

## Perspectives

# Meryl Meisler's Quirky Vision

**George Slade**

What's a nice girl from Massapequa doing in places like these? Bathrooms, bedrooms, dressing rooms, dance floors, dining rooms, city streets and suburban backyards populated by characters straight out of central casting for another *Ocean's Eleven* remake. If you sense a time capsule element to this work, just flip your calendars back about 45 years and transport yourself to the north central Eastern Seaboard and its sprawling, densely populated urban landscape.

**From the suburbs,** bridges and tunnels were the means for accessing the city. Excuse me—The City. Manhattan. Give it its due. The Big Apple intimidated and shunned many, but Meryl Meisler, born in the Bronx



*Meryl Meisler, Test Strip Queen (self-portrait), March 2019*

and a child of Long Island, was undaunted. Having briefly decamped to Buffalo for college and Wisconsin for grad school, she returned to the East and dove into the Manhattan/Nassau County continuum. She was driven like only an effervescent twenty-three year old with abounding energy and a big appetite for life can be.

While she was still feeling her way into photography, she knew that she had not only found her subject in that vibrant mix of city and suburb, she had also identified herself as its protagonist and chronicler. "I had to photograph it to make sense of it all," Meisler explains. "To hold onto the time, to release and share it, put it in perspective and move on. It was sassy, but also sweet, and so was I."

If there is a documentary quality to her work, it has to be seen as personal and highly subjective; she never made a pretense of objectivity. Meisler was comfortable and inspired to photograph in both worlds.

Such ease has distinguished her photographic work. Catherine Kirkpatrick, in her introduction to Meisler's 2015 book *Purgatory & Paradise: SASSY '70s Suburbia and The City*, from which most of these photographs are drawn, astutely catalogs the fascinations



*The Meisler, Forkash and Cash Clan Welcoming a Sweet New Year, North Massapequa, NY, Rosh Hashanah, 1974*



*Butterfly Bedroom, East Meadow, NY, May 1975*

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Massapequa (familiarily referred to as “Matzah pizza”) domestic interiors held for an aspiring image-maker. There were glass tables with gilded legs, gold columns, patterned wallpaper that seems to come alive, languid ferns, as well as tchotchkes, ormolu, mementos and stuff, all reflecting the search for order and comfort by people who had been through a depression and war, and wanted a better, more stable life for their children.

While she was a graduate illustration student in Wisconsin, Meisler showed her Massapequa pictures to Cavalliere Ketchum, her photography instructor, who was bowled over by the interiors. Midwesterners were apparently unaccustomed to such ornate homes. “Who are these people?” Meisler recalls him saying. “I’ve never seen anything like this!”

**Home was also** the nesting grounds for The Mystery Club. Meisler’s visual chronicles of this singular social group—“eleven couples that went on adventurous outings to places like a haunted house, séance, nudist colony

and gay bathhouse”—from the Massapequa community are delightful openings into a culture of curiosity that probably has more to do with nightclubbing in New York than one might think at first glance. How else to understand these comic agglomerations of people popping into the frame at odd angles and from unusual spaces than as party shots? Whether the parties were taking place in paradise or purgatory seems immaterial.

There’s a lot of fun and high spirits apparent in Meisler’s photographs. She admits that she gravitated toward elated aspects of events and situations. Energetic people, especially a live wire named JudiJupiter, caught her attention; she and JudiJupiter worked together at several New York strip clubs. The two of them became a kind of yin-yang entity. Why not “capture joy” during a time, the 1970s, when so much cultural angst was bubbling all around the country and New York City in particular?

Smiles come easily to Meisler, and people in her photographs reflect her positivity back into her lens. Her work always prompts a grin from this viewer, and that’s a rare thing to accomplish. Black-and-white photography tends toward the serious, as we all know. Rarely embraces the “sassy” she cites in her book’s title. Of the many others who were photographing the Seventies in New York—Nan Goldin, Garry Winogrand, Peter Hujar, Jill Freedman, to name just four—few could usefully or accurately be described as sassy. (Oh, there’s that fellow Mapplethorpe to add to the list.)

