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JILL FREEDMAN: RESURRECTION CITY, 1968 @ STEVEN KASHER

By Anne Doran, November 10, 2017



JTF (just the facts): A total of 73 black-and-white photographs, framed in black and matted, hung on the white walls of the gallery's two rooms. All of the works are vintage gelatin-silver prints made in 1968, the year the pictures were taken. The images have largely been printed in one of two sizes: 11x14 (or reverse) or 8x10 (or reverse); there are 52 of the large size and 16 of the small size in the show. In addition, there are four odd-sized prints measuring 8 7/8 x 13 5/8 inches, 14 x 10 inches, 8 7/8 x 11 3/4 inches, and 14 x 10 1/4 inches, respectively. In 1971 Freedman published *Old News: Resurrection City*. (Grossman, 1971). This exhibition coincides with the release of a new book, *Jill Freedman: Resurrection City, 1968*, published by Damiani, which features most of the 185 photographs from Freedman's original book. It is available at the gallery for \$45.

Comments/Context: In the spring of 1968, Jill Freedman, a gumptious and prodigiously talented young street photographer, quit her day job as a copywriter in New York City to join the Poor People's March on Washington. Organized by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a non-violent call for economic justice, and carried out after Dr. King's

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assassination by Ralph Abernathy, the Poor People's Campaign brought over 3000 protestors, of all ethnicities and from all 50 states, to the Washington Mall, where they built a plywood encampment they called Resurrection City.

Freedman lived in Resurrection City for the entire six weeks of its existence, photographing the daily life of its residents as they rallied, made speeches, protested in front of government buildings, confronted police, built makeshift kitchens, organized clothing swaps, and dealt with flooding, petty crime, and illness. Freedman, one of the most important (and one of the few women) postwar documentary photographers, captured it all, with an artist's eye and a passionate interest in the individuals she depicted.

In 2008, some 30 of the resulting photographs were exhibited at Higher Pictures gallery in New York. The current show comprises about twice as many pictures. They reveal Freedman to be a natural storyteller, with a feeling for character and situation and a special interest in families.

A group of young men escorts an old woman carrying a homemade sign past a line of cops holding batons. Three boys float past flooded tents on a homemade raft. A dignified older woman wears a button reading "Welfare rights now!" She's no anonymous demonstrator—Freedman carefully records her name, Addla Thompson, as she frequently does in photographs of other people, among them the Reverend James Orange, Chicken, Bennie King, Bea, and Madam. A black suited man hands out copies of Muhammad Speaks, the newspaper of the Black Panthers; a group of toughs, simply labeled "The Invaders from Memphis," might be looking for trouble, or just for a better life.

There are none of Cartier-Bresson's decisive moments here—Freedman records a place and time of energy, chaos, and multiple agendas. "Resurrection City was pretty much just another city. Crowded. Hungry. Dirty. Gossipy. Beautiful," Freedman wrote in a 1971 text, some of which is excerpted in the show. "It was the world, squeezed between flimsy snow fences and stinking humanity. There were people there who'd give you the shirt off their backs, and others who'd kill you for yours. And every type in between. Just a city."

Nor is space fractured, as in the photographs of Lee Friedlander, or sculpted as in the work of William Eggleston. Rather, it is architectonic. In addition to recording a variety of do-it-yourself dwellings—cobble-together, scrap-wood and canvas dwellings sporting spray-painted messages or designations like "SOCK IT TO ME BLACK POWER!"; "We Shall Overcome"; and "000 Poor Avenue"—Freedman frequently depicts protestors made small by downtown Washington's inhumanly scaled greenways, avenues, and government buildings. A dozen or so demonstrators sit on the steps of a building facing a seemingly endless, tree-lined, gravel walkway. One of them wears a sweatshirt emblazoned, heartbreakingly, with the phrase "How can we lose when we're so sincere?" The grand vista in front of them is the silent answer.

Nevertheless, Freedman never represents her subjects as victims, instead contrasting Washington politicians' indifference with the marcher's quiet determination to be seen. A barefoot woman sits on the bottom of the Capitol steps, which rise endlessly behind her like an unscalable mountain. Nevertheless, she sits foursquare, truculent, and immovable, her sagging skirt reflecting in reverse the Capitol dome. Elsewhere, the Washington Monument looms over a line of shanties, one complete with a small, white, picket fence that somehow shames the phallic symbol behind it.

On June 24, 1968, a special Civil Disturbance Squad moved in to clear the encampment, where the remaining residents sang and clapped until being forced out or arrested. Like Occupy Wall Street, Resurrection City is mostly remembered as a failure, marked by filth and disorganization and, in the end, having little effect on Federal policy.

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But although such street protests all too often lacked an organization capable of following up over the long term, civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., understood the power of the photograph to educate and motivate. As futile as it may seem in retrospect, the People's March, living on in Freedman's photographs, resonates at a time when, according to a Pew Report of 2013, income inequality is at its highest since 1928, and when a looming Republican tax bill threatens to make things much, much worse. As Michael McBride, Traci Blackmon, Frank Reid, and Barbara Williams Skinner recently wrote in the New York Times, "Rather than critique from afar, come out of your homes, follow those who are closest to the pain, and help us to redeem this country, and yourselves, in the process." And that's just what Freedman did.

Collector's POV: Vintage prints of all 185 images included in exhibition catalog—about half of which are view here, are available as a set, price upon request. Duplicate vintage prints for some of the images are available for \$6000 for the 11 x 14 prints and \$5000 each for the 8 x 10 prints. Freedman's work is not widely available in the secondary markets, so gallery retail is likely the best option for interested collectors at this point.