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Through Weegee's Lens

By NIKO KOPPEL

BACK in the 1970s, a gutsy blonde named Jill Freedman armed with a battered Leica M4 and an eye for the offbeat trained her lens on the spirited characters and gritty sidewalks of a now-extinct city.

Influenced by the Modernist documentarian André Kertész, with references to the hard-edged, black-and-white works of [Weegee](#) and [Diane Arbus](#), this self-taught photographer captured raw and intimate images, and transformed urban scenes into theatrical dramas.

Her New York was a blemished and fallen apple strewn with piles of garbage. Prostitutes and bag ladies walked the streets, junkies staked out abandoned tenements, and children played in vacant lots.

“The city falling apart,” Ms. Freedman said one day recently in recalling that era. “It was great. I used to love to throw the camera over my shoulder and hit the street.”

For reasons involving both changing photographic styles and her personal circumstances, Ms. Freedman faded from the scene in the late 1980s. But at a moment when much of the city is bathed in money and glamour, her work offers a vivid portrait of a metropolis defined by violence, poverty and disarray — a New York that once was.

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At 68, Ms. Freedman is a petite, wiry-framed woman with the piercing blue eyes and the feisty, outspoken manner of her youth. Never married and with no children, she has been living since November in a one-bedroom walk-up in Harlem near Morningside Park, outfitted with worn furniture collected over a lifetime. Her companions are two stray cats, Lulu and Pooch.

Though none of her work hangs on the walls, many of her black-and-white photographs from more than 30 years ago are protected in thick portfolios, which she keeps in a shopping bag.

The albums contain many of her most memorable images, among them “Smoke Eaters,” showing firefighters at work taking a cigarette break; “Nympho Circus,” in which children bundled in winter coats pose in front of the marquee of a porn theater in Midtown; and “Love Kills,” depicting a young couple leaning against a metal grating in the flower district, the emblem of a gun on the man’s shirt aimed menacingly at his girlfriend’s head.

In many respects, Ms. Freedman has an impressive résumé. She is the author of seven books of photography, including “Firehouse,” “Circus Days” and “Street Cops.” Her pictures are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the [International Center of Photography](#). Her series “Resurrection City,” documenting life in the shantytown erected in 1968 on the Washington Mall, is on view through May 24 at Higher Pictures, a gallery on Madison Avenue near 66th Street.

Despite praise from critics, however, Ms. Freedman's career as a photojournalist never fulfilled its early promise. "Her work influenced a lot of people," said Andy Grundberg, chairman of photography at the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington. But he added that "her style really fell out of fashion" as people grew less interested in her brand of documentary photography, in which an emotional connection with the subject is valued as much as the photograph.

Compounding her eclipse was that Ms. Freedman had more or less become one of her own hardscrabble subjects. Starting in the late '80s, and over the next two decades, she struggled with financial and health problems.

"I was really depressed," she said over lunch the other day at a Midtown cafe, as she nervously fidgeted with her hands. "I used to say, 'All I need is one good thing to happen.'"

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Born in Pittsburgh, the only child of a traveling salesman and a nurse, Ms. Freedman came to New York in 1964 and held various temp jobs before going to work as an advertising copywriter. She discovered photography while experimenting with a friend's camera.

"I realized I had been taking pictures in my head all along," Ms. Freedman said. She found a \$150-a-month apartment above the Sullivan Street Playhouse, where she built a darkroom and stayed for 24 years.

One day in the spring of 1968, she came upon a man in Central Park wearing overalls and sitting on a mule. He urged her to join the protest encampment called Resurrection City.

"Oh, man, whatever this is, I've got to be there," she recalled thinking. Quitting her job, she lived for six weeks in the plywood community, immersing herself in her subjects. Six of her pictures were published in Life magazine, a breakthrough that brought her confidence and recognition.

Back in New York, she lived for a time in a beat-up white Volkswagen bus, following the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus as it traveled from upstate New York to Cincinnati, and producing images straight out of a Fellini film. She later trained her camera on the players in the '70s art scene, capturing its decadence with a gimlet eye as she photographed happenings in SoHo, and [Andy Warhol](#) and [Deborah Harry](#) at Studio 54.

In 1975, Ms. Freedman began photographing firefighters in combustible neighborhoods like Harlem and the South Bronx. In an image titled "Brother Firemen," two soot-covered firefighters, relieved to have survived a five-alarm fire, kiss.

She then turned her attention to police officers working in the Ninth Precinct in Alphabet City and Midtown South, which covered the raunchy blocks around Times Square.

"There are days I walk down the street feeling its ugliness on my skin like a sunburn," Ms. Freedman wrote of those times in an unpublished manuscript, "other days when I can hardly catch my breath for the beauty of it."

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Her downward spiral began in 1988, when she was found to have breast cancer. Without medical insurance or a regular income, she had to give up her apartment on Sullivan Street. She was successfully treated, but with no

strong family ties — her father died when she was 18, and her relationship with her elderly mother was distant — she disengaged from the New York photography world and moved to Miami Beach in 1991.

“I found that I lost my passion,” she said. “I thought, ‘I’ve got to get away from this place because if I lose this, then I’ve lost it all.’”

Those were difficult years.

“She did have a lot of bad luck,” said Ann-Marie Richard, a friend of Ms. Freedman’s who at one point exhibited her work at a Williamsburg gallery. “She shielded herself with the camera. I think there are a lot of puzzle pieces that we just don’t know.”

Five years ago, Mr. Freedman returned to the city, homesick for what she described as “the smart talking and corned beef.” She barely recognized the place.

“When I saw that they had turned 42nd Street into [Disneyland](#),” she said, “I just stood there and wept.”

For a time, she shuttled between the apartments of friends, while her archive of negatives and original prints and equipment including vintage cameras and enlargers languished in two storage lockers in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

She was reunited with her belongings last fall when she moved into her current, rent-stabilized apartment. Dozens of framed photographs enclosed in bubble wrap and portfolio boxes sit on metal shelves in her living room. “I have all my junk,” Ms. Freedman said as she surveyed her cluttered space. “I’m swinging.”

And by the look of things, she is ready to return to shooting. An oak dresser that doubles as a nightstand holds her negatives. In its drawers, preserved in glassine envelopes, are thousands of images: of a bewildered man dressed like a carrot, of youngsters joy-riding on the back of a bus, of a brawny firefighter playing Santa Claus, of men dressed like women wandering around in the dark.

And presumably much more is out there to be captured by her Leica. “I’d like to find what’s left,” Ms. Freedman said.

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