

**STEEL GENESIS:
SANDRA GOULD FORD**

October 19 – December 8, 2018
Frederick Layton Gallery

Through the photographs, writings and documents of artist and writer Sandra Gould Ford, this exhibition explores the history, memory and experiences of the industrial working class as well as the economic and social loss suffered when an area's defining industry declines. Ford's photographic work, which she produced during and after her employment at one of the Pittsburgh area's oldest and largest steel mills, creates a vibrant conversation with her subject, capturing the nuanced links between place, time, memory, work and creativity.

Friday, October 19, 5:00 – 9:00 PM
Opening Reception

Monday, November 26, 6:00 PM

*The Mill as a Metaphor:
Art, Storytelling, and Change*

Panel Discussion with

Sandra Gould Ford and other guests

A reception for the artist will follow

WHY DOES THIS EXHIBIT MATTER?

Steel Genesis represents a recent photographic movement toward subjective documentary storytelling. The combined use of first-person narrative text, poetry, historical artifacts, and photographic imagery representing Sandra Gould Ford's first-hand experiences at the Jones and Laughlin Steel Company allows for a complex delivery of a story through varying narrator's voices and stylistic conventions. This is increasingly complicated by the portraits of our primary narrator (Ford) by photographer Latoya Ruby Frazier. This combination strategy allows for a viewer to engage with material from both "insider" and "outsider" perspectives in the space of the same exhibition, and ultimately contemplate how their understanding of a story may be affected by different, but complementary narrative sources.

Much of what makes *Steel Genesis* possible as an artistic expression is a result of the particular perspective that Sandra Gould Ford held. As one of few Black people, and one of even fewer Black women to have access to the shops at Jones and Laughlin Steel Company, Sandra documented the mills and the lives of those working in them in a way that only she could. By drawing a parallel between a large ladle carrying tons of molten steel and a nursemaid delivering a child, Sandra comes to recognize the entire mill as something altogether new: a regenerative organism. Sandra Gould Ford leveraged her perspective as simultaneously an insider and an outsider, transforming the gritty and tough environment of the steel mill into "a metaphor for all of us, that we come into being and go out of being."¹

The interplay of Ford's images and writing offers us a more complex, redemptive view of deindustrialization than the representation of loss and ruin that we usually see. Because Ford used to work in the mill, the stories she tells embody a layered relationship to the place of work. Typically, the narratives and images around workplaces are controlled by the owners, for example corporate publicity and the company magazines shown in the archival section of this exhibit. When the company closes down, there is no more narrative from the corporation's point of view. But

Gallery Hours

Monday through Saturday,
10 a.m. – 5 p.m.

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the working people themselves don't go away just because a mill is shuttered. Ford's work put us in touch with the risks, the camaraderie, the enormous collective effort of steelmaking. By calling us to remember the stories of the people who made steel, this exhibit invites us to re-see and rethink industrial and postindustrial places around the U.S. and the world, with particular attention to the lives and experiences of the people who work.

¹ Lanay, Jessica. "From Metal to Mettle: An Interview with Sandra Gould Ford by Jessica Lanay." BOMB Magazine, 1 Dec. 2017, bombmagazine.org/articles/from-metal-to-mettle-sandra-gould-ford-interview/.

PROMPT QUESTIONS

- How does your understanding of the photographs change after reading the text passages? How is the text affected by the visuals?
- Some argue that the "outsider" voice has the opportunity to tell a more "truthful" story because it is emotionally detached and more objective in its delivery of information. Others argue that the "insider" is the only voice with the appropriate agency to tell the story of people's experiences. Whose voice do you tend to prioritize? What is the effect of bringing both voices into this exhibition?
- If you were to make a photo essay of your place of employment, what story would you choose to tell? What would be your stage and who would be the people you'd incorporate?
- What is your individual perspective as an artist/designer? What are the specifics that govern how you see the world around you?
- Sandra Gould Ford has said that she sees her own work as tools for "renewal and legacy building", how do you view your own practice in relation to yourself? What do you feel its purpose is beyond you?
- List a few things in which you find inspiration or influence for your practice. More than likely your list will not line up exactly with anyone else's. How do you feel that your collection of interests and inspirations can make your practice as an artist or designer unique?
- What is the power of making art about industry? What does the artist bring that that is different from other ways of addressing our industrial past?
- How does this function as a memoir of a distinct place? How does memoir function as a part of history? How can memoir work to preserve history in ways other methods, such as the reliance of official archives, do not?
- What stories about work do you have in your family?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Beaver County Industrial Museum, <http://www.beavercountyindustrialmuseum.com/>

Lanay, Jessica. "From Metal to Mettle: An Interview with Sandra Gould Ford." Bomb. 1 Dec. 2017, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/from-metal-to-mettle-sandra-gould-ford-interview/>

Maloney, Courtney. "Reframing Solidarity: Company Magazine as Family Album." The Journal of Working-Class Studies, vol.3, no. 1, June 2018, <https://workingclassstudiesjournal.com/>

St. Félix, Doreen. "A Black Woman, Steelworker, and Artist, Through the Eyes of Latoya Ruby Frazier." The New Yorker, 31 Oct. 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/a-black-woman-steel-worker-and-artist-through-the-eyes-of-latoya-ruby-frazier>