

STEVEN  
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Jill Freedman, Circus Days

by Jonas Cuénin

Jill Freedman

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It's hard to tell if the deeply sad faces of the clowns in these pictures are really their own, or simply the reflection of photographer Jill Freedman. There's no doubt that the American artist, whose work remains somewhat neglected, photographed them with a sense of empathy worthy of the greatest. Even if the image of this circus figure oscillate between tragic and comic, from these pictures emanate an overwhelming atmosphere. The viewer feels that behind the curtains of this fabulous spectacle, dramatic human stories were being lived.

In 1971, Freedom joined the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros Circus for a two-month trip across the eastern United States in a legendary white Volkswagen bus. During the weeks she spent living with the troupe, she photographed their performances five times a week, twice a day, except on Sundays, when they only performed once. She documented their private lives, backstage and onstage, after the show, and during idle moments of reflection.

Freedman also took pictures of their animals, lions rehearsing or confined in their narrow cages, but she seems to have had a particular passion for elephants. They are shot with humor, like this elephant pushing a lion's cage with its trunk, or in another image, where Freedman thinks she's photographing two performers under a tent, only to find herself faced with an elephantine eye peering through the tarp. Clearly unafraid, Freedman photographed them as well from unnervingly close, playing with the texture of their bodies, the grids and lines formed by the thickness of their skin.

It's difficult to believe that this beautiful and intriguing documentary work, first published in the 1975 book Circus Days, is receiving its first New York exhibition, now at Higher Pictures. But the great works, those that marry photography with poetry, are timeless.

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*Jill Freedman, Circus Days*

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Higher Pictures

980 Madison Avenue

New York, NY 10075

USA

212.249.6100