

Susan Meiselas, Médiations, Jeu de Paume, Paris

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Number 93, Spring 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/88024ac>

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Publisher(s)

Les éditions esse

ISSN

0831-859X (print)

1929-3577 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

LaBarge, E. (2018). Review of [Susan Meiselas, Médiations, Jeu de Paume, Paris]. *esse arts + opinions*, (93), 111–111.



Susan Meiselas

← *Sharif and Son*, from the series
44 Irving Street, 1971.

Photo : © Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

← *Traditional Indian dance mask from the town of Monimbo, adopted by the rebels during the fight against Somaza to conceal identity, Masaya, Nicaragua, 1978.*

Photo : © Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

↑ *Muchachos await counterattack by the Guard, Matagalpa, Nicaragua, 1978.*

Photo : © Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

Susan Meiselas

Médiations

In 1971, having just finished an MA in Visual Education at Harvard University, Susan Meiselas knocked on all the doors of the rooming house in which she lived—44 Irving Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The resulting work is a series of black-and-white photographs, one of each room with its occupant, accompanied by handwritten statements from the individual about his or her domestic space.

Some of the lodgers simply describe what they are doing in the image; others comment on the photograph itself—surprised or disappointed by what the camera reveals. The series includes a self-portrait: bare floorboards and pale, smudged walls; a wooden chair next to a small slender crate that is turned on its end to act as a side table, and on which sits a potted plant grown from an avocado pit. Reclining on the chair, looking straight into the camera, is a ghostly double-exposure of Meiselas. The photographer is there, but not there—as is the case, one could argue, in all of her other photographs.

“In all my work, I form a relationship,” explains Meiselas of her vast and impressive retrospective at Jeu de Paume, which is entitled *Médiations*—a reference to the photographer’s belief “that photography is an act of mediation between myself and the subject. The camera allows me into places I would otherwise not have gone and helps create deep engagements.” Meiselas works in series of photographs, often in conjunction with some combination of text, sound, moving image, and book publishing. As in *44 Irving Street*, projects focus on specific communities of people: carnival strippers; people and their porches in the southern states of the U.S.; a group of girls growing up in Lower Manhattan; BDSM practitioners; women living in domestic abuse refuges—their bodies, but also their empty rooms and their sparse, scattered belongings. The camera captures people and myriad lives, but always with the sense that they speak—as well as look and appear—for themselves.

Meiselas’s work shows the keen and judicious eye of a documentary photographer sensitively influenced by ideas about anthropology and ethnography. This is particularly true—to ends very different in tone, texture, and content—of Meiselas’s work for Magnum Photos, of which she has been a member since 1976. At Jeu de Paume, some of her most arresting journalistic photos from the Nicaraguan Revolution of the 1960s–70s are on display: a group of boys wearing traditional painted masks as they practise throwing contact bombs; a severed pair of legs lying in the green hills, with a spinal column protruding; white handprints against a red door—the signature of the death squads. Alongside these photographs is Meiselas’s ongoing work about the Kurdish diaspora, working with communities to represent their lives and histories after genocides that annihilated not only individuals but all their attendant documents—photographs and books, in particular. Meiselas worked with local Kurdish communities in Paris to gather images that are bound together and presented in the exhibition space, hanging in clusters from chains on the walls. In *Médiations*, true to form, photographs are not contained by their frames.

Emily LaBarge

Jeu de Paume, Paris
February 6–May 20, 2018