



MERYL MEISLER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MERYL MEISLER
TEXT BY TYLER AKERS

"Sipping Sweets with My Sweetheart Patricia Jean O'Brien, Ghirardelli Square, San Francisco, California" (August 1979).

"Self-portrait, The Girl Scout Oath, North Massapequa, NY" (January 1975).



"Poochie Wears her Shell Belt to Dance at The Magic Carpet, NY, NY" (November 1979).



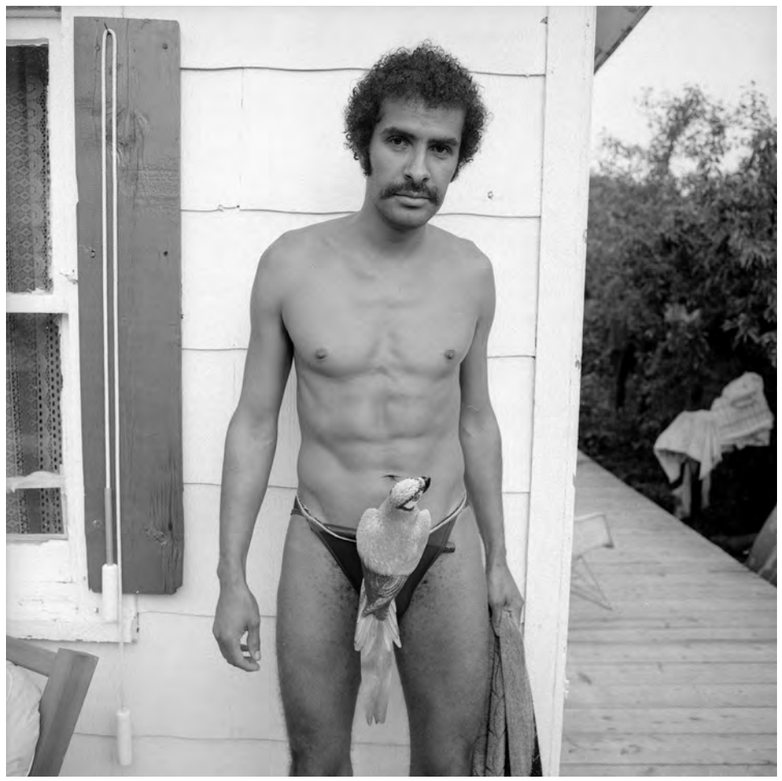
"Wild Wild West Double Jointed Contortionist, Hurrah, NY, NY" (March 1979).



"Grace Jones Arrives on Opening Night La Farfalle, NY, NY" (June 1978).



"Rejected From Studio 54 No No (With Judi-Jupiter), Studio 54, NY, NY" (October 1978).



"Parrot Pants, Cherry Grove, Fire Island, NY" (August 1977).



"One Way Keep Right Lesbian, Pride March, NY, NY" (June 1977).



"Ms. Fire Island with USA Flag Hat, Cherry Grove, Fire Island, NY" (September 1977).



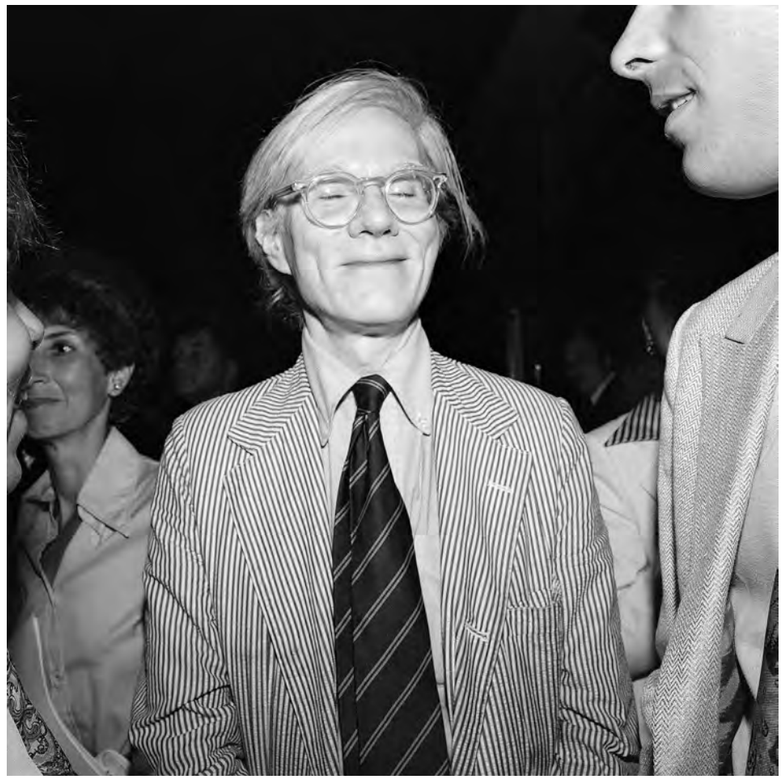
"Hustler on a Boat, Fire Island Pines, NY" (July 1978).



