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GALLERY

ART SPIEL

MERYL MEISLER – LES YES!

By Ettyyaniv, April 27, 2018



In 2008, The National Trust for Historic Preservation placed the LES on their list of America's Most Endangered Historic Places. "LES YES!" at The Storefront Project upcoming exhibition features Meryl Meisler's photographs of the Lower East Side during the 1970's & 1980s. Meisler, who was born in the Bronx and raised in Long Island, captured in her photos a tight knit immigrant and working-class neighborhood during difficult times in NYC history.

The photos in the show remind us that these grounds were made by the sweat, tears, and love of those who came before us, in a not too distant past. By highlighting the everyday life of real people in her past, Meisler makes us think about what each of us is doing at present to preserve and contribute to future history; posing the questions: what will we give to future generations? What will they say about us?

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Meisler's photos depict not only moments that characterize an era or a geographic place, but also and maybe most importantly, people she is very familiar with. Her attention to real life protagonists underscores this heart felt show.

For instance, she met one of her central characters in the spring of 1976. On her way to an art event in the LES, Meisler noticed a jovial elderly man wearing the most unlikely attire – plaid pants, sports jacket, zebra patterned shirt, a bow tie and a yarmulke. As she passed by, he introduced himself with a distinct Yiddish accent, as “Mr. Morris Katz, the Mayor of Grand Street.”

They bonded on the spot. For a retired man in his nineties, Mr. Katz's schedule was busy. Every day he would get up early and go out to make the rounds at the senior centers, synagogues, parks, police station and playgrounds- greeting people and catching up with news of his constituents. He often took his new young friend on his rounds, proudly introducing her to his neighbors and she, in turn, brought her parents and friends to meet him.

One day, Katz called Meisler up, very upset. As he was dozing in front of his TV, two youth climbed through the window and mugged him. After that, it was decided bars should be put on his windows. Though bruised, he wasn't beaten – Katz continued to perform his chosen neighborhood duties. Mr. Katz was a perfect subject for Meisler's project as a 1978 CETA Artist grant recipient, her project was to create a portfolio of photographs documenting Jewish New York for the American Jewish Congress.

For the public service and work training component of her grant, Meisler taught photography to children at The Educational Alliance in the LES, and subsequently became a long term NYC Public School art teacher. On the last day of a challenging school year in 1981, a classroom intruder threatened to shoot with a gun if she didn't hand over her beloved medium format camera. Katz's resiliency was an inspiration for Meryl not to give up on either teaching or photography, but she was heartbroken to lose her best friend- the camera that was her constant companion for six years.

After a brutal heat wave in 1986, Meisler received a phone call that her step mother's second cousin's father passed away while sitting in his apartment during the heat wave. It was her old friend Morris Katz, shortly before his 100th birthday. Through six degrees of separation, Meisler learnt that she was actually an extended family relative of “The Mayor of Grand Street.”

LES YES!

Meryl Meisler's Photographs of The Lower East Side During the 1970s & '80s Presented in Celebration of Lower East Side History Month

Exhibition May 03 – June 03, 2018

The Storefront Project

70 Orchard Street, NY, NY 10002 Hours 1 – 6 PM, Tuesday –Sunday Opening Reception Thursday, May 03, 6 – 9pm

Artist's Talk & book signing Saturday, May 12, 2–4pm

LES Photo Walk Sunday May 13, 2 – 4pm (Bring a camera if you wish, rain date 5/20), Include your LES Photo. Bring one of your LES photos, unframed, 8" x 10" or smaller, to be hung salon style in The Storefront Project during LES YES! Several LES photos are in Meryl's book Purgatory & Paradise SASSY '70s Suburbia & The City (Bizarre Publishing)