Purgatory and paradise are the headlined poles of Meisler’s book. She doesn’t specify which is which. Most page spreads in her book link an image from suburbia with one from NYC. The argument is, plainly, that the two coexist. Or at least they did in Meisler’s life. Viewers are left to decide for themselves.

Social contexts are funny that way. One person’s hell is another’s heaven. Both are exotic. Meisler brought the same camera and eye to both places. Her favored instrument then, which she still carries today, is a “funky brick of a camera,” a medium-format Norita SLR, coupled with a flash for the night-time places she frequented. Prior to the Norita, it must be noted that her first camera, a 35mm, was nothing other than the Wittnauer Adventurer. Just right for Meisler’s intrepid eye.



*Man in a Three-Piece Suit Dancing Within the Circle at a Wedding, Rockville Centre, NY, March 1976*



*King Shalom's Rubies [L-R] Helen, Ronda and Stephanie, The Mystery Club, Seaford, NY, June 1975*

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**For Meryl Meisler**, photography's kinship to mirrors has always been an important consideration. "Mirrors hold meaning, memories and self-reflection," she states, and hypothetically adds, "Doesn't every new photographer take a self-portrait in a car's rearview mirror?" The mirror selfie is a rite of passage, in other words.

In this portfolio we see mirrors active in the photograph of The Mystery Club's crowded bathroom grooming scene and Dallas performing during the Wild West Party at the club Hurrah. Meisler is "seen" both directly and reflected in the former image (Who's looking back? Do we meet their eyes directly, or in the mirror reflection?), and multiply in self-portrait in the latter (look for her flash in the arcing vertical strips behind the performer).

"Among the first self-portraits I did in 1973 is one of me shaving my armpits, partially reflected in the mirror.... In *SASSY '70s* there is a self-portrait of me in my childhood bedroom in front of a French Provincial mirror, sur-

rounded with photos of me from birth to then. I still have that mirror in my guest room." A large mirror from her parents' bedroom hangs in Meisler's bedroom. "We are all sentimental," she explains, referring to her family.

Mirrors capture alternate glimpses of the photographic moment and enhance a viewer's capacity to appreciate perspective. They create a third dimension in the image. They talk back to us: "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" We know Narcissus animates mirrors. And they create their own kind of fun, whether in nightclubs or at carnivals. In Jewish traditional practice, mirrors are covered during the mourning ritual of sitting shiva to turn attention away from oneself and toward the deceased. Commemoration precludes vanity.

While numerous self-portraits exist, Meisler seems more interested in herself as a fellow celebrant than as a vain, self-conscious "artiste"; given her preference for revelry over sobriety, she models the light-heartedness of life as she found it on both ends of the bridges and tunnels.



*Mother and Daughter Framed, Massapequa, NY, 1974*

**The 1980s represented** a sea change in Meisler's life as she embarked on a 36-year career in teaching. She continued photographing, but more during the day, and of youth, school activities and city landscapes, using 35mm color film in a point-and-shoot camera. Although "the disco scene was growing more raunchy and outrageous" in the new decade, her nightlife pictures moved to a back burner. "I knew it was not appropriate for a schoolteacher to waitress at go-go clubs."

Nevertheless, the work is there. In quantity. Meisler's 2021 book *New York PARADISE LOST Bushwick Era Disco* opens into the 1980s, and some of the sassiness has been wrung out, replaced by an aura of, what, respectability? Solemnity?

The 1970s linger on in black-and-white images from the clubs, which assume a touch of nostalgia in comparison with the young people and devastated landscapes all seen in color. The poles have changed. The joyousness of life in Massapequa and Long Island fades away, replaced by a tale of two cities: Bushwick uptown, where Meisler was teaching and enjoying massive amounts of natural



*The Way We Were, The Mystery Club, North Woodmere, NY, January 1979*



*Close Shave Family Grooming, The Mystery Club, North Woodmere, NY, January 1979*

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light as a result of buildings having disappeared, and the clubs in lower Manhattan, where AIDS was beginning to emerge as a traumatic scourge on life. The best of times seemed to give way to the worst of times, though Meisler remained committed to finding and recording joy.

