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Must See: American Mourning

The One Work You Need to See in New York This Week



Paul Fusco, from *Robert Kennedy Funeral Train, USA (1968)* © Paul Fusco/Magnum Photos. Courtesy International Center of Photography

By  Christian Viveros-Fauné

art and culture critic

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“The first thing I saw was hundreds of people on platforms. The train took about eight hours. It was eight hours of a constant flood of emotion.”

The speaker, Magnum photographer Paul Fusco, was on the train that transported the body of slain politician Robert F. Kennedy from New York, where a funeral service had been held at St. Patrick's Cathedral, to Arlington Cemetery near Washington D.C.

Fusco chronicled the somber journey, taking thousands of color photographs from the moving train of the two million Americans who lined the tracks to pay RFK their last respects.

On commission from Look magazine, Fusco was able to record the country's enormous outpouring of grief following Kennedy's assassination, as well as the remarkable human diversity on display.

Forty years before the election of President Barack Obama, Americans of every stripe came together to salute a political leader whose example filled them with confidence during dark times. But unlike Obama's upbeat victory speech delivered 2008 at Chicago's Grant Park in 2008, Fusco told *The New York Times* that, on 8 June 1968, the nation "saw hope pass on a train".

Fusco captured nameless American mourners from his restricted vantage point as the train travelled from city to town to country, and back again. One photograph depicts a college-age couple perched pensively on a motorcycle; another, a large family sitting in lawn chairs in their backyard; a third, two shirtless boys saluting the passing cortege like adult soldiers.

SO-LONG BOBBY

But it is a fourth image that best condenses the national tragedy animating Fusco's subjects. The picture depicts a trio of brightly dressed African-Americans, two women and a man, holding up a large hand-lettered sign that reads "SO-LONG BOBBY".

This photograph, which is currently on show in the exhibition "[Magnum Manifesto](#)", a 70th anniversary celebration of the Magnum Photos agency at New York's International Center of Photography until September 3, is a poignant memento of America during a profoundly anxious age.

Shot in Kodachrome with a slow shutter speed and blurred areas of exposure, the photographs grasp the hazy human aftermath of an event that made a nation reel. Fusco captures the blurry hands and faces, and waving handkerchiefs, the instability of the photographs matching the mood of 1968-era America to a T.

In a 2008 interview with *The New York Times*, Fusco spoke about his RFK funeral train pictures as signs of the "breaking up of the world, the breaking up of society emotionally".

Though this photograph was taken a half century ago, its fuzzy contours and saturated color foreshadow a great deal of the unease—and not a little of the civic-minded grief—felt by millions of today as America motors into unknown, divided territory.