

BOMBLOG

Art

LaToya Ruby Frazier and Greg Lindquist
by LaToya Ruby Frazier and Greg Lindquist Dec 16, 2010

Photographer and curator LaToya Ruby Frazier sat down with painter Greg Lindquist to discuss the aesthetics of gentrification and decay. Their *Planet of Slums* exhibition opens December 17th at Third Streaming in NYC.

Scroll down for a slideshow of Frazier's portraits of Braddock, PA.



Greg Lindquist, 2010, *The Theatrics of Interior/Non-interior*, oil on linen, 25.5 by 47.5 inches. All Lindquist images courtesy of the artist.

With curator Omar Lopez-Chahoud, I curated the exhibition *Planet of Slums*, which was on view at Rutgers University, Mason Gross Galleries in New Brunswick, New Jersey, last fall and opens on December 16th at Third Streaming in SoHo. I have a deep concern for what's happening with the landscape and the environment in places like New Orleans, Detroit, and Braddock, PA. Braddock, where I was born and raised, is an old steel mill town located five miles outside of Pittsburgh. It is home to Andrew Carnegie's steel mill factory, the Edgar Thomson Steel Works. I was thinking about how abandoned spaces and infrastructures are re-developed, giving rise to gentrification. Initially, that was my key curatorial thought, but, then again, there's nothing new about gentrification. When I read Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums* I realized that what I really wanted to focus on was gentrification's structure, its cycle, how it keeps happening repetitively in different geographic locations. Three particular artists I wanted to work with were Tony Buba, an important filmmaker from Braddock, PA; Ishmael Randall Weeks, a conceptual artist from Lima, Peru; and Greg Lindquist, a painter from Brooklyn, NY. I had been following Greg's work since we met during at Art Omi, a residency in upstate New York, in 2008. Through numerous conversations we learned that our commitments to our respective

fields, painting and photography, were grounded in a common interest in the complexity of historicizing abandoned landscapes and locating ourselves within their decay. I consider Greg one of my important contemporary companions, which has brought us to our conversation today.

LA TOYA RUBY FRAZIER What was your initial interest in accepting to participate in *Planet of Slums*? How do you see your work fitting into the exhibition?

GREG LINDQUIST It begins with gentrification. My work has developed out of my personal experience and concern for the Williamsburg and Greenpoint neighborhoods, as they have grown and changed in the past five years with gentrification and urban development, especially on the waterfronts. When I started digging into issues about historic preservation versus development, globalization, and outsourcing, I sought to understand why these buildings were becoming vacant and being redeveloped for residential purposes on a global scale. I became more interested in globalization and its economics after speaking about these issues with my brother, who at the time was an economist for the US Department of Treasury. He frequently traveled to Eastern Europe and the Transcaucasus region. He was part of a team of economists that helped Georgia manage its transition to a market economy. At some point when I was focusing on Brooklyn, he said, "If you want to see unimaginable industrial decay, go to the former Soviet Union." He described his boss's visit several years ago to a former battery factory, which had handled production for the entire Soviet Union—it was gargantuan. This inspired me to leave the comfort zone of my immediate surroundings and explore Georgia, where I could observe the visual results of the decline of the Soviet Union, as factories collapsed with the fall of USSR and industrialization came to a halt. So, to answer your question, I was interested in how my work would fit in this group show, but also in learning more about these global economic trends through reading the book.

LF Are there specific passages in the book that speak to or relate directly to your paintings in the exhibition?

GL Yeah, the specific descriptions of the slums, for instance. I was fascinated by the resourcefulness and creativity that people require to survive in these environments. For example, the City of the Dead in Cairo, where a million use Mameluke tombstones as part of their dwelling place as part of their day-to-day furniture—they string laundry among gravestones or use them as desks, for instance. These developing communities are making something unusual useful because the city lacks infrastructure to provide basic services for them. My initial interest is aesthetic—architectural elements that appear unusual, transformed, or rearranged unexpectedly. I am interested in how an orderly design can be weathered and unraveled with time, with use/non-use and the elements. I then dig into the constellation of political, economic, and cultural concerns. This came, in part, from experiencing the informal economy of the Republic of Georgia, where a primitive form of capitalism is going on. People are excited to be selling just about anything on the sidewalks and everyone wants to be part of that global economic system. It's very do-it-yourself and unregulated. Similar economics are manifested in the aesthetics of the structures in Georgia. I do image searches on the Internet as research before visiting the sites. What about for you? How have economic forces shaped the urban fabric of Braddock? Do you see this fitting into the larger picture of *Planet of Slums*?

