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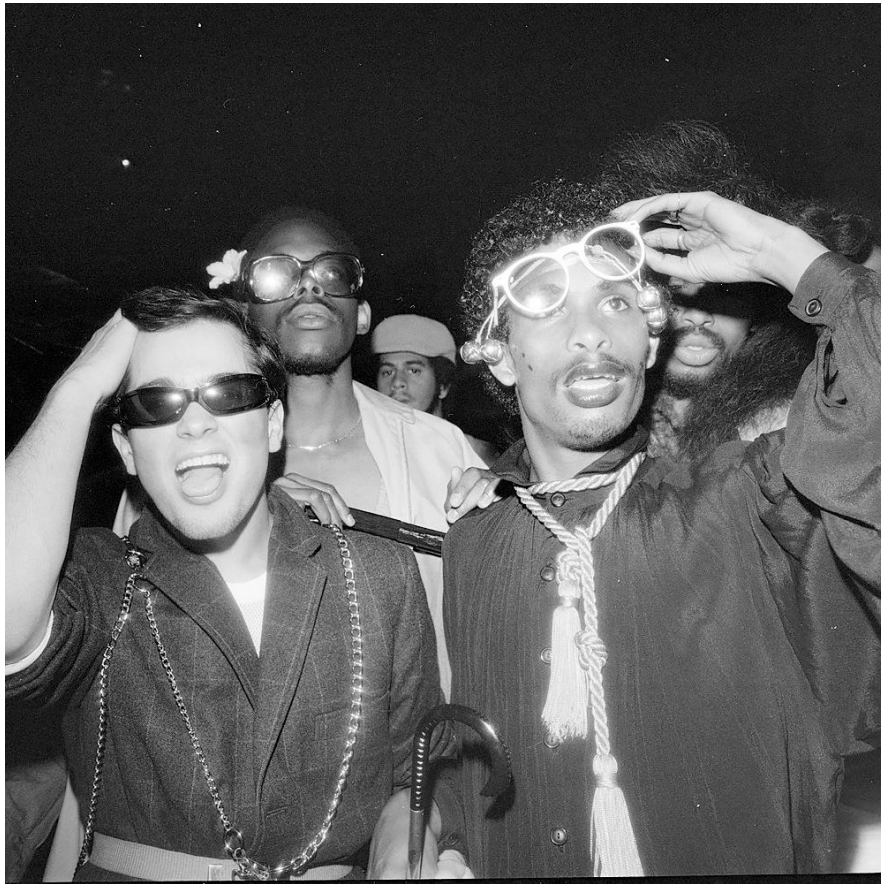
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Meryl Meisler: “This was my version of Brassai’s Paris”

For her new exhibition, the American photographer talks living the dream between suburban bliss and disco fever in 1970s New York

By: Edward Moore

December 12, 2016



American photographer Meryl Meisler’s life and work is defined by the contrast between the city and the suburbs.

I absolutely loved the disco scene; the music, the dancing, the mixed crowd and creative energy Sassy 70s NYC, a new exhibition at Midoma Gallery, New York, celebrates this split during her adolescence in the 1970s, which she documented fervently with her medium-format camera.

Born in the South Bronx, Meisler was raised in the prosperous Long Island village of Massapequa. Her family were a typical example of the 1950s white flight, when white Americans left the racially mixed inner cities in favour of new

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communities a commutable distance away. After studying illustration at the University of Wisconsin, Meisler returned to New York City in 1975, just in time to throw herself headlong into the city's burgeoning club scene.

Her style balances an interest in self-expression with the snapshot aesthetic, a trend for capturing supposedly banal scenes from quotidian life. Meisler's earliest works were on display earlier this year at another exhibition at Steven Kasher Gallery. They show her dressed up as various childhood archetypes, including a ballerina and a girl scout. Soon after Meisler started chronicling her friends, family and neighbours in Massapequa. Her images of kitschy interiors and hammy housewives reveal a world of suburban pride, peace and eccentricity.

When she moved to New York, it seemed natural that Meisler would gravitate towards nightclubs, another locus of self-actuation. Working as a hostess at the Magic Carpet club while freelancing as an illustrator, she depicted the full breadth of the city's nightlife, from punk and new wave at CBGBs and Hurrah, to the decadent disco of Studio 54 and the Paradise Garage. The resulting photographs are both documents of a time and of humanity's propensity for performance.

Meisler's first monograph, *A Tale of Two Cities: Disco Era Bushwick*, was released in 2014; a second, *Purgatory and Paradise: Sassy 70s Suburbia and the City* – from which the exhibition at Midoma takes its name – appeared the following year. Both are published by Brooklyn-based Bizarre Publishing.

We caught up with Meisler to hear about living between Long Island and New York City, her time at some of the hottest 1970s clubs, and the importance of keeping open-minded.

What was home-life like in Long Island in the 1970s?

I am the middle child, my older brother Kenneth and I were born in the South Bronx, and younger brother Mitchell in Massapequa, a Long Island suburb.

My dad Jack commuted to the City six days a week and my mum Sylvia, nicknamed Sunny, was a stay-at-home mum. On Sundays, we drove to see family in the Bronx or they came out to Long Island.

