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**VICE**

## VINTAGE 70s SELFIES SHOW AN ARTIST DISCOVERING HER SEXUALITY

By Miss Rosen, February 7, 2018



Growing up in Long Island during the 1950s and 60s, Meryl Meisler had the typical suburban life: girl Scouts, ballet and tap dance lessons, and prom. But while she loved her family and friends, she didn't quite fit in. She quickly realized she didn't want to be a housewife, teacher, nurse, or a secretary—pretty much the only options available to young women at that time.

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As Meisler came of age, she began to discover her sexuality as a lesbian as well as her identity as an artist. “Photography is in my genes,” Meisler said. Her paternal grandfather Murray Meisler, her uncle Al, and her father Jack had all been lifelong practitioners of the art.

Meisler got her first camera in second grade, but it wasn’t until she enrolled at the University of Wisconsin in Madison during the mid-1970s that she became serious about the form while pursuing an MA in Art. During school breaks, she returned to her childhood home, where she staged a series of self-portraits that examined her past, present, and future. At this point, Meisler hadn’t heard of Cindy Sherman, but she had the same instinct. She sought to examine the construction of the female gender, from its rituals to its poses to its personas.

A selection of these photographs appears in *Purgatory & Paradise: SASSY 70s Suburbia & The City (Bizarre)*, while others have recently come to light as Meisler prepares for her next book. Here, she speaks with us about this seminal period of her life, sharing a self-portrait of the artist as a young woman ready to take flight.

VICE: Can you take us back to what life was like growing up in Long Island during the 1950s and 60s?

Meryl Meisler: I’m from Massapequa. It was called “Matzo Pizza” because there were so many Jewish and Italian families. There were Irish, German, Greek, and maybe a Chinese and a Cuban family. It was, and still is, a very segregated town.

Growing up, everyone was a first and second generation American. Most of the parents were from the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens and bought their homes on the G.I. bill for under \$15,000. Everything was just starting. All the farmland was quickly becoming housing developments.

My parents, Sunny and Jack Meisler, relished the suburban lifestyle and made sure my brothers and I had all the things they didn’t have because they both grew up very poor. I had piano lessons, ballet, tap, twirling—everything but art! I was active in the Brownies and Girl Scouts, all the way up to Cadets.

It was very provincial. I was lucky that my parents took us to the city. My father had a printing business and my mother loved theater. We used to go to Broadway shows. I think you can see this in my work—it’s very theatrical.

At what point did you begin to realize that you didn’t quite fit in and weren’t going to start an adult life in the suburbs? If you want to talk about being gay, yes I had feelings. But I also dated, went to proms, Sweet Sixteens, and had boyfriends, and enjoyed it all. I knew I was different, but I didn’t know what it was.

My brothers and I were the first generation in my family that had the luxury of going to college. I got into Buffalo State. I didn’t think about what I wanted to do. On the first day, we received a battery of tests and it came back that I could go into education or the arts. I took a class for non-art majors and loved the assignments. The teacher asked if I ever thought about becoming an art major and I literally felt my heart thump.

I called my parents and told them I wanted to study art. But it was under the condition that I get a teaching degree so that I could always make a living. I loved it and graduated first in my class in the school of education.

It turns out Cindy Sherman went to Buffalo State as well. She was an art major there and graduated a year or two after I did. She was also from Long Island, which is funny as well. But I never took a photography class there.

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How did you get into photography?

Photography was always part of my life. Any time I saw my paternal grandfather he had a camera on him and a light meter, and he used it. My dad had an eagle eye and photographed with a Rolleicord. My style is very much influenced by him. He photographed friends, family, and special occasions and he did it really well.

Going into my senior year of college, my boyfriend in Buffalo broke up with me. He said I wasn't a real artist. So what did I do? I took myself to the Museum of Modern Art and saw the Diane Arbus show. It was a consciousness that, "I am an artist. Tough noogies."

While I was in graduate school, I decided to take a photography class because I wanted to learn how to use a real camera. I bought a Minolta SRT-101. I was reading the directions on the plane to school and I jammed it and thought I broke it—that's been a theme ever since.

As soon as I went home, I started photographing myself and my friends. I am going through my first rolls on 35mm film now for the next book. I discovered one of the pictures, where I am smoking cigarettes in front of the dishwasher. I don't know if that was the first or second roll but I made a self-portrait immediately.

That photograph shocked me. I never printed it. I was wearing nothing but my mother's house dress and I took her cigarettes even though I didn't smoke. I was asking myself, "Am I a future housewife?" It was a very private moment.

How did making these self-portraits allow you to explore this pivotal period of transformation in your life?

I wanted to photograph this life that I knew, that I had been seeing and living for many years. I would come home from school and go through the closets and the attics, where we kept everything from special occasions. The photos are about life between childhood and adulthood, where I asked myself, "Who am I? What do I want to be?"

Going to the theater was very influential. I lit the rooms in my house like a stage, very direct and crude, using the curtains as curtains and the objects as backgrounds. The house was like another member of the family because that is the place that I lived in since I was two years old.

I was 21 going on 22 when I started taking these pictures and I was definitely saying, "Come on already! Come out!" (Laughs). It eventually did happen, but many of the photos are in the 'twixt and the 'tween. I was questioning my future in the suburbs. I didn't see how I would fit in.

Looking back, do you see something in the photos you weren't conscious of while you were making them?

I see it as extremely brave—and I even dared to print them. It surprised me to see how determined I was.

Speaking of daring, could you speak about the Lynda Benglis photo and how this inspired you to create one of your most radical self-portraits?

There was a poster for a Lynda Benglis exhibition hanging in the hallway of the art department at the University of Wisconsin. There she was, just standing there naked, wearing a huge dildo!

I didn't know where I got the inspiration for that photo until we had this conversation. For me, my camera was my power. I took the shot more than once. One time I had this guy I was dating help me with it, and another time, it might have been my future bride (Laughs). It certainly wasn't my brother!

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When Steven Kasher was considering giving me a show in 2016, he was looking through my prints—and he picked that one! I was like, “I have to give it a title,” so I called it “Untitled Film Still” as a reference to Cindy Sherman.

It’s a ballsy picture. Just showing it was like, “Ohh!” I am very critical about what is a photograph. It can’t just be shocking or composition or lighting or history—it has to be a little bit of everything. I looked at the photo and said, “It has all of that.”

I also had a moment when I thought: “If not now, when?” You know what? It’s a perfect image.