LF In particular, just think about the timing. You have this 19th century landscape that was totally manufactured and shaped around one plant, the Edgar Thomson Steel Works mill, meant to profit Andrew Carnegie and his partners. The factory is a massive infrastructure that hovers over the small row homes

that are strategically placed across the street. The town layout was designed for the workers who emigrated from Europe to work for Carnegie. He made sure that people didn't go too far. When you start to think about it, there's something dark, sinister, and controlling to the way the city's residents are positioned in such proximity of the mill.

GL How has this history impacted the present?

LF This is the 21st century; practically all the original inhabitants and their families have died or disappeared. Residents in Braddock today do not work in Carnegie's mill—the layout and infrastructure of the town are obsolete and non-functional for the current residents. It doesn't make sense to me that newcomers would build right on top of it. Part of me is curious to see how urban planning will restructure the space and how this reshaping will reconsider residents that have been living in the shadow of the mill for decades. I have a serious issue when people romanticize places they have no historical connection to or understanding of. Braddock is environmentally unsound, toxic, and hazardous. It has the highest rates of infant mortality, asthma, and cancer in the country. I'm confused as to why philanthropists, entrepreneurs, and artists are relocating to Braddock, and I can see how that relates directly to Planet of Slums. The town's 20,000 or more residents decreasing to roughly 2,000 current residents today reveals the poor conditions in which its residents have been existing. Recently there's been an influx of newcomers who are not working-class; they are not forced to live in the same toxic, harsh conditions that the long-time residents of Braddock have been dealing with for decades. When Mike Davis points out the explosion of inequality and poverty due to plant closures and deindustrialization in places like Albania and Bulgaria, it resonated with my thoughts on how Braddock's steel workers and their families were devastated and displaced when the mills collapsed around the 1970s. Speaking of Albania and Bulgaria in the '80s and '90s, Mike Davis states: "Simultaneously, there has been massive neglect, disinvestment, even abandonment of the crucial district infrastructures and factory-based social services, and as a result, older apartment blocks—indeed whole neighborhoods, and some entire cities—have regressed to slum conditions." The same could be said of Braddock.

GL And also of the industrial center of Rustavi in Georgia—it was just sprawling factories built on this economy. Completion of a lot of them hadn't even finished before the economy collapsed, leaving 65 percent of the city's population jobless.



Greg Lindquist, *Ikea's Planned Obsolescence (Everyday Living, Everyday Forgetting)*, 2009, oil and metallic on linen, 13.75 by 39.75 inches.

LF Looking at your paintings I wondered if you are romanticizing this. Do you see beauty in the process of deindustrialization?

GL Entropy is not always so obvious. Economic actions are manifested in material displacements: things falling apart, people leaving, things and people being replaced, construction happening. I am aestheticizing these landscapes because I see a certain melancholic beauty in their loss—painting certainly heightens that effect. Am I romanticizing? Yes. To what end? To seduce the viewer, to engage him or her in a more complex context about the landscape’s political, economic, and conceptual underpinnings.

LF Well, Romanticism in art has its own history dating back to the 18th century in Europe, and it impacted on American artists in the 18th and 19th centuries. There was a revolt against the political and social forms of the industrial revolution. Artists aestheticized their emotions, wanting to escape confines of population growth, urban sprawl, and industrialism.

I don’t feel that I’m romanticizing any of the landscapes that you saw in my photographs in MoMA PS1’s *Greater New York*. I’m taking a closer look at the complexity and history of each landscape. I’m very connected to the specific blocks and locations where the photographs are taken—I’ve revisited them and grew up in them, spending nearly the last three decades of my life there. It’s interesting to see how the new artists that have come to Braddock produce work. They’ll say, “Wow, this is so amazing, this landscape. It’s so beautiful, informing my art practice and its aesthetics. I don’t want it to ever change.” When I look at the land, that’s not what I see or feel; I know the treachery and the environmental impact that the landscape has had on the bodies of the long-time inhabitants stuck in these conditions.

GL Do you find these places in Braddock beautiful?

