



LaToya Ruby Frazier

**Art As Transformation:
Using Photography for
Social Change**

**November 1, 2023
Luth Concert Hall**

This program is made possible by the
Heidi Brake Smith '82 Fund for the Arts

WELCOME

Dear friends,


Intensely empathetic, historically rigorous, and formally dazzling, the work of LaToya Ruby Frazier has been aptly described as “an archive of humanity.”¹ Approaching charged narratives of racial, economic, and environmental injustice with an eye toward her subjects’ dignity and desires, Frazier revises common assumptions about what stories matter and how they can be told.

Among the many reasons Frazier may inspire us in this liberal arts setting is the fact that she herself is such an avid student. Proudly indebted to myriad artistic traditions, especially documentary photography, Frazier draws on the innovations of her predecessors while also confronting their blind spots. She is in confident dialogue with fields like sociology, women’s studies, environmental studies, and critical race and ethnic studies, suggesting how valuable it can be to work in interdisciplinary ways on our society’s most pressing problems. Finally, she models what it means to engage one’s subjects with mutuality and respect. Often collaborating creatively with the people she photographs, Frazier is interested, first and foremost, in what *they* want to say. Her photography thus not only invites viewers’ future action toward justice but, in rebalancing the relationship between artist/critic and subject, is itself an instance of the more just world she seeks.

Frazier explains her focus on our starkest realities with language echoing James Baldwin’s. “I am showing these dark things about America because I love my country and countrymen,” she says. “When you love somebody, you tell them the truth. Even if it hurts.” Implicit in these words is the optimism of the artist’s broader project: the idea that change *is* possible—and that art can lead the way.

Kyle Frisina
Interim Director
Prior Performing Arts Center

¹ Lescaze, Zoë. “LaToya Ruby Frazier, American Witness.” *New York Times*. 1 Mar 2021.



Special thanks for their support of and engagement with this residency to Heidi Brake Smith '82 Fund for the Arts, Giulia Andreoni, Rachelle Beaudoin, Robert Bellin, Nancy Kathryn Burns, Bryce Dubois, Colleen Fitzgerald, Sharon Frechette, Matthew Gamber, Lynn Kremer, Carmen Alvaro Jarrín, Frances Maughan-Brown, Shawn Maurer, the McFarland Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture, Gabriel Morrison, Victor Pacheco, Allison Richardson, Carolyn Richardson, Mary Roche, Morgan Rocks, Melissa Geisler Trafton, the Worcester Art Museum, and the Worcester Public Schools.

LaToya Ruby Frazier

One of the nation's most acclaimed photographers, LaToya Ruby Frazier's work depicts the stark reality of today's America: post-industrial cities riven by poverty, racism, healthcare inequality, and environmental toxicity. Legendary art critic Jerry Saltz calls her "one of the strongest artists to emerge in this country this century." By featuring voices and perspectives traditionally erased from the American narrative, MacArthur "Genius" Frazier not only captures our cultural blind spots—she teaches us how art is a powerful tool for social transformation.

For over two decades, LaToya Ruby Frazier has used photography and her art to preserve forgotten narratives of labor, gender, and race. Her brilliant, eye-opening work explores the post-industrial era, lifting up marginalized voices and the underrecognized work of women and people of color. The Museum of Modern Art is organizing a comprehensive exhibition dedicated entirely to LaToya and her work, which will be on display in 2024. The MoMA's Acting Chief Curator said that LaToya's "non-traditional monuments demand recognition of the crucial role that women and people of color have played and continue to play within histories of labor and the working class."

LaToya Ruby Frazier's extraordinary body of work includes *Flint Is Family*: a piercing chronicle of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. LaToya spent five years in a city plagued by poisonous water, documenting the community's resilience in the face of environmental racism. The original photo essay, for *Elle Magazine*, was named one of the "25 Most Influential Works of American Protest Art Since World War II" by *The New York Times*, which called it "a natural extension of her already well-established commitment to social justice." She collaborated with residents to tell their story and raise funds for a solution, as the project evolved from a photo essay to a video, and now to a 2022 book and exhibition—which celebrate togetherness and family as much as they condemn injustice.

LaToya's recent work includes *The Last Cruze*, which documents the devastation of a factory town losing its factory. Designed to resemble a production line, the exhibition follows the workers affected by a General Motors plant shutdown in Lordstown, Ohio, after more than half a century of operation. These unflinching photographs of an exploited working class "speak to the imperative to stay together even and especially when driven

apart” (*Artforum*). LaToya also took portraits of Breonna Taylor’s family for the cover story of *Vanity Fair*. Alongside the latter project, LaToya penned a moving statement about how crucial it was for her to help the family reclaim visual justice by offering humane and dignified representations of Breonna and her loved ones. “My portraits are a call for justice and the unwavering steadfast endurance of Black women in America regardless of the persecution we face on a daily basis,” she wrote.

