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1970s NYC Returns to Life In The Photographs Of Meryl Meisler

By Scott Heins   March 2, 2016

Standing in front of a black-and-white portrait, photographer Meryl Meisler raised her hand and recited an oath—her own version of the Girl Scout oath. "On my honor I will try to do my duty to God and my country, and to do my best at this exhibit!"

Meisler forged her identity as she photographed the rollicking humanity of 1970s New York. She shot go-go girls clutching wrinkled dollar bills, punk rockers backstage at CBGB, circus performers at Madison Square Garden, and bouncers watching over Studio 54. Meisler has always been drawn to the noisy, crowded places where New Yorkers could just be themselves, and was often seen dancing in discos with her camera at the ready. Never an art

scene celebrity, today Meisler's work is more popular, and powerful, than ever, and now her first-ever curated photography show is on display at Steven Kasher Gallery.

"When I first moved to New York City it was a tremendous financial crisis. People were struggling. It was a time of confusion. It was a time of distress...I felt I fit right in!" Meisler herself worked as a hostess at three different go-go clubs, and in her photos it's easy to feel her empathizing with the bartenders, high-rollers, DJs, and dancers who made up her world. "I was in the midst of changing, myself," she said. "I wasn't sure who I was or what I wanted. I was in search of myself, and it seemed just right."

When she tired of the '70s disco scene, she found a job as an art teacher in Bushwick. She brought her camera along on her trips to and from the school, and the photographs she took during this, a distinctly different time in her life, show a bombed-out and burnt urban landscape. But despite Bushwick's riots, fires, and fighting, Meisler strove to capture humor and joy. In all of her images, there's as a vivid connection between photographer, subject, and life itself. Looking back at her portraits hanging on the gallery walls, Meisler sums it up perfectly: "They were there, they saw me. And then people just started being themselves."