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MERYL MEISLER'S DISCO INFERNO

By Petra Mason, January 2018



It was love at first sight when I came across New York photographer Meryl Meisler's 'Two 4 One Muscles' image in The New Yorker. Picture this: a petit brunette (in peppermint stripe bikini top) appears sandwiched between two brawny, flexing, all American muscle boys. The threesome, in varying states of undress are admiring each other, but mostly, themselves. The girl in the middle admires no one. Coiffed, accessorized, even a bit of bronze makeup smudged between

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them. It's hard to make out what's going on but you can smell the sweat, the poppers and the perfume (probably YSL's Opium -- all the rage in 1970s New York). It's hard not to wish you were part of the action. One does a lot of wishing looking through Meisler's lens, mostly wishing it was the 1970s (minus 'the crabs' and the crime).

In the harsh, sobering daylight of nowadays, my only 'in' with Meisler was to negotiate use of the image for the 'Beefcake: 100% Rare, All Natural' book I was putting together for UNIVERSE. Taken in New York discotheque 'Les Mouches' in New York 1978 the muscle image was a bit of a stretch historically: not exactly the intended vintage physique photography focus but it was the only image featuring a woman and by a woman in the book. It's also so smoking hot it got top billing upfront appearing double page full bleed right after Lady Bunny's overheated foreword. Soon after, at the book launch party in the West Village I met the notorious girl in the middle, Meryl's muse, Judi Jupiter.

Exactly three years ago (to the very day) Meryl and I met up at downtown independent bookstore McNally Jackson. I'd just flown 16-hours straight from South Africa to JFK but as anyone who meets Meryl knows, her energy is infectious, you'd be hard pressed to find anyone more inspired and amped. You'd also have a hard time finding a more ferocious promoter. Her self described 'guerrilla approach' to book marketing could teach the industry pros a thing or two about keeping a book in the news (and selling) no matter the pub date or the publisher (Bizarre Bushwick, a bar and avant-garde performance venue/gallery space in Brooklyn. So far, Meryl Meisler's press highlights include Whitehot, The New York Times, The New Yorker, VICE, TIME, HuffingtonPost, Advocate, Flavorwire, PAPER, Advocate, Interview, OUT, The Paris Review. L'Oeil de la PHOTOGRAPHIE. La Repubblica (Italy) The Daily Mail (UK), Stern (DE), LUI (FR), and features on NPR, PBS, ABC, CNN. and an upcoming special onTRACKS Arte (Franco German TV).

Exactly six months after I was knee deep in disco era Meisler at the photographer's archive and Upstate estate, an enviably wooded area not far from Woodstock where Patricia O'Brien, Meryl and Via, a designer dog (a Poodle Bichon mix) divide their time between stints in the city. Nearby neighbors include writer Luc Sante, (of Low-Life fame) and you may run into film-director Jim Jarmusch at the local post-office.

There are few party tricks Meisler has missed: with double trouble team member Judi Jupiter she's been accepted (and ejected) from Studio 54, worked as a Playmate Hostess, popped into Plato's Retreat, a swinger's club she photographed (adding swiftly that she's not now, nor has she ever been a swinger!) to actually way more edgy than 54 night time dens all telling the tale of the 'Two Cities' Brooklyn and New York's Disco Era. Sometimes even political parties: Meisler was there for Jimmy Carter's Inauguration, and part of the pomp and circumstance at countless Inaugural Balls in Washington DC and Las Vegas. She witnessed mid to end of reign Barnum & Bailey Circus and, paging through 'Sassy' 70s Suburbia & The City' her big, extended Long Island Jewish family features prominently. Meisler is a proud 'daughter of a printer' and she 'came out' to her family on April Fools day, as she'll tell 'ya.

Digging deeper into her archive we discover baby Grace Jones, wild times in Fire Island's Cherry Grove pre-AIDS, mad nights at Mardi Gras in New Orleans and The Hamptons, and more New York City nightlife and street life than many would experience in several lifetimes including early Pride marches from Wisconsin (Madison, Green Bay) to Lake Tahoe. Cruising the streets of 1970s (in black and white) California and San Francisco and her 1980s mostly color slides, some medium format including Cape Cod, Province Town, Go-Go girls and boys from as far afield as Paris, London, the 'burbs, New York and the 5-Boroughs, including one of John Water's many muses, actor Divine hanging in her apartment.

If photography tells a story of 'something that already happened' Meryl Meisler's tall tale time capsules come with punchlines, plot twists and even the occasional dancing girl. Her eye provides an insightful snapshot of a period that's infinitely idealized and romanticized by anyone who was not there, both a vortex and an inferno.