LF Yeah, there is a lot of beauty in the resiliency of people to survive in these types of conditions. I call the experience we’ve had there the “Vortex of Braddock,” an oppressive symptom of American capitalism. American capital raped, pillaged, and killed Braddock’s innocent natives, then erased them from history as if they never existed. It then abandoned and neglected innocent African Americans via redlining. Now, after decades of polluting its soils, American capital wants to “reclaim,” “revitalize,” and “redevelop” Braddock again in hopes of “redistributing” more wealth for the new colonizing neo-liberals. What I appreciate about your work is how you’re looking at the landscape formally and aesthetically. You say you’re only celebrating the industrial landscape, but I’m not sure I believe you. You are very aware of the trajectory and the history of landscape painting. I’m very aware of the history of photography and how the New Topographics, a movement in the 1960s where photographers, all men in the history books, of course, happened to be concerned with the way people were affecting the environment. In our American West, at the time, manufactured suburbs were sprawling, cutting through the earth’s mountains and fields, expanding on westward to the so-called new frontier. Everything was so artificial; at the same time settlers, were damaging the landscape and nature. Robert Adams saw that—whether the images are in Colorado or Los Angeles, he is looking and dealing with the beauty in all this, but at the same time is totally dismayed with the human activity around it.

GL Using painting to communicate these things is a very complex, knotty question. Photography is very accessible and is fairly new, while painting has a lengthy history—there’s the history of the object, the commodity, the luxury object. It carries certain social and political baggage with it. I’m celebrating the aesthetics of these industrial interstices in Brooklyn and Georgia, but, at some point, there is a disconnect in the way they relate to subject matter, content, and the political debate around it. That’s something I’m definitely still working

out. Getting farther away from Brooklyn made me aware of how imperialistic I felt going to take photographs of places where people are experiencing third-world poverty and coming out of the Communist condition, in which everything was provided for them as long as they worked. How do I not feel like I'm completely exploiting this exploration? How do I give back? One way of addressing this was working directly with the art community in Georgia through the Laura Palmer Foundation in Warsaw. Through the research-based, context-responsive project *Frozen Moments: Architecture Speaks Back*, I collaborated with a Georgian collective to create, ship, and track several oil paintings of the Ministry of Transportation building, where the project was held. I was interested in the strange ways in which Georgians were both connected to, and disconnected from, the global transportation of information and commodities—despite their history of being along the caravan route of the Silk Road and part of the once efficient Soviet system. For example, they can browse Amazon's website, but cannot actually order any products because of Georgia's present internal civil conflicts, which has disrupted their transportation systems. Things such as designer perfumes and skateboards are in high demand, even though people download music and movies digitally from the Internet. So, I based one of the Ministry of Transportation paintings on an aerial view of the building that my Georgian collaborator Gio Sumbadze photographed and transmitted to me through Skype. Then I, in turn, shipped these paintings via Fed-Ex, tracking their meandering path from New York through the Midwest and then through England before reaching Georgia. I also challenged the works' values for customs by claiming that, "The perceived value of these paintings are not in their commercial costs, but rather in their conceptual and contextual worth, which is created in part by this documentation and shipping process." The paintings were installed like banners, which suggested a dematerialization, deflation, and decomposition of not only the painting as object but also the architecture in which it is placed. And then I donated them to start both the Laura Palmer Foundation and Contemporary Center for Art of Tbilisi's permanent collections. The art scene in Georgia is refreshing after being steeped in the New York art world, it's largely uninformed by material-based objects—it's mostly photography, video, installation.



Frozen Moments: Architecture Speaks Back, 2010, installation in the Ministry of Transportation Building, Tbilisi, Georgia, oil, metallic, canvas, transportation record. Organized by the Laura Palmer Foundation, Poland.

LF Do gentrification and outsourcing bother you? When looking at your work, I sense that you always find a way to be ambiguous and step around issues of gentrification and globalization.

GL Yeah, it does. It's imperialistic and exploitative to the original community and, often, artists. One of the great quotes in Davis' book is: "One's ideological perspective is likely to be shaped by one's housing status." This quote reminds me of how Marx said that the ideology of a society is in keeping with its material basis. It's a hierarchy of economic statuses, because we're both in privileged and unprivileged positions depending on how we look at it. As artists, we often feel beholden to the support of our "patrons" and exploited by the corporate mechanisms of gentrification (we settle these "slums" first, making them more tasteful), yet obviously we're more financially stable than many of the endemic residents of Williamsburg, Rustavi, or the slums of Mexico City. I had very conflicted feelings when people started first buying the paintings about gentrification in Brooklyn. There's a visual seductiveness in the work; it's alluring and accessible. There's also a general melancholic feeling to them. I don't know how much the politics really come into play, or need to, or are embedded in the work itself. I think that's in the work's context, which I have explored through projects that take things outside the commercial gallery setting.

