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MERYL MEISLER'S NEW EXHIBITION CAPTURES THE DIVERSITY OF THE LES IN THE '70s, '80s

By Bill Hayes, April 17, 2018



ONE OF THE realities of living in New York is that you cannot become too attached to specific places any more than you can become attached to certain people in your life: the waitress you chat with every weekend, the parking garage guy, the newsstand vendor from whom you buy a paper. Often, they disappear, and you may never learn why. Why was that building torn down? Why did that bar close overnight? Whatever happened to the bartender? And what about Mohammed? He was here yesterday.

Place is as crucial to the architecture of memory as it is to dreaming, and like those New Yorkers who seem to disappear, spaces themselves carry their own memories here. Departed landmarks like CBGB or the Mudd Club are not so much addresses in downtown Manhattan as they are touchstones in the collective consciousness, occasionally reminding us of what was and of how much has changed — not least, ourselves. CBGB is where a 16-year-old Adam Horovitz — soon to be known as Ad-Rock of the Beastie Boys — opened for punk legends Bad Brains in 1982; the Mudd Club is where, a few years earlier, Talking Heads, performing just days after the release of “Fear of Music,” coolly name-checked both spots in the iconic song “Life During Wartime.” (“This ain’t no Mudd Club or CBGB / I ain’t got time for that now.”) Moments like these still haunt the city — half recalled, half imagined — even now that the Mudd Club is a condo building where a unit sold recently for \$3.6 million, or CBGB has been colonized by designer John Varvatos, plundering the cultural heritage of the very building he now occupies.

These images are perhaps clearer to those of us who weren’t here to experience them firsthand, whose vision of New York was shaped by stories of and from the disappeared. In 1983, I was in college in Northern California, living in a drab ground-floor apartment just off campus, and on the verge of coming out. Not a place or an age I wish to return to for longer than a flash of remembering. Not a place or an age I wished to be back then either. Where I wanted to be, or thought I wanted to be, existed in the pages of publications like The Village Voice, where photos of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat at Club 57 made New York into a goal, a place to try to reach. In the gay literary magazine Christopher

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Street, read surreptitiously on visits to bookstores in San Francisco, I glimpsed not places so much as states of mind: the notion of being both openly gay and a serious writer — indeed, of being a gay writer, at the time still a radical thought — as epitomized in its pages by Edmund White, Vito Russo, George Stambolian, Michael Denneny and others.

By the time I actually moved here, in 2009, at age 48, most of those places from the early '80s (and many of the people) were long gone, as were nightspots I'd only heard about — Danceteria, Paradise Garage and what was once Madonna's stomping ground, the Fun House. Certain landmarks remained — like the Stonewall Inn, the birthplace of modern gay rights in New York, or the Kettle of Fish bar, once a popular hangout for Bob Dylan and Jack Kerouac, and now a sports bar for fans of the Green Bay Packers. Christopher Street seemed to carry the memory of Christopher Street magazine like an aging face carries the memory of its youthful glamour. In the years since that journal started publishing in 1976 and its shuttering in 1995, the city had been ravaged by crack and AIDS, cleaned up and turned outrageously expensive. The past sometimes seeps through, buried as it is beneath layers of time and history, and inevitably, the present suffers by comparison. I am often reminded of this — told this, really — by people my age who lived here through all those years.

AND YET I dismiss such wistfulness privately. New York isn't what it was, true; it is something different. But whatever its faults, different is always interesting. To get too attached to New York is to invite the city to break your heart, over and over again.

When I moved into my current apartment, I had a view of the Hudson River; in certain seasons, I could see the sun set on the water on some nights. Then, one day six years ago, I noticed construction starting down near the waterside. I watched over the next year as a building went up, floor by floor: the new Whitney Museum. It was being built on burial grounds of a sort: the meatpacking district, a neighborhood populated in the '80s by butchers and truckers during the day, and, at night, by gay men spilling out of bars and sex clubs like the Mine Shaft and Anvil, all long since vanished, replaced by restaurants and retail stores.

The Whitney now blocks my view of the water almost entirely, like a gigantic thumb. But however indifferent I feel at times about the art exhibited inside, I've come to think of the museum as lovely. Even so, I don't take it for granted. One day, another building will rise and block out my view of the museum. Until then, I try to appreciate what I see from here — like the rays of tangerine-colored sunlight that bounce off the Whitney's pearly facade in the evening — without comparing it to what was there before. Because what is is what matters most. What was will only make you blue in New York.