

MERYL

In conversation with
SAM DEBATIN

Meryl Meisler is a photographer based out of New York. She is known for her series “SASSY ‘70s” and “Disco Era Bushwick.” Meisler focuses on storytelling over technique, capturing the moods and emotions of each scene. Having worked as a public school teacher for over 30 years, Meisler is well versed in the day-to-day moments that define New York City and has seen the city change over her 50 years living there — from the club scene of the 1970s to present day.

Conversation curated by
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MEISLER



Meryl Meisler
Untitled film Still (Self-Portrait)
North Massapequa, NY, Thanksgiving 1976 © Meryl Meisler



“I WAS PHOTOGRAPHING
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SAM DEBATIN. You were born in— **MERYL MEISLER**

the Bronx and you studied photography at the University of Wisconsin. Was there somebody early in your life who inspired you to pursue that passion? How did you decide to dedicate yourself to it?

MERYL MEISLER. I was born in the Bronx but I grew up in Long Island. My dad was a printer by trade but he loved photography; he recorded our lives. It was just part of something we did. His father’s father was a machinist, and I literally always saw my grandfather with a camera and a light meter. The biggest influence was just a part of my life.

S.D. Did you grow up with a camera too or did that develop later?

M.M. My Adventure camera; I got this when I was 8. I photographed my little brother, friends on the block; same things I did my whole life. And then it went from that to Instamatic, and other ones. When I was going to graduate school, I heard they had a good photography program there, so I thought I’ll take a photography course. That was in the Fall of ’73. Before I went to school, my senior year at Buffalo State, I went to an exhibit by Diane Arbus at MoMA and it moved me. It was like the first photography that I saw. I didn’t know what it was, and it moved me. I was deciding on schools to go to, and I knew someone who was a counselor at a day camp. She said that the University of Michigan had a great photography teacher. And so I thought, that sounds interesting, I’ll do that. I immediately took to it as an artform, though it wasn’t my major. First my major was art education, then I switched into art, and my major was drawing and illustration. But I always found pleasure from it [photography].

S.D. Do you feel like that experience of drawing and painting being your main thing before you got into photography affected your sense of composition?

M.M. Yes, I feel that it is a sense of storytelling, I have an eye for detail. It’s like telling a story. I’m looking at you and seeing the things in the background that tell your story. I think that, yes, I have an eye for detail.

S.D. In your early photography, what were

you trying to convey? What were your intentions behind becoming a photographer? Is that part of that storytelling urge or is that something else?

M.M. My first semester, in Photo 101 class, the teacher would show the work of many photographers, mostly documentaries, and when I saw the work of Jacques Henri Lartigue, I came home on vacation and I just wanted to photograph my friends and family. I wanted to show who I am and where I come from. I was about 22 years old, a time of questioning in my life, questioning my sexual identity, how I see myself after college, how I see myself in suburbia; all those subtle or deeper things. And so now, I really love live theater — homes are like stage sets. And I lived them as such and I used them that way.

S.D. You studied with Lisette Model at some point. What did you learn from her and how is she as a teacher?

M.M. When I was considering moving to NYC, obviously I was very nervous; I heard Model was teaching at New School. Instead of going to my MFA, I started to apply to be accepted in Lisette Model’s class. And I showed her my photographs. Even when I was applying, she picked up one of my photographs, and said, “You should show your work to John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art.” I was very shy; I’ve still never met a curator at MoMA. She let me in the class right away. I think the main thing I learned from her was that it was the image, the story; it wasn’t the technique. It wasn’t specifically the lighting, but it was the genuine gut feeling of a photograph. And I thought the most important thing that she gave me was just to go forth, go forth and keep doing what you’re doing because it’s real. She only gave positive comments. I only took one class with her — I did other ones, but it was very pivotal. Throughout my life, I would take lighting courses, other courses, and still it’s not me. My pictures come out funny, but I’ll make it another way. And that was ok.

S.D. You were working in New York at the time. What was the city like at the time and your experience of the city, the nightlife, all of your subjects at that point?

M.M. It’s ironic. When I first graduated undergrad in 1973, I could have gone to school in Columbia. I was scared of the city. I was terrified of getting raped, killed, this and that. Two years later, I was there, and I fell immediately in love with it. I felt that this is where I belong. I found it fascinating, vibrant. I’m from the burbs, a very segregated area, and for me, it was thrilling to

meet different kinds of people, and people who were not exactly fitting into the norm.

S.D. What was the sort of nightlife — you did a lot of photography of nightclubs, you met JudiJupiter there — what was that like?