"Woman With Ratify The ERA Button and Gloria Steinem, Studio 54, NY, NY" (July 1977).



"Allen Ginsberg at Antinuke Rally, NY, NY" (May 1979).



"Andy Warhol Smiling with Eyes Closed (Between his Friend and JudiJupiter) Studio 54, NY, NY" (July 1977).



"Patti Smith Sings Gloria at CBGB, NY, NY" (April 1977).



"Bent Over Dancer Wearing White String, Paradise Garage NY, NY" (April 1978).



"Antlers and Leather Mask at Star Wars Party, Fire Island Pines, NY" (August 1977).



"Turn Around with Drink in Hand GG's Barnum Room, NY, NY" (December 1978).



"Wearing Chains and Dancing on the Ice Palace Wall, Cherry Grove, Fire Island, NY" (August 1977).



"Mom Dances with a Dollar on her Forehead at a Wedding, Arbor Inn Rockville Centre, NY" (March 1976).

Meryl Meisler had a front row seat to the disco boom. She remembers, "When the scene hit it was my cup of tea." After studying photography in Wisconsin, she moved back to New York in 1975 just as a new club culture was taking hold. "I was not a ground breaker. I felt lucky. I was standing on the shoulders of the people before me," she says of coming out that same year on April 1, "and I've always had a queer eye." Meisler's early photos draw on the Long Island of her upbringing, giving images of her family members and friends a campy yet intimate charm. Through her lens, wedding halls, living rooms, and beauty shops in North Massapequa become offbeat playgrounds of Borscht Belt humor. Her parents, Jack and Sunny, founded a group called the "The Mystery Club" of about a dozen couples who would take turns planning a mystery night out every month. Meisler enjoyed hearing about their escapades including trips to a nudist colony, fencing lessons, a séance, and going to the Gay Continental Baths. The club members were among her early subjects. But when she began shooting queer underground discos in 1977, her sensibility had met its ultimate subject.

That same year, shortly after going to her first big disco party on Valentine's Day at the Copacabana, she met longtime friend Judi Jupiter traveling down to Mardi Gras on a Grey Rabbit bus which had all the seats removed and replaced with mattresses. Their mutual love for eccentrically libidinous aesthetics created an immediate bond and creative partnership, and they began going out routinely, as evidenced in Meisler's numerous vivid portraits of Jupiter. Shooting in clubs and bars in the 70s and 80s was much easier. While Meisler used to just show up with her camera in hand, she now has to contact club owners, performers, and producers to get permission to shoot. It "always surprises" her that her work has become popular because by her account there were plenty of photographers shooting the 70s club scene in New York. "Though it makes some sense," she remarks, because most were shooting for newspapers to document the disco explosion while she was a free agent in those days, never showing the work commercially for many years. She was often in her own work and she participated in the scene rather than observing and cataloging at a remove like a voyeur or reporter.

To earn a living, she got a CETA grant for almost two years that she says was like "the WPA of the 70s" with which she documented "Jewish New Yorkers" for the American Jewish Congress. She lived a double life: "I was doing that during the day and going out at night," she remembers. Beginning in 1979, she became an art teacher at public schools throughout New York, a career lasting 31 years that gave her financial security and a brilliant body of work focused on children and pre-gentrified Bushwick. Because she didn't have time to shoot for the dark room during that period, she began using a 35mm camera and slide film. "I did some color negatives but mostly color slides," she recalls, "and I'm glad because they've certainly lasted longer. But nothing compares to seeing the black-and-white silver gelatin prints." In 2016, she found her way back to the dark room by enrolling in FIT's Photo 101 class over and over until the professors told her, with affection, that she couldn't keep taking the same class. These days Meisler splits her time between New York City and a second home in Woodstock which she shares with the love of her life, Patricia Jean O'Brien. While the two had known each other off and on since junior high school, their romance started after Meisler was stood up one night by a blind date. It was a long-distance relationship for a couple years until O'Brien moved back to New York from San Francisco in 1980 to begin their life together, eventually marrying and living happily ever since. ■



"Gold Stars Arch, Le Clique, NY, NY" (June 1978).