As a self-reflexive visual chronicle of one's twenties, *Purgatory & Paradise* may withstand all comparisons. Clearly, it was a decade of unique circumstances. Amy Leffler, writing about *The Mystery Club* in *SASSY '70s*, described it as "an unparalleled phenomenon." The clubs—Studio 54, Hurrah, CBGB—and go-go joints—Playmate, Winks, The Magic Carpet—were legendary, highly charged, and unparalleled in their own terms. Meisler's fond, candid explorations of both realms have encapsulated a remarkable era of The City's history.

"This book," and her transformational moments within these photographs, "encompasses my coming of age," Photog-

rapher and photographs are rarely intertwined so joyously.

#### **Addendum**

*All images copyright Meryl Meisler. To see more of her work, visit [merylmeisler.com](http://merylmeisler.com) and [merylmeisler.com/exhibits/meryl-meislers-quirkyvision](http://merylmeisler.com/exhibits/meryl-meislers-quirkyvision). Meisler's photographs have been exhibited at CLAMP, Steven Kasher Gallery, Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery@Light Work, Center for Photography at Woodstock, Pop Kultur Festival (Berlin), FOTOGALERIE Friedrichshain (Berlin), Germany, and Carole Lambert (Paris) France, among others. In addition to the books cited in this article, *A Tale of Two Cities Disco Era* Bushwick was published by Bizarre Publishing in 2014. Meryl Meisler is represented by CLAMP, NY, NY.*



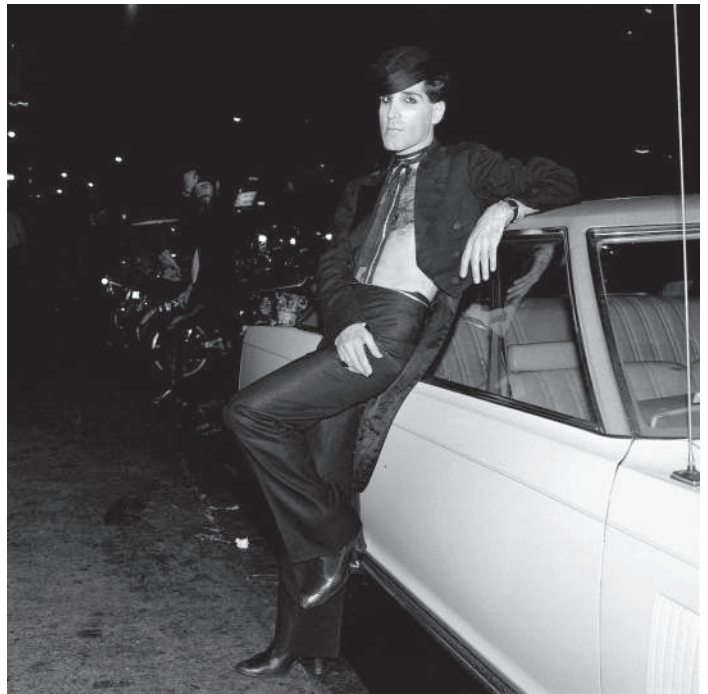
*Stiv Bators, Last Dead Boys Lead Singer, During Their Last Concert Tour, CBGB, NYC, March 1978*



*Dallas Performs Near Mirrors, Hurrah Wild West Party, NYC, March 1978*



*Nicole's Silver Boots Stretched on Floor, Studio 54, NYC, June 1977*



*Leaning on Car Outside Studio 54, NYC, October 1978*





*Holding Head as Hair Flies While Dancing with JudiJupiter, Studio 54, NYC, July 1977*



*Mom Getting Her Hair Teased at Besame Beauty Salon, North Massapequa, NY, June 1979*