M.M. I met Judi at Mardi Gras. I wasn’t photographing clubs. I was going to clubs and I had my camera along. I wish I photographed more; I went to other ones that I didn’t get to take photographs of. You can see us having a lot of fun. When I brought my camera, people opened up to me. I’m glad I did.

S.D. Moving on to your “SASSY” series,



Sneakers
IS 291, Bushwick 1984
New York PARADISE LOST Bushwick Era Disco
© Meryl Meisler courtesy of ClampArt

there's a levity as well as a melancholy that's present in a lot of those photos. Could you speak on that a little bit?

M.M. I am going to be very honest. Within me, there's joy and melancholy — I'm someone who copes with depression. In retrospect, I have realized that I've always been photographing things that I find uplifting. Like in my series in Bushwick, I photographed mainly people having a good time, living life. If the buildings looked destroyed, there was this beautiful light on them. I was doing positive reinforcement for myself. I tend to photograph the joie de vivre, a sense of the excitement of the moment. I don't usually photograph people who are down and out; they're having a hard enough time. But when I do ask, there's something proud and a little funny they're projecting. I think I sense that before I ask them, and I only ask on those occasions. Whether it's as simple as somebody laying down in the subway and looking at his phone, I seek people who project something positive.

S.D. In your series "Allegories," there is a lot of influence from Gustave

Doré, Dante, and Goya's engravings. Can you speak on this a bit?

M.M. You're talking to someone who built a darkroom during the pandemic. I'm back to shooting black and white. I'm attracted to darks and lights, extreme contrast, details, richness; every millimeter says something. There's a reason that it's within the rectangle. I look at it in critiquing my own work, in choosing which to scan or print, looking at everything there as part of the story; it's all important. Or even if it's something that doesn't, like a rainbow streak in it, well that's part of the photographic process. I rarely crop an image. I'm not a purist, but there's so many images that you can eliminate some. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work.

S.D. Do you find yourself shooting mostly on film these days, or have you moved into digital at some point?

M.M. I've done digital; I've got drives full of stuff. I prefer film, although my cameras are all in repair. It's exciting, I feel like I see bigger and better things through that medium format viewfinder. I feel like I know how it will come out as I see it more on film. And it's sexy. I do prefer black and white over color. It's got something.

S.D. If you're shooting in black and white as opposed to color, do you feel like you look at the world differently, do you choose different subjects, tell different stories?

M.M. The answer is yes. Two years ago in February, right before the pandemic, I went to Cuba for the first time, and I thought, "Do I take black and white, or do I shoot color?" So I got them in the same ASA and I was shooting both. It got confusing; color is good, but I like black and white images better. The night life ones, I'd shoot color if my camera was in repair, and on the streets in the 1980s working full time, I didn't have time to be in the dark so I shot color slides.

S.D. A lot of your work portrays non-normative bodies. What was at the time your sense and intention behind that?

M.M. It's funny. When I read that sentence, I thought, "I don't do that." And then I said, "Oh, I guess the man standing that's

missing the leg does count as non-normative." I truly thought, "What? Oh but they're so handsome. They're so bold." The scars are not the main subject. When I was in Cuba, I was asked to photograph someone who was missing a leg, and he asked why, and I said "You look great!" I don't go after non-normative bodies I guess I would say. Maybe I'm lying there. During the AIDS epidemic, I did not go out thinking, "I want to have pictures of people with AIDS." People who were suffering; I didn't ask. I don't even usually photograph people who are strung out. They could be high, but not strung out. I could be in denial, it could all be there and I'm just not seeing it.

S.D. In a similar vein, you have many pictures of the Bronx and of Bushwick that contain shocking scenes of buildings in disrepair. Can you speak on that time and that series of photos?

M.M. I was born in the Bronx, and I wanted to go back to see where I came from. But most of the pictures you are referring to are actually in Bushwick, Brooklyn. I was a schoolteacher there from '81 to '94. It was my life, real life. I was photographing what I saw. I would pick pictures of abandoned buildings, and think Ansel Adams would have taken that picture. I was photographing because that's what I enjoy doing — it's uplifting, it makes you feel involved. [I was] just documenting life as I saw it, as I passed by.

S.D. I'm reminded now too, there's a film by Agnès Varda called "Daguerréotypes" (referring to the early photographic apparatus) which is entirely conducted within 300 feet of her apartment. Are there films that have influenced you, or is there ever a filmic aspect to your work?

M.M. It's funny, yes, I saw that movie. I don't think there was a film in particular. I think it was always more about the photographers work that I've seen, you know, the FSA photographers, Dorothea Lang and Helen Levitt; just what they documented. I think photographers influenced me more than specific filmmakers.

