

AMERICAN CONNECTION

From bar mitzvahs and weddings to punk gigs and go-go bars, **Meryl Meisler** obsessively documented all walks of life in 1970s New York, finding 'funny' wherever she went. Susan Burnstine finds charm and wit in her archives.



The Meisler, Forkash and Cash clan welcoming a sweet New Year, North Massapequa, NY, Rosh Hashanah 1974



My mom, Sunny Meisler, dancing at a bar mitzvah, Huntington Town House, Huntington, NY, June 1976

It's such a rare delight to happen upon photographs that make you smile. So, when I came across Meryl Meisler's images, I relished in the much-needed laughter and amusing walk down memory lane. Her charming images of family and friends, in addition to a witty collection of 1970s and 80s disco and punk scenes, brilliantly depict the revelry, oddities, quirkiness and authenticity of a world she knew intimately.

Meisler has been carrying around a camera ever since her parents gave her an Adventurer 620 box camera for her seventh birthday. After attending a Diane Arbus retrospective at MoMA NYC, she became inspired to take a photography class at college in 1973 and says she 'was hooked on photography ever since as a form of joy, purpose and expression'.

Meisler admits: 'Even as a kid, I knew I saw "funny". I'd see trees

that would make me laugh and was surprised my friends didn't think they were funny too.' The beginning of her playful style emerged in 1973 when she self-started shooting her collection of self-portraits, family and friends while studying with Cavaliere Ketchum at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

In 1975, she moved to NYC and took a class with legendary photographer Lisette Model.

everywhere I went – walking on the streets and subways, going out at night to parties, discos and punk scenes,' she says. When critiquing Meisler's work, Model gave her positive feedback on her family and friends series, and encouraged her to 'keep doing what I was doing the way I was doing it'.

In 1978-79 Meisler received a Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA) grant and began working for the American

Jewish Congress, photographing Jewish New York and her family roots. For her CETA volunteer work, she taught photography to kids and homebound, physically disabled adults. 'Nights were more outrageous,' she says.

During that time, her disco friend Judi Jupiter landed a job bartending at a go-go bar. 'I became interested in the fascinating scene and got a hostess job. I brought along a sketchbook and, from time to time, a camera to document the go-go dancers, hostesses, patrons and managers.'

Following that period, she taught part-time and continued doing freelance illustration work until the late 1980s. Meisler's impressive resume of full-time teaching positions spanned from 1979 until 2010, when she retired from the NYC public school system. She then became an adjunct instructor at NYU Steinhardt School of Education and supervised future art teachers in their masters programmes.

Meisler hasn't stopped photographing since her early years. The subject matters remain the same: family, friends, walking on the streets, going out at night, and trips. I am attracted to photographing people and situations I find uplifting, joyful, stereotypical (almost like a real-life Norman Rockwell recreation), or unlike anything I've ever seen,' she says. Additionally, she is continuing to search through and edit work from her archive – 1973 to the present.

The first camera Meisler used was a Vivitar 283 flash in 1974. In recent years, she returned to using the Norita and also purchased a Pentax 67II SLR in 2000 and uses that occasionally. She has worked with digital cameras and media, but confesses: 'Working on my books made me realise how much I loved the gelatin silver prints made with the black & white medium-format film camera.'

In 2016, Meisler became



Patou within tree, Studio 54, NY, August 1978

inspired to return to the analogue medium. She enrolled in Photo 101 and relearned the art of traditional darkroom printing. Initially, she used public darkrooms, but when they closed during the pandemic, she built one in her home.

Meisler has released three monographs: *A Tale of Two Cities: Disco Era Bushwick* (Bizarre, 2014), *Purgatory & Paradise: Sassy 70s Suburbia & The City* (Bizarre, 2015), and what she deems as her

'biggest and boldest' book yet, *New York PARADISE LOST: Respite After: The Space Between Memory and Expectation* (Parallel Pictures Press, 2021).

Meisler has an upcoming solo exhibition at Zillman Art Museum at the University of Maine from 19 May to 2 September 2023. Additionally, there will be a 50-year retrospective exhibition of her work at CLAMP in New York City in September 2023.

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Nicole's silver boots stretched on floor, Studio 54, NY, June 1977

EXHIBITIONS
USA

ATLANTA

High Museum of Art
Until 19 February 2023
Deana Lawson
high.org

BALTIMORE

Baltimore Museum of Art
Until 19 March 2023
Elle Pérez: Devotions
artbma.org

BRATTLEBORO

Brattleboro Museum & Art Center
Until 12 February 2023
Respite After: The Space Between Memory and Expectation
brattleboromuseum.org

CHICAGO

Driehaus Museum
Until 19 February 2023
Capturing Louis Sullivan:
Richard Nickel Say
driehausmuseum.org

Hilton | Asmus Contemporary
Until 23 March 2023
Cristina Mittermeier
& Paul Nicklen: Evolve
hilton-asmus.com

DENVER

Denver Art Museum
Until 26 February 2023
Other People's Pictures: Gifts from the Robert and Kerstin Adams Collection
denverartmuseum.org

LENOX

Sohn Fine Art
Until 6 February 2023
Rachael Tallbar: Oceans & Odysseys
sohnefineart.com

ROCHESTER

Eastman Museum
Until 11 June 2023
Marcia Resnick: As It Is or Could Be
eastman.org

SAN FRANCISCO

Contemporary Jewish Museum
Until 9 April 2023
Gillian Laub: Family Matters
thejgm.org



The way we were, The Mystery Club, North Woodmere, NY, January 1979



Man in a three-piece suit dancing within the circle at a wedding, Rockville Centre, NY, March 1976



Self-Portrait, a falling star, North Massapequa, NY, January 1975