



Meryl Meisler

Street Walker

Meryl Meisler has photographed New York since 1975, from Studio 54 to the streets of the Bowery. As 'Street Walker' gathers fifty years of her work, she talks about her father's family albums, humour, and going back out with the camera she started with.



Love in Bloom G-d Bless America, Henry Street Settlement Good Companions Senior Center, NY, NY, 1978

Two Women Embrace on Floor Next to JudiJupiter's Legs, Les Mouches, NY, NY, June 1978

How did you come to photography? Was there a specific moment, or a single image, that pointed you in this direction?

Several people, images and moments set me on that path.

My dad, Jack Meisler, was a printer by trade and an avid photographer. His main subject was our family. My grandfather, Murray Meisler, was a tool and die maker, and whenever I saw Grandpa, he had a serious camera on him and a light meter in my face.

For my seventh birthday, my parents, Jack and Sunny, bought me a 620-roll camera called "The Adventurer." My first subjects were family, friends, parties, Girl Scouts, and school trips: topics that interest me to this day.

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Amanda Lepore on her Birthday, Bartschland, Soho Grand, NY, NY, December 2022

Marion Windexes Window, N. Massapequa, NY, August 1976

As a senior in college, I went to see the Diane Arbus retrospective at MoMA. Her work, alongside my dad's family photographs, inspired me to take my first photography class in graduate school and learn how to use a real camera.

A lot of your work from 1970s and 80s New York captures a world that no longer exists. What do you feel when you look back at these pictures? Does the distance change what you see in them?

It took time and distance, several decades, to look at my early work

and comprehend its historical, artistic, and personal value. I didn't realise how important or powerful the work was.

Now I look through my archive as if I am someone else discovering the unseen photographs of an underrecognised artist, Meryl

Meisler. Most of this world no longer exists, yet I see remnants and reminders: visual and cultural traditions that continue today.

I feel a sense of pride in the honesty, intensity, and visually dynamic way I documented the lives of people I loved and total strangers. Looking

back also deepens my appreciation for the past and for the importance of finding joy and purpose in everyday life.

What's shifted in how you approach the work overtime? Something you used to think was

important that you let go of, or vice versa?

As I look through and edit the negatives and slides in my archive, I continue to photograph contemporary life. In retrospect, I see that I have always strived to capture people expressing joy



Peep Show Peepers, New Orleans, Louisiana, February 1977



Kissing in Black Leather Jackets During The Last Dead Boys Concert, CBGB NY, NY, March 1978

and confidence, being themselves despite challenging circumstances and prejudice.

Humour is a positive force that has carried me through life and through the making of art. Rather than letting go, I strive to let myself back in, to photograph with pure

intention, an open mind, and a sense of humour.

Is there a photographer whose work changed how you see, or how you shoot?

Yes, in addition to my dad Jack Meisler and the life's work of Diane

Arbus, I was deeply influenced and inspired by Jacques Henri Lartigue's pictures of his turn-of-the-twentieth-century Parisian family and friends, Brassai's tantalising 1930s 'Paris de Nuit' series, and Helen Levitt's photographs of New York City children at play.

StreetWalker covers a huge span of your career. How did you approach editing it? What made the cut, and what didn't?

When Marco Savarese of EYESHOT invited me to make a book with a company that focuses on street photography, it was collaborative

from the start. I wanted to include my earliest childhood photos, and some of my dad's, alongside street photos from 1973 through to today. I scanned hundreds of pictures. Marco made the initial edit and sequencing, and I was pleased: they were very much in line with my previous three books. He was

receptive to all my alternative choices. In the end, we are all proud of 'Street Walker'.

What do you hope people feel when they look at your photographs?



Squint on Bus, New Orleans, Louisiana, February 1977

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Trash Can Shields and Wooden Swords, NY, NY, July 1978

When people look at my photographs, I hope they feel curious, inspired, and hopeful. More than anything, I hope they respond first and foremost to the photograph itself: that they think, “This is a damned good, simply wonderful photograph.”

New York has changed beyond recognition since the 70s. Do you still photograph the city? What interests you about it now compared to then?

Growing up in the suburbs, I feared New York City. Once I moved here in 1975, I fell in love with it, and

that love has never waned; New York City is my muse. I have spent recent years deeply immersed in editing my archives, but after ten days exhibiting and photographing in Dublin, I’ve decided to start carrying my medium format camera on my walks and errands in NYC again.



Reclining in Tree by Goddard Riverside Community Center, NY, NY, June 1978

What continues to interest me is the city's energy and diversity: the gorgeous light, geometry, typography, and, above all, its people. I'm drawn to things that seem utterly typical yet feel completely new: fleeting moments, expressions of joy, and scenes that literally make me smile.

Is there anything you're currently working on or have coming up that you'd like to mention? A project, exhibition, anything you want people to know about?

I'm working with the same analog camera, flash, and darkroom techniques I used in the 1970s,

but now photographing a new generation of performers (drag artists, burlesque dancers, showgirls, DJs, MCs, and nightlife regulars) onstage and off. The images move between spectacle and intimacy, capturing the electricity of performance and the candid



LOVE-22 I WANT YOU, Mardi Gras, New Orleans, Louisiana, February 1977

moments between acts, behind the scenes.

I'm now approaching the age of one of my earliest subjects: Disco Sally, a widow in her late seventies who ruled the floors of Studio 54. That perspective changes everything. I've returned to this world with

deeper intention and clarity, finding resilient joy and community wherever I point the camera. I'm also keeping an earlier curfew.

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Meryl Meisler (b. 1951, the Bronx) moved to New York in 1975 to study with Lisette Model. She is represented by CLAMP, New York, and Polka Galerie, Paris.

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