In her award-winning first book *The Notion of Family*, LaToya offers a penetrating look at “the legacy of racism and economic decline in America’s small towns.” A haunting photographic account of three generations of Frazier women, the book is simultaneously personal and political: investigating the impact of deindustrialization on working class Black families in the Rust Belt through the “labour-consumed bodies” of her relatives. Her talks, like her breathtaking work, betray a sobering reality: the American dream has not, and does not, work for Black people. As long as environmental injustice, healthcare inequality, and economic racism continue to thrive, the country is failing its Black citizens. With clarity and insight, LaToya shines a light on how art can be used as a tool for transformation and social good across the nation.

In 2020, LaToya was selected as one of nine Storytelling Fellows for *National Geographic*. She has received the prestigious MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship. She was chosen by *Ebony* as one of their 100+ Most Powerful Women of All Time. Her work has been exhibited widely, with solo exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum, Seattle Art Museum, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. LaToya also shot an aerial photography series depicting Memphis, Baltimore, and Chicago in *The Atlantic*’s Martin Luther King issue, as well as the movie posters for the Grand Prix-winning Spike Lee film *BlacKkKlansman*, which tells the true story of an American detective who infiltrated the Colorado Springs KKK. LaToya is the Associate Professor, Photography, at School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and has previously held academic and curatorial positions at Yale University School of Art, Rutgers University, and Syracuse University.

PRIOR PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

A catalyst for creativity and learning, the Prior Performing Arts Center amplifies the arts at Holy Cross and provides the College, the greater Worcester community, and visiting creative thinkers with an inspiring environment to pursue diverse questions of the human experience.

For more information, visit www.priorperformingartscenter.org.

PRIOR PRESENTS

LaToya Ruby Frazier's talk is the third event of this year's **Prior Presents** series, the Prior's signature visiting artist program, which complements the innovation and creativity of work produced throughout the year by Holy Cross students, faculty, and staff. Building on the foundation laid by Arts Transcending Borders (2014-2023), Prior Presents is the keystone of the Prior Performing Arts Center's public-facing programming, merging thrilling live events by visiting artists with robust educational and outreach activities. Defined by exceptional artistic quality, interdisciplinary impulses, and the potential to spark both wonder and reflection, this annual series celebrates artistic risk-taking and the exchange of ideas and perspectives from around the globe. Short- and long-term visiting artist residencies include performances, artist talks, installations, workshops, and experiential learning opportunities for Holy Cross students and the greater Worcester community. Creative residencies, which provide artists with time and space to develop new work, make an essential contribution to the broader arts ecosystem and provide on- and off-campus community members with a window into intimate aspects of the creative process. Upcoming Prior Presents events include:

Compagnie Hervé Koubi

January 29-30, 2024 | 7:30 pm | Boroughs Theatre

French dance company Hervé Koubi returns its stunning classic to Holy Cross, allowing audiences to experience its gravity-defying style in the thrilling proximity of our black box theater.

Reginald Dwayne Betts

February 26, 2024 | 6:00 pm | Luth Concert Hall

A critically acclaimed poet, scholar, and graduate of Yale Law School, Reginald Dwayne Betts draws on his personal experience with incarceration to work across diverse literary forms and advocacy projects for reform of the criminal justice system.

Cultural Exchange Rate

Tania El Khoury

March 11-16, 2024 | Boroughs Theatre

In this interactive multimedia experience by Lebanese live artist Tania El Khoury, audiences are invited to engage with an astonishing collection of sensory artifacts that collectively trace more than a century of border crossings.

Rhiannon Giddens

March 14, 2024 | 7:30 pm | Luth Concert Hall

The iconic folk artist Rhiannon Giddens, who has stretched her inimitable brand of folk music into nearly every field imaginable, performs from her first album of entirely original songs, “You’re the One.”

Boston Lyric Opera

The Wanderer’s Tethering

April 6, 2024 | 3:00 pm | Luth Concert Hall

With poetry by Boston Poet Laureate Porsha Olayiwola and music by composer Mason Bynes, “The Wanderer’s Tethering” follows the story of Tobi, a descendant of an Igbo community whose members were stolen from what is today Nigeria and who led a revolt against their enslavers on the shores of Georgia in 1803. The program will also include stirring selections of chamber music by Castle of Our Skins.

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