



1977_07-79-134_FireIsland_Pines_IndependenceDay_selfPortrait_sunglasses_three_kissCheek 001. Photo by Meryl Meisler

Meryl Meisler

By Sklyar Epstein

A woman wearing mirrored sunglasses is staring at you. Someone with a mustache is kissing one side of her face and another person is licking the other side of her face. In the reflection of the mirrored sunglasses, you see a photographer holding a camera. That photographer is Meryl Meisler and you are looking at a photograph she took on Fire Island during the 1970s.

The photograph described above is one of the images featured in the “FIRE ISLAND The Photography of Meryl Meisler” exhibition at The Werk Gallery in St. Petersburg, Florida this month. The exhibition is a collaboration between Meisler, the Fire Island Pines Historical Preservation Society (FIPHPS), and The Werk Gallery to celebrate 1970s gay culture.

The Werk Gallery has 22 of Meisler’s photographs on display from May 17 to June 30. Together they are a

black-and-white unposed snapshot of what life was like for Cherry Grove and Fire Island Pines vacationers during the hedonistic 1970s.

The high-quality photo prints are divided between a large main room and a smaller room for the more risqué photographs that include nudity. A table with three of Meisler’s photo books and a catalog of Fire Island photos not selected for full-scale display is also included with the exhibition.

A nearby LGBTQ+ club and resort called Cocktail St. Pete also hosted celebrations in coordination with the exhibition’s opening weekend. The celebrations featured Fire Island-associated DJs and a traditional Fire Island Classic Tea Dance.

One photograph in the exhibition depicts a man in Cherry Grove wearing a fake parrot attached to the front of his bathing suit. Another depicts two naked men sunbathing and includes Meisler’s shadow over the butt of one of the men. Yet another photo featured by the exhibition showcases the image of a woman and friend of Meisler named JudiJupiter standing nude on the beach near a police car.

“In that era, there was a lot more freedom you know, you really could do whatever you wanted,” said FIPHPS President Bobby Bonanno regarding the atmosphere in Cherry Grove and the Fire Island Pines during the 1970s. “The surveillance wasn’t what it is today, and nudity was very accepted.”

“It was only eight years after Stonewall,” said Meisler of the era when she took the photos. “You know it was an awakening before AIDS and HIV so there was a height of liberation going on.”

Meisler’s historically significant photographs give modern viewers a window into that environment of liberation from the point of view of a person whom the exhibition’s promotional booklet called “a young lesbian photographer with a quirky eye.”

Still, as unique an era as the late 1970s was for Fire Island Meisler also said that: “It’s really not that long ago” and “Fire Island in some ways has not changed too much.”

“A woman with a camera was not looked at as anything threatening the way it could have been maybe with a man,” Bonanno added. “It was a time when people didn’t get their picture taken all the time like today where everybody is doing a selfie. She captured the moment with her subjects, even when they were looking at the camera.”

Readers who are unable to attend the current exhibition taking place in Florida can still experience Meisler’s Fire Island photography on her website meryl-meisler.com. Six of Meisler’s prints will also be on exhibit closer to home as part of the upcoming “Fire Island: The Art of Liberation” at the Long Island Museum in Stony Brook from July 18-December 15, 2024.