer Claude Cahun. Recent publications include “I’d Rather Be Here and Now: The Performative Verb of Painting – An Interview with Anoka Farooque” in [X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly](#), and “Farm Fresh Art: Food, Art, Politics, and the Blossoming of Social Practice” in [Art Practical](#).

*#Hashtags is a series exploring the intersection of art, social issues, and global politics.*

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