LF So why are you preserving these industrial spaces that are disappearing, these transitions in your paintings?

GL Ultimately, because it gives me a sense of control, albeit a false one. I see the paintings themselves as emotive documents, even though there is transformation—through color and sensibility. Early on I thought of the work as memorials and monuments, which heightened the sense of loss in these landscapes. I'm creating a personal telling of a more universal history. Do you think that photographing Braddock and your family helps you create a sense of history?

LF Considering that the entire population of African Americans from Braddock has been omitted from the 2008 book, *Braddock Allegheny County, (Images of America: Pennsylvania)* published by Arcadia Publishing, I find it crucial to continue documenting the untold stories of my family and my community.

GL Does doing this give you any sense of control over the exploitation that's occurred in Braddock, or the illnesses your family members have suffered?

LF It gives me the sense that I'm recalling things that our government has deliberately ignored, neglected, and buried. Through social conditioning, America's pathology is denial, no regard for the pain of others. The poor and African Americans were redlined thanks to Reaganomics. That's what's irritating about seeing people neglect these hardships. What I'm doing is not trying to control it, because I don't think, ultimately, you can. If you don't have money, you don't have power; therefore, you can't control anything. But what you can do is raise questions and awareness about why this has systematically happened. Why is it always about pillaging? Andrew Carnegie never meant to have African Americans work in those steel mills. He viewed the immigrants that came over from Europe as better, harder workers. Unions were formed that did not include the black men and women that finally started working there. Their pay was drastically different. Non-African Americans were making more; they were

allowed to have better positions and jobs within the factory. I mean, imagine you're a black man and you train this white man that comes in and then, the next day, he's your boss. You can never move up. You can never make an equal salary. So working hard, and sacrificing yourself, and dying in this pollution... It's an awful thing to realize. The photographs have been making me learn a lot about American history. I understand the distress that black families are in now, and especially my own family. In this current political climate, it's very important that I start to engage in this before they totally erase all that history.

GL Absolutely. On a different note, how do you feel about artists' place in the gentrification process? As artists, we're exploited by developers because we settle a so-called "frontier" when it is almost unlivable. We bring culture and status to that community, and then the developers cash in on that. So much of the advertising of these high-rises and condos for Williamsburg, Greenpoint, and Bushwick cash in on that hipness. And, at that point, they make that community almost unlivable for us; we can't afford it. How do you feel about that, and especially in relation to Braddock?

LF Artists need to do their research on the history of neighborhoods they have no connection to whatsoever. The reason developers are cashing in on "revitalized" neighborhoods is due to the artists' ignorance to what was going on there in the first place. I would imagine that if artists that were interested in revitalizing a place started talking to the residents and truly built up conversations and a real human awareness, there would be a sense of pride and connection and solidarity with everyone.

GL Otherwise it's this is an exploitative food chain.

LF I would agree with that.

GL It reminds me of the part in Planet of Slums when Mike Davis talks about when you have informal structures like housing, for instance, where the corrupt officials are making money on unofficial landlords who, in turn, are making money on even poorer tenants, who are, in one extreme example, renting cages in unused sections of buildings.

LF What I'm witnessing in Braddock... I go back and forth wondering, are these newcomers just vultures swooping down, picking off what is left of sick, elderly people who have no money and no power? Now the philanthropists, entrepreneurs, and the artists can start "beautifying" Braddock, while building up their own property.



GL This reminds me of how the Williamsburg neighborhood boundaries have been encroaching on Bushwick and Greenpoint in order to minimize those endemic populations, such as the Latinos and Polish, and maximize the branding of its hip chic. As the money pours in, I have no input in its changing urban fabric.

LF Yeah, we don't get to call the shots on any of it. You and I both hit the same wall, ultimately. Whether it's done through a painting of your landscapes, or a gelatin silver print of my landscape, it's still that same complex issue that artists have to deal with, especially when considering what their roles are in relationship to urban development. Have artists become agents of gentrification? Today, has the primary function of the artist become synonymous with "urban pioneers"? If artists allow their skills and talents to be co-opted by real-estate developers, does this make artists the new colonizers?

All Frazier images: silver gelatin print, 16×20 inch print, trimmed flush to the image, mounted on 24×28 inches museum board. All Frazier images courtesy of the artist.

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