

Vintage photographs that capture the drama and exuberance of New York in the 1970s

By Katy Cowan

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In this series of her earliest work, Meryl Meisler captures the drama and exuberance of the 1970s, when pop-psychology encouraged everyone from suburban Long Island housewives to drag queens and disco queens to self-actualise and act out. The photographs drift between the kitsch-filled rooms of Meisler's hometown in Long Island to the gritty clubs and streets of disco-era New York.

Meisler takes her stylistic cues from the snapshot aesthetic that was at the centre of New York's photo world debates since the New Documents show organised by John Szarkowski at MoMA in 1967. She was inspired by Jacques Henri Lartique's decades-long photo diary, Diane Arbus' retrospective at MoMA in 1972 and Brassai's effervescent Paris by Night photographs from the 1930s. These influences helped define her approach, which focused on personal diary, the snapshot aesthetic and night life. Her distinct, borough-spanning vision of the Big Apple in the '70s aligns her with the masters of Americana.

Now you can see all of these pictures in a solo show at New York's Steven Kasher Gallery from 25th February 2016 until early April. The earliest pictures in the exhibition, from 1973, are self-portraits, posed as a Girl Scout, a ballerina and other childhood identities. She then turned her lens on her friends, parents, relatives and neighbours, a quirky bunch.

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Meisler's hometown of Massapequa was nicknamed "Matzoh Pizza" because of its many Jewish and Italian families. Outlandish décor ruled, inspired by everything from French Empire to Mid-Century Modern, and a cast of lively characters was ready to ham it up at the drop of a hat. "Homes are dramas", Meisler said, and the people of "Matzoh Pizza" were in on the joke and eager for their moment in the spotlight.

Many of Meisler's photos document members of the "The Mystery Club," a group of 11 couples from nearby neighbourhoods who would take turns planning mystery outings. These took them everywhere from haunted houses, recording studios and hypnotists to the Continental Baths in New York City and a nudist camp in South Jersey. Posing coyly in front of their matching wallpaper and bedspreads and surrounded by ornately arranged tchotchkes, her subjects capture the pride and delight of people for whom the suburbs meant affordable homes and the chance to escape the urban streets that had become increasingly mean.



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Moving back to the city from Wisconsin in 1975, Meisler worked as a freelance illustrator. She frequented the infamous New York clubs and discos, following a close-knit and diverse community of artists, feminists, drag queens, musicians and writers. She photographed the punks at CBGBs, there revelers at Studio 54 and the dancers at Playmates, Winks and The Magic Carpet where she worked as a hostess. Meisler's night life photos put her and the view in the middle of the no-holds barred hedonism of clubs like Hurrah, Les Mouches, Xenon and other cathartic hot spots.

Meisler was born in 1951 in the South Bronx and raised in North Massapequa, Long Island, NY. In 1973, while on an illustration course at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Meisler enrolled in a photography class. She bought her first camera and began photographing while at home on Christmas Break. In 1975, she returned to New York City and studied with Lisette Model, continuing to photograph her hometown and the city around her. An absolute must-see.

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