

What's Black and White and Read All Over?: The Documentary Photography of Jill Freedman

By Jack Neubart

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Jill Freedman is not one of those names that readily rolls off the tongue when we discuss documentary photography. But it should be. Her documentary photographs are as real, as telling, as poignant as it gets. They are moments captured in a style all her own, albeit with the same measure of truth as a Dorothea Lange portrait of life during the Great Depression. In fact, the photographs of Lange, along with those of W. Eugene Smith and André Kertész, would shape Freedman's photographic viewpoint.

For that matter, Freedman asserted, "I wish there would have been an FSA (Farm Security Administration) in my time, because that would have been an issue for me to portray as a photographer." She was referring to Lange's pictorial chronicles of migrant farm workers and the deplorable conditions they'd had to endure.

Choosing Photography as a Career

Unlike Lange, however, Freedman did not have any formal training in art and photography. For her, a desire to take pictures came almost as an epiphany, after brewing in her mind for some time.

STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

She writes on her website: “When I was seven I found old Life Magazines in the attic. My parents had kept the ones from the war and for a year I used to go up there after school, look at the pictures, cry, then go play softball. When my parents realized that I had found them and how they affected me, they burned them, but it was too late, those pictures had burned into my brain.”

Still, as the years went by, Freedman could not find her path in life. She had graduated college, traveled through Europe literally “singing for her supper,” as she described it, and returned to New York with no clear direction.

Then, out of the blue, one morning it hit her. Those pictures from Life finally surfaced. Perhaps more than that, the people she met in Europe and the stories they told, unbeknownst to her at the time, had shaped her. She wanted to take pictures, to document life around her, to tell stories with a camera. Without any knowledge of how to use a camera, she borrowed one, along with the instruction manual, which she studied religiously, shot a couple of rolls—and found her calling.

Paving a Path in Black and White

Although she would also shoot color—on assignment, for her own work her choice has always been black and white. Early on, a copywriting job had allowed her to invest in camera gear and build a darkroom, and, along with basic photo techniques, she learned processing and printing on her own.

But why black and white in the first place? Aside from the expense of printing color, “the subjects I was shooting were stronger in black and white. I found black and white more challenging. Plus, one book I produced, *Street Cops*—I wouldn’t have wanted to shoot in color. It would have been too bloody and too gory.”

She continued: “When I fell in love with photography, I wanted the whole shooting match, from capturing the image to the printing stage. Everybody has that magic moment when the image comes up in the developer for the first time. And then you’re hooked.” Not only was Freedman hooked, “I became a perfectionist with printing. My favorite paper was Agfa Portriga Rapid.”

Tri-X All the Way

“From the very beginning, I have always shot Kodak Tri-X, at the rated film speed (400),” she noted. “At that film speed, I either got it or I didn’t. Well, on rare occasions, if it was really dark, I’d push it to 800. I like to keep the processing simple.

“I shot everything handheld, by available light. Shooting handheld allowed me to move around unencumbered. I liked the thrill of the hunt, the moment.”

Asked if image stabilization would have made a difference, she replied: “I never had a problem with camera shake. I never found myself shooting below 1/30 second.”

Film vs. Digital

Freedman has adapted to modern times. She still has film lying around, but by and large she’s shooting digital these days. More to the point, she no longer has a black-and-white darkroom. Asked about film versus digital, she remarked: “The whole fuss about film versus digital means nothing to me. A good picture is a good picture.”

STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

What's more, today she finds herself becoming as adept at digital black-and-white printing as in her analog days. "I like the pearl finish and Ilford Galerie papers," although she's also currently testing Hahnemühle products. She prints on an Epson Stylus Photo 2200 and now also an Epson Stylus Pro 3880.

And when it comes down to it, analog or digital, she emphasized one simple truth: "To make a really great black-and-white image, I want blacks, I want whites, I want grays." That's it in a nutshell.

Her Creative Vision

Freedman is as forthright when talking about her photography as she is about what she likes and doesn't like. She noted that seeing a W. Eugene Smith photo of GI's who found a half-dead baby in a cave on Saipan during World War II was a pivotal moment, helping further shape her creative vision right at the outset, along with those Holocaust pictures in Life.

In discussing her approach, she pointed out: "I like it straight and unmanipulated. I just try to catch whatever is real, whatever that is. I love to catch moments. I hate easy, cheap stuff, and I hate pictures where the photographer tries to show off how clever he is or where he derides someone."

Freedman prefers to work with a 35mm lens. "I like to work close. I don't want anything getting between me and it (the shot). And I don't like rules... If you're not close enough, blah, blah, blah." She added: "I pretty much trained myself to crop in the viewfinder. But if I have to crop when processing, I will, if it helps the picture."

On her website's About page, she pointed out: "I like to work two ways, either on a specific idea or just wandering around, getting lost, snapping. Eventually all the wanderings go together, and then I find out what I've been doing."

What's in Freedman's Gear Bag

"I always like to keep it simple, relying on my eye and mobility instead of equipment. When I walk around I generally have one camera with me. It could be a Leica M9, Leica M Monochrom, or a Canon G10. When I travel or am working on a specific topic (book always in mind), I use two cameras, with a third body for backup. I use a Canon 60D for color and portraits."

Her Favorite Photo Gear

"My camera, whichever one I'm using. I don't know what to say—my cameras have to feel good in my hands. Beyond that, the equipment matters less than the picture. It's a tool, that's all."