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REMEMBERING THE INCREDIBLE WOMEN OF AMERICA'S LAST CRUSADE

By Miss Rosen, November 21, 2017



On April 4, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a speech titled “Beyond Vietnam” at Riverside Church in New York City. Turning the focus from civil rights to human rights, he called for an end to the war, and renewed focus on fighting the enemies within the United States borders: poverty, injustice, and insecurity. One year later, to the day, he was assassinated – a crime for which the US government was finally found guilty in a court of law in 1999.

In the final month of his life, Dr. King called for a national demonstration that would “confront the power structure massively.” Following his death, “The Last Crusade” went forward, and 3,000 people came from across the land to set up a camp called “Resurrection City” on the Washington Mall. They lived in wooden shanties that stood for six weeks in 1968.

The Poor People’s Campaign, as it was officially known, was organised to draw attention to the poverty affecting people of all ethnicities in the United States. “They murdered Dr. King and I was furious,” photographer Jill Freedman remembers. “I had to go.”

A self-taught photographer at the very start of her career, Freedman quit her job as a copywriter at an advertising agency, rolled up 100 feet of Tri-X film into cartridges, and headed down to DC. She lived in the camp from start to finish.

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

Her work, which was first published in 1970, has just been re-released by Damiani as *Resurrection City, 1968*, in conjunction with an exhibition at Steven Kasher Gallery, New York (October 26 – December 22, 2017).

At the heart of the movement were the women, who held the camps down and marched on the frontline, where they were subject to arrests and police brutality. “Women were the backbone. You look at the strength of those old ladies from Mississippi – holy shit!” Freedman recalls. “It was very fucking rough. It rained every day and it was freezing. When it stopped raining, it became a swamp and was a million degrees out. I never thought of it as joining the movement so much as documenting what was going on. I was there to do what I thought of as a job.”

That job required Freedman to create a portrait of the people as they were, avoiding the clichés that focused on celebrity sightings and power moves in the wake of Dr. King’s death. In Freedman’s work, there are no stereotypes – just people who chose to live in abject poverty on the nation’s stage.

“The daily job was to make yourself seen and demonstrate,” Freedman recalls. “No more invisible poor was the idea of the campaign. It was all demands: the right to have food, education, housing, and medical attention. That’s why Dr. King was killed. Now he was a threat.”

Resurrection City, 1968 is out now on Damiani, and on display at New York’s Steven Kasher Gallery until December 22.