

Meryl Meisler



Self Portrait with Test Strips, April 2019

I owe Meryl Meisler an apology. A few years ago, I asked Meryl to help me document the arts and culture of Bushwick, Brooklyn. As an art critic, I was on the Bushwick beat. Meryl, meanwhile, was the original Bushwick beatnik, the street photographer of 1970s New York who brought her camera to work when she took her job in 1981 as an arts teacher at Bushwick's I.S. 291. The Bronx was burning, and Bushwick had burned, blocks of it at a time, leaving her school-age families to live and love among the ruins. Meryl set out to tell their sides of the story. She has been photographing Bushwick ever since.

Meryl has an uncanny ability to find those humanizing visual moments amidst the wreckage, the sleaze, and the schmaltz of a decadent and dying city—something she first captured in the haunts and havens of New York's downtown demimonde. Meryl's compassion radiates from her viewfinder and lights up her subjects. In a flash, faces come alive in her photographs.

When Meryl took her teaching job in '81, she never stopped focusing on the streets. Yet as her professional life took over, her thousands of images mostly came to rest on her negatives and slides and, eventually, her digital chips. These were "photos"—records of light—but not yet "graphs," the pictures that result from those recordings.

I owe Meryl an apology, because I was the one who first suggested she dust off her medium-format analog camera for our Bushwick project. I love old things, and I loved old prints. I especially love those prints that still exist from Meryl's days as a young photographer capturing the city for the first time as a rebel from North Massapequa. The tactile quality of light and dark magically emerging from emulsion adds to the warmth and humanity of Meryl's work.

So Meryl did just that. She hung the old Pentax around her neck and we put out an open call for Bushwick artists to come around for our documentation. But, of course, the

analog technology of pre-digital photography requires not just rolls of film but also darkroom time, and lots of it. Printing in a darkroom may be "lightwork." It is also heavy-lifting in our age of quick shots and instant gratification. Every photograph is work, and Meryl went to work and work printing out our project, which we called *Bushwick Chronicle*.

And yet, that time back in the darkroom revealed something else. Like cracking the code of an ancient artifact, the darkroom allowed Meryl to shed new light on her old negatives too. For the first time, the light of an enlarger beamed through her old celluloid film and imprinted those captured shadows. Many of these were visual recordings from four decades ago or more, some of them fixed for the first time on photographic paper.

The photographs in the series you now see are snapshots of time and the imprintings of life both uptown and down. As I write these words from a city in quarantine, they seem more vital than ever before. *Stoop Sitters, West 92nd Street, NY, NY* (June 1978) and *Trash Can Shields on West 92nd Street, NY, NY* (July 1978) show a neighborhood in transformation, when the stoop life of a hot summer was being pushed to the side-streets by "urban renewal" and the wholesale displacement of low-rise Columbus Avenue with Section 8 housing and middle-income towers. *Flowered Dress and Vase, Studio 54, NY, NY* (August 1977) and *Cowboy Crush, Cherry Grove, Fire Island, NY* (July 1978) chronicle two of those fascinating characters that Meryl sought out in the '70s nightclub scene. *Color Television, Mardi Gras, New Orleans* (February 1977) reveals Meryl's great humor, as her black-and-white photograph ironically captures the exuberant peacockery of "color television." *Four Hanging Out in Car, NY, NY* (October 1978) again demonstrates Meryl's wit and formal sensitivity, as four youths pop out of a car window almost as though they were crawling out of the photographic surface.

And then there is *Self Portrait with Test Strips* (April 2019). The veteran photographer,

now in the present day, wears a royal gown made out of photographic paper, collected and glued together from all of her time back in the darkroom. Meryl is the daughter of a tradesman printer, and she says she is proud to make these images as she originally intended: as gelatin silver darkroom prints. "The learning curve has been steep," she tells me, "getting back on the bicycle—printing in the darkroom after a multi-decade hiatus."

I feel like this final image is personal, and somewhat aimed at you-know-who. Meryl, I am sorry. But, I have to say, through all the testing and printing, I am grateful to see your singular photographic vision on paper. You wear it well.

James Panero

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Meryl Meisler lives in New York City and completed her residency at Light Work in April 2019. www.merylmeisler.com



Stoop Sitters, West 92nd Street, NY, NY, June 1978



Flowered Dress and Vase, Studio 54, NY, NY, August 1977



Cowboy Crush, Cherry Grove, Fire Island, NY, July 1978



COLOR TELEVISION at Mardi Gras, NO, LA, February 1977



Trash Can Shields, West 92nd Street, NY, NY, July 1978



Four People Hanging Out in a Car, NY, NY, October 1978