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The New Criterion

GALLERY CHRONICLE

By James Panero, June 5, 2018



The photographer Meryl Meisler arrived in New York City in the mid-1970s. Surrounded by decadence and decay, she looked for the humanizing touch in the wreckage, the sleaze, and the schmaltz of the struggling city. Through a 1978 ceta Artist grant to photograph Jewish life for the American Jewish Congress, she turned her lens on the Lower East Side. Continuing our rediscovery of Meisler's rich body of work, these photographs are the subject of "les yes!," an exhibition at The Storefront Project, a gallery on Orchard Street at the heart of a neighborhood that has transformed in the four decades since Meisler captured it in black and white.

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Meisler has an eye for character. In her photographs, often shot in fifty millimeter with heavy flash, great expressions come into bloom for her welcoming lens. Bright-faced rabbis, soda jerks, and garmentos pop out of their darkened shuls, diners, and apparel stores. There are a few striking images of degradation —a drunk lying across the bleak median of *Photographing on the Bowery* (1977), with a second figure snapping away from the side of this captivatingly framed image. Yet, mostly, Meisler looks for the life of the street and those struggling to keep living in it. In particular she finds Morris Katz, the self-proclaimed “Mayor of Grand Street,” who appears in several images. Looking out from two black eyes, Katz describes “how he was mugged by two kids who found him dozing in front of his TV in his living room,” as one of the images is titled. Resolute and resigned, he does not let his cigar drop from his mouth or his bow tie come undone. The old neighborhood is in decline. He was there to see it through. Thankfully, in the dying light of the late 1970s, Meisler was there as well to find what could be preserved.