S.D. When you were a teacher in public schools, did you take a lot of pictures then?

M.M. I started teaching in Fall of '79. Four days a week for two years and five days a week afterwards. And so there was overlap, and of course, I taught in the school system for 31 years and retired in 2010, but then I continued for

four more years as an adjunct for NYU supervising future art teachers. I was photographing them in their schools for their portfolios, but I realized being out of school for even six months, that there are things you see in schools that you don't see anywhere else. Photography is fun; I shot all the time as a photography teacher. Maybe not all the time at school because classroom management is the most important, you know, keeping your job. That's actually my largest unseen body of work; about 36 years inside schools, 31 being a public-school teacher in New York and the five years I was in private schools. That's something to dig through, that's for sure.

S.D. A lot of your photos are people on the street, everyday stories. But you also have photos of people who are celebrities, famously Village People and Liberace. What do you think about the differ-



MRS Miesler IS A BIRTH
IS 291, Bushwick, Brooklyn, NY 1990
New York PARADISE LOST Bushwick Era Disco
© Meryl Meisler courtesy of ClampArt





Star Wars Party, The Pines, Fire Island, NY, August 1977. A Tale of Two Cities Disco Era Bushwick © Meryl Meisler courtesy of ClampArt

ence between taking a picture of someone on the street who is unknown to the public as opposed to somebody who is always in the spotlight?

M.M. Well in no circumstances was it like “I’m gonna go out and photograph Andy Warhol.” He was there and I asked, “Yes, the Village People were there; they were walking out. Was it a set up? No, it was simply a natural part of things. A lot of times I didn’t photograph people — Keith Haring was having dinner near me, and I didn’t ask him because I thought it should be private, so I try to be respectful too. I like a photograph to be strong whether the person is famous or not. It must be strange for those people to walk around and have everyone recognize you everywhere you go. That’s a mixed blessing.

S.D. And so throughout your career, was your work normally self-exhibited, or what was your career process in that sense?

M.M. Throughout my career as an artist, I’ve always done shows. I’ve always done group shows, very few solo shows, but I’ve always exhibited. I’ve gotten grants, and I was also doing work doing mixed media or sculpture. I was always doing something based on photography. It’s not until these past few years when I retired and I started to realize how strong this first Bushwick series [“New York PARADISE LOST Disco Era Bushwick”] was, that I started realizing the beauty of the pure photograph, unto itself. The essence was important. I’m not an untrained person. I did get an art education, I loved those art history courses, and always had a toe in the art world. Even in my teaching with kids, I started to do collaborative work. I needed to make my passion work, because I didn’t have great classroom management, [and] by doing interesting projects and getting them involved in art I saved it.

S.D. Do you feel like showing your work is an integral part of the work itself? Do you take pictures to show other people?

M.M. I don’t think I take pictures to show other people. However, I love showing my work. I like having a physical exhibit, I like having open receptions, I like meeting people, I like talking about it, I like to have events around it. I like the process. I like the preparation. I also like being curated. I actually really enjoy having the public come in real life and be part of it, and I always, always create events that bring people into it that might not normally walk into a gallery. I think you have to love it, or else it’s really just very lonely and minimum wage work. Anyone who doesn’t know it’s a lot of work has never done it.

S.D. Finally, do you have anything new coming out? Do you have any future books, anything you’d like to plug? What can we expect from you in the future?

M.M. My latest book just came out, the one you see behind me [“New York PARADISE LOST Disco Era Bushwick” Parallel Pictures Press 2021]. I don’t have a distributor, so any links are appreciated. It has taken hindsight to realize it is almost a memoir. I don’t go to photograph, I photograph where I’m going. Eye-

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shot, a publisher in Italy, is going to do a monograph of my street photography from 1973 to 2021 and we’re working on it now. It should be coming out in 2022. In June, I’m going to be having a solo show at the Portraits festival in Vichy, France. Last year I had five solo shows; that’s a record for me, so yes, I do like showing. Things come up that you don’t know, but those things are plenty for me, to work on a book right now, and getting out of town. It’s all exciting. It’s only my second exhibit abroad and so that will be exciting.

Liberace’s Protégée Les Mouches, NY, April 1978
A Tale of Two Cities Disco Era Bushwick
© Meryl Meisler courtesy of ClampArt





Street Ventriloquist
 NY, July 1979
 New York PARADISE LOST Bushwick Era Disco
 © Meryl Meisler courtesy of ClampArt



Patou and The Man in The Moon With a Cocaine Spoon
 Studio 54, NY 1978
 New York PARADISE LOST Bushwick Era Disco
 © Meryl Meisler courtesy of ClampArt