

GLADSTONE

Kamora Monroe, "LaToya Ruby Frazier: Monuments of Solidarity," *The Brooklyn Rail*, August 28, 2024



LaToya Ruby Frazier:

Monuments of Solidarity

By **Kamora Monroe**



Installation view: *LaToya Ruby Frazier: Monuments of Solidarity*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2024. Photo: Jonathan Dorado.

LaToya Ruby Frazier is an enigma, but her subjects are definitely not. A comprehensive exhibition of Frazier's work over the years, titled *onuments of Solidarity*, is currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art. Comprehensive is almost an understatement; this exhibition covers over one hundred pieces across seven bodies of work from 2003 to 2024. No

stranger to MoMA, Frazier has been in two previous exhibitions there—as well as many other group and solo shows throughout the

world.

There is a free-flowing quality to the exhibition as each gallery smoothly transitions to the next. Even so, each room has a unique lighting, color, and setup that evoke different emotions. The first gallery I saw, subtitled “The Last Cruze,” consisted of bright red headboard-like structures towering single-file in front me, in a formation like that of a train track. Trains and beds are often things one can sleep on, but—in this exhibition—I found my eyes peeled for each lengthy story I had to trudge through. Each structure displayed a union worker’s photo and their story. The room itself was a grayish blue all over. The straight line of fluorescents above cascaded down on the red structures, the rest of the room dimly lit and adopting an eerie quality instead, which wasn’t helped by the closeness of the red structures. A small, beige room draped in a yellowish fluorescent lighting, which held the project titled *More Than Conquerors: A Monument for Community Health Workers of Baltimore, Maryland, 2021–22* (2022), evoked a feeling of sterility. The room contained the stories of community health workers, with their images and stories placed on moving structures that looked like hospital monitors. My eyes traced the bottom of the structures—falling upon the sight of unlocked wheels. I flirted with the idea of moving these monitors, perhaps toying with the chronology and its impact, but this desire quickly faded—the sterile lighting negated my buoyant thoughts. Next, I passed into a room with a rounded shape, entrapping itself with walls lined with collected paperwork, cyanotypes, and color photographs demanding the viewer’s full attention. With abrupt lighting changes, I was intoxicated by its constant conceptual motion. Then, I found calm. The final galleries were more underwhelming in their layout, composed of neutral-toned walls and standard museum lighting, which was almost a saddening sight. However, everything was quickly redeemed by the content in such a small space. It was as though you could fit all the pieces in a small lot. Kind of tight but not jarring or overly fussy.



Installation view of *LaToya Ruby Frazier: Monuments of Solidarity*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2024. Photo: Jonathan Dorado.

As I made my way back into the blue-gray room with the beaming fluorescent lights, it was almost ironic how the largest image in the room was the easiest to miss. As my head swiveled, almost falling off of my neck in doing so—my feet led me left. Through a slew of people, I was sucked into a 2019 photo of Marilyn Moore from Frazier’s *The Last Cruze* installation, bound on the wall. Immediately, my eyes were drawn to the hands. This photo was duplicated at both ends of the gallery, and it was as though I could hear its call in



both my ears at once. Hands crossed, left over right—experiences crash into one another, yet remain calm: a testament to perseverance. The subject looks relaxed—almost slouching in her seat. It's not in a way that denotes bad posture, but rather comfort, that it would be painful to sit differently. The photo is extremely sharp, allowing the viewer to see each detail, down to the wrinkles, ridges in the nails, and each divot in her rings. The image evokes a kind of nostalgic and sentimental quality: nostalgic because these hands remind me of my grandma's, carefully smoothing and twisting my hair as a child; sentimental because the wrinkles denote experience in life. I imagine the rings on Marilyn Moore's fingers on a stack, like my grandmothers—and her lightweight jacket coming from the front closet nearest to the door. I imagine she never forgets to put the chain on the door. I imagine the wooden table that those hands rest on smells of Old English wood cleaner. This image plays on portraiture, yet redefines it in that it de-emphasizes the need for faces, and places emphasis on an entirely new part of the subject. I got the spitting image of my grandmother without even seeing Moore's face.

LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Marilyn Moore*, UAW Local 1112, Women's Committee and Retiree Executive Board, (Youngstown Sheet and Tube Co., Lear Seating Corp., 32 years in at GM Lordstown Complex, Assembly Plant, Van Plant, Metal Fab, Trim Shop), with her General Motors retirement gold ring on her index finger, Youngstown, OH from *The Last Cruze*, 2019. © 2023 LaToya Ruby Frazier, courtesy the artist and Gladstone gallery.

These may be Frazier's *Monuments of Solidarity*, but I argue they are also the opposite, in that she works to retain an intimate bond between the viewer and the subject by making their story part of the work itself. In some ways, this factor turns its head away from the monumentality of the exhibition, in that the texts do not allow room for the photos and their subjects to speak for themselves. The necessity of reading in conjunction with viewing the photo takes away from having a natural experience and mental conversation with the subjects. I came out of the exhibit more knowledgeable on people's stories and lives in different times of hardship, but at times the influx of information

obscured the experience of viewing the photograph, especially as the works approached more recent years. I would have liked to converse telepathically with the subjects and perhaps see their stories, as opposed to reading them in large blocks of text shifted to the right side. However intimacy is never the enemy, I find—and I believe that these stories are necessary to platform, by any means. The importance of a viewer’s ability to more easily resonate with the subjects of the photo is underscored in *Moments of Solidarity*, as Frazier ensures that she platforms commonly unfamiliar faces in art spaces.

Although, for me—her subjects aren’t so unfamiliar.

Contributor

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