New York City is still totally engaging and stimulating; that's where I go to recharge. Our neighbourhood was filled with families and kids the same age as us. I had lots of friends on my own block – we formed our own North Massapequa Girls Club. Everyone in our neighbourhood went to public schools in Plainedge (unless they went to parochial school) and on to Plainedge High School.

Did you live in the suburbs for the whole decade?

I lived in the suburbs full-time until I graduated High School. I went away for college [Buffalo State College] and grad school [University of Wisconsin] and lived back home during summers, and holiday breaks from school.

In 1975, I moved to NYC but continued to visit my mum in Long Island until she sold our Massapequa home and retired to Florida and upstate New York in 1985. My in-laws still live in Long Island, a few blocks from where I grew up, so I still go back there on a regular basis.

Why did your parents leave the city in the first place?

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To pursue the American Dream. Both my parents came from very poor families who fled Eastern Europe to escape pogroms and Jewish persecution. They grew up during the Great Depression in the South Bronx

My dad Jack Meisler was a printer's apprentice. He married my mum, Sylvia Schulman, on furlough from the coast guard during the Second World War.

Thanks to the GI Bill, benefits for returning Second World War veterans, including low-interest loans to start a business, meant that dad could open his company Excel Printing. The Bill also meant my parents could get a low interest mortgage and buy a lovely split-level home on the site of a former Chinese vegetable farm in Massapequa, Long Island in 1954.

So, we moved from an apartment in the Bronx to a large home with a backyard in a new community filled with young couples and children the same age. Dad commuted long-hours six days a week to the City so we could grow up with public schools and after-school enrichments like ballet, piano lessons, horseback riding and girl scouts – all the things they never had growing up.

Was it important to be able to leave the city and recharge?

I still live in New York City and am fortunate to have a country home upstate in Woodstock. It's the best of both worlds but New York City is still totally engaging and stimulating; that's where I go to recharge.

When did you start engaging with New York nightlife?

I moved to New York in 1975, and sublet a room from my cousin Elaine Rosner's home. I started hanging out with my cousins and their friend in East Harlem and the Lower East Side. We'd party with a wide variety of New Yorkers in lofts, galleries and salsa clubs.

What parties were particularly appealing?

In 1977, I met Judi Jupiter on a bus from Mardi Gras in New Orleans. We began frequenting and photographing the volcanic club scene that was exploding all around us.

Judi was dating a bartender at CBGB, so we'd hang out there. When Studio 54 opened, we had to check it out. I absolutely loved the disco scene – the music, the dancing, the mixed crowd and creative energy. The gay and feminist movements were in full swing so people could be anything they wanted to be.

Every week a new disco popped up, and we'd hit the hottest ones, especially on opening night. Fortunately, I wrote the names of the clubs and parties on my negatives.

So in addition to CBGB and Studio 54, I went to: Xenon, Roseland, Paradise Garage, Les Mouches, La FarFalle, Hurrah, Ice Palace, the Monster, New York New York, Infinity, Pyramid, Sahara, GG's Barnum Room, Le Clique, Uncle Sam's, Palladium, Roxy. And, in the early 1980s, the Limelight.

What are your fondest memories of New York at that time?

New York City in the late 1970s was a wild place and time, the site of my own roaring 20s. I was madly in love with the city and carried my medium format camera everywhere. It was my version of Brassai's Paris.

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Many people speak about how New York was this terribly dangerous place in the 1970s, yet your pictures show how exciting the city was. How were you able to see things differently?

While accepted at Columbia University for grad school, I feared living in the City with daily reports of murder and rape.

But by being introduced to a wide array of people by my Rosner cousins, I quickly felt at ease in the City. Plus, my dad's printing plant was in Chelsea and both my brothers moved to New York City, so I had close family and friends all around.

The first time I lost my wallet, a stranger who found it in a telephone booth returned it to me. I was – and still am – careful about entering deserted streets or subways late at night. When my girlfriend – now wife – Patricia and I moved to Brooklyn in the 1980s, our apartment was burglarised several times. We installed window bars and got an alarm system.

To me, well-being and safety comes first, then comes art and fun.

In regards to seeing things differently, I explain it in the introduction to my book *Purgatory & Paradise SASSY '70s Suburbia & The City*. 'I come from an upbringing that fostered finding appreciation, mystery and adventure close to home. Striving to stay open-minded; appreciation for the synchronicity, absurdities, and a sense of humour helps me get through heartaches and sorrow.

During times of great sadness, I ache, mourn deeply and seek help. I use art and photography to capture visual and personal delight. This is how I see and hold on to joy.'

Could you speak about why you chose the title of the book *Purgatory & Paradise*?

When I was around seven-years-old, a new girl moved to the block. One day, playing outside her house, she looked at me and said, 'You can never go to heaven'. 'Why not? I'm a good girl,' I said. 'Because you're Jewish,' she replied. 'Jews can't go to heaven. My aunt's a nun and my uncle's a priest. They told me. The best you can do is purgatory.'

I didn't know what purgatory was. Her explanation made no sense, no way, no how. I knew in my heart it was important to be open-minded, that discrimination was wrong. With my first paycheck as an illustrator, I bought an antique edition of *Dante's Purgatory and Paradise*, illustrated by Gustave Doré. I never read it, just needed to own it, still do. Working on this book, I realised I had never been invited into that girl's home.

Sassy 70s NYC, a photo exhibition by Meryl Meisler, is open at Midoma, New York until 6 January