

# True Pictures? LaToya Ruby Frazier



*Grandma Ruby, Mom and Me at Mom's house, 2005 (from the series *The Notion of Family*, 2001–2014)*

**Social injustices, racism, labor migration, environmental pollution, and the economic decline of formerly prosperous industrial cities are the thematic focal points of the work of the American artist LaToya Ruby Frazier. At its center, however, is her own family as an exemplary core element of interpersonal cohesion. Frazier is currently one of the most important young photographers in North America. In and with her work, she takes sides with the predominantly unprivileged working class in the United States, which lives in precarious conditions due to unemployment, drinking water contamination, or the dismantling of necessary urban infrastructures. With *True Pictures? LaToya Ruby Frazier*, the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg is presenting the first solo exhibition of the multiple award-winning artist in Germany.**

When LaToya Ruby Frazier was born in Braddock, Pennsylvania, in 1982, the once profitable steel town was already in decline: High unemployment, economic hopelessness, and the dismantling of health care facilities defined the cityscape. Her own family suffered not only from the immediate consequences of this precarious living situation, but also from the decades of environmental pollution they were exposed to while working and living in the city. Early on, Frazier began to photographically record both her family and urban situations in her hometown. This resulted in, among others, her extensive black-and-white series *The Notion of Family* (2001–14). Especially the close personal connections to her grandmother and her mother—woven into a familial or social context—are at the center of this early series of works.

With her black-and-white photographs, videos, and performances, Frazier explores both interpersonal and socio-political realities and presents these emphatically in her works.



*Momme, 2018 (from the series *The Notion of Family*, 2001–2014)*

LaToya Ruby Frazier repeatedly appears herself in her photographs, thus making the autobiographical conciseness of her work that much more clear. The range of her motifs within the various series extends from intimate glimpses of family life to landscape shots that could almost be described as classical, were it not for the knowledge of the often economic and/or ecological disasters associated with the areas photographed.





*The Bottom (Talbot Towers, Allegheny County Housing Projects), 2009 (from the series *The Notion of Family*, 2001–2014)*

With increasing awareness of problematic societal conditions, LaToya Ruby Frazier uses her camera in the spirit of Gordon Parks as a weapon against injustice, racism, intolerance, and poverty. In March 2021, *The New York Times* described the photographer's artistic practice as "a marriage of art and activism." In this sense, Frazier also works in places such as Flint, Michigan/USA, in the context of which the series *Flint Is Family I* (2016–17) was created: As of 2014, the city of Flint, which was financially hard hit by the relocation of General Motors'



*Shea brushing Zion's teeth with bottled water in her bathroom (from the series *Flint Is Family I*, 2016/2017)*

largest production site, no longer drew its municipal water from a nearby lake due to cost reasons, but rather from the Flint River, contaminated by years of industrial pollution—with dramatic health consequences for the population. Frazier examines the effects of this environmental scandal without creating an artificial distance, using the example of a family that she accompanied with her camera for several months, creating a very personal as well as politically engaged work that addresses the incident both unambiguously and with great empathy.



*Flint Students and Community Members outside Northwestern High School (est. 1964) awaiting the arrival of President Barack Obama, May 4th 2016, III (from the series *Flint Is Family I*, 2016/2017)*

In the subsequent related series *Flint Is Family II* (2017), Frazier follows that same family as they head to Mississippi to escape potential health hazards caused by contaminated drinking water in Flint.



*Sandra Gould Ford sitting on the Bank of the Monongahela River in Braddock, PA (from the series *On the Making of Steel Genesis: Sandra Gould Ford*, 2017)*

With the series *On the Making of Steel Genesis: Sandra Gould Ford* (2017), Frazier addresses the life and work of the artist and author Sandra Gould Ford, whom Frazier first met in 2015. Using black-and-white photographs and cyanotypes, the work portrays Sandra Gould Ford and the sites of the former Pittsburgh Works Division of Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation, one of the largest and longest-established steel manufacturers in the region, for which Ford worked for many years before being laid off in the mid-1980s.





Jean-Claude, Silvio, Émile et Antonio, jardin d'Antonio, Flénu, Borinage, 10 Octobre 2016 (from the series *Et des terrils un arbre s'élèvera*, 2016–2017)

With the series *Et des terrils un arbre s'élèvera* (*And from the Coaltips a Tree Will Rise*) (2016–17), LaToya Ruby Frazier explores a very different geographical as well as thematic area: In the context of a residency of several months at the Museum Grand-Hornu in Belgium, she investigated individual fates of the post-industrial decline of coal mining in the region of Borinage. Individual miners and their families tell of their lives; in order to escape unemployment, they often immigrated to Belgium from southern Europe or Turkey to work in the mining industry. Hard labor and serious accidents characterized the working and living situation of the people in the mine, which was shut down in 1976. Frazier portrays both the former workers and their widows and living quarters in order to wrest the individual biographies and the fates associated with them—supplemented in the exhibition context by oral history text documents—from oblivion and to preserve the dignity of the people and the memory of their fates. Artistic photographic investigation finds expression here, as well as empathetic portraiture and social narratives.



Flénu, Borinage, 13 Octobre 2016 (from the series *Et des terrils un arbre s'élèvera*, 2016–2017)

With *The Last Cruze* (2019), LaToya Ruby Frazier focuses her camera on the (former) factory workers of the American automobile manufacturer General Motors in Lordstown, Ohio. Despite intensive efforts of the United Auto Workers—a union representing the interests of the employees at General Motors—to save the plant from closure, it was shut down after more than fifty years of existence, among other things due to planned production relocations, as well as the electric mobility turnaround.



United Auto Workers in their monthly union meeting at UAW Local 1112 Reuther Scandly Alli union hall, Lordstown, OH, 2019 (from the series *The Last Cruze*, 2019)

The employees were now faced with the choice of either being transferred to another plant of the group within the United States—which would have meant a new family start in an unfamiliar environment—or, if they refused a transfer, not only losing their employment, but also any pension entitlements.



*The Last Cruze*, Installationview, 2019, Renaissance Society  
photo: Useful Art Services

*The Last Cruze* series will be presented on a twenty-two-meter-long display in cadmium orange, reminiscent of the General Motors assembly line system. More than sixty photographs and texts will be on display, giving vivid expression to the concerns and disappointments, but also the hopes and mutual solidarity of the General Motors plant workers.



The exhibition *True Pictures? LaToya Ruby Frazier* at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg is part of the cooperation project *True Pictures? Contemporary Photography from Canada and the USA*. This comprehensive survey of twentieth and twenty-first-century photography was initiated by the Sprengel Museum Hannover and is accompanied by the Museum für Photographie in Braunschweig and the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg with their own exhibitions.

While the museums in Hanover and Braunschweig provide a broader overview, the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg concentrates on an outstanding photographic position with LaToya Ruby Frazier and presents it in detail on approximately 800 square meters featuring roughly 160 works. The three institutions are organizing an extensive joint supporting program of lectures as well as curator and artist discussions.



*UPMC Professional Building Doctors' Offices*, 2011 (from the series *The Notion of Family*, 2001–2014)



*Flint Students and Community Members outside Northwestern High School (est. 1964) awaiting the arrival of President Barack Obama, May 4th 2016, II* (from the series *Flint is Family I*, 2016/2017)

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Tuesday – Sunday  
11:00 am – 6:00 pm

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