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Susan Meiselas: In History



Best known for her work covering political upheavals in Central America in the 1970s and 1980s, Susan Meiselas has always experimented with photojournalism in radical and challenging ways. Grappling with questions about her relationship to her subjects, the use and circulation of her images in the media, and the relationship of images to history and memory, she has become a leading voice in the debate over the function and practice of contemporary documentary photography. From April 10 through June 20, 2010, the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth

College will become the only college or university museum to present the striking multimedia overview *Susan Meiselas: In History*, and only the second North American venue after the International Center of Photography (ICP), New York, the exhibition's organizer, before the show travels to Barcelona.

This exhibition is structured around three key projects, that exemplify the evolution of Meiselas's process and approach: photographs and audio of New England carnival strippers (1972–76), including workers at the famous fairs in Essex Junction and Tunbridge, Vermont; photographs, films, and public installations from Nicaragua (1978–2004); and photographs and collected archival objects and video from Kurdistan (1991–present). About the opportunity for her work to be shown at the Hood Museum of Art, Meiselas said, "I am excited to see the show in the Dartmouth College community, where students will have the opportunity to delve into the histories and issues it raises. A teaching museum is the perfect context to explore the challenges of the documentary process and hopefully inspire students to find their own engagement with the world."

Susan Meiselas's interest in global issues involving politics, civil war, and America's relationships with other nations, as well as domestic social conflicts involving women, has attracted an unprecedented range of Dartmouth faculty members involved in a broad array of disciplines and pursuits, including Latin American culture, society, and politics, the art of photography, death and dying, genocide, and women's and gender studies. At a time when College President Jim Yong Kim has advocated for students' engagement with the world, museum staff members have worked especially to bring exhibitions to campus that prompt discussion and dialogue. The museum will draw upon the contents of this exhibition to explore all aspects of visual literacy, the ability to construct meaning from images, which is at the heart of the museum's teaching mission. Partnerships have been established across campus to teach classes and present programs related to the exhibition, working with The Dickey

Center for International Understanding, The Tucker Foundation (in particular its Cross-Cultural Education and Service Program to Nicaragua), Institutional Diversity and Equity, and the Departments of Comparative Literature, Studio Art, Art History, Philosophy, Latin American, Latino, and Caribbean Studies, Women and Gender Studies, Film and Media Studies, English, and History. Following Susan Meiselas's opening lecture on Friday, April 16, exhibition-related programs will include guest lectures by photography writer and commentator David Levi Strauss and journalist William Gasperini, as well as faculty talks by Lisa Baldez, Virginia Beahan, Gene R. Garthwaite, Brian Miller, and Jeffrey Ruoff, and a special walking tour with the exhibition's curator, Kristen Lubben of ICP.

Susan Meiselas: In History revisits three career-long projects by the internationally renowned photographer. The first section of the exhibition presents *Carnival Strippers*, an intimate and uncompromising depiction of the lives of a group of women working the strip tents of traveling carnivals in New England, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina. Taken at the height of the women's movement in the United States, the photographs portray women alternately endangered by and commanding their seamy environment, and supported by a community of other women. As she photographed public performances and private moments, Meiselas made a series of audio interviews with the strippers and the men surrounding them: audience members, managers, and boyfriends. The black-and-white photographs and accompanying interviews were published in the book *Carnival Strippers*, which appeared in 1976 and was recently reissued. Meiselas maintains a long-term engagement with her subjects—a hallmark of her process in future projects—and the resulting photographs offer a resonant and complex portrait. The project represents an early effort to integrate the voice and intent of the documentary subject into the work. The exhibition will present vintage prints accompanied by audio interviews playing on speakers in the gallery.

The second section of the exhibition will be devoted to Meiselas's work in Nicaragua in 1978–79. Still considered by many to be her signature work, these startling color photographs of the lead-up to the overthrow of the Somoza regime and subsequent Sandinista victory were widely distributed in the international press and published in the 1981 book *Nicaragua*. A landmark in war photography for its pioneering and controversial use of color, Meiselas's work in Nicaragua remains a model of engaged, partisan documentary coverage. It was Meiselas's first experience as a photojournalist, and she was forced to contend with the mixed blessing of seeing her work in wide distribution and out of her control. Three films will be shown in conjunction with the Nicaragua photographs: *Voyages*, a documentary from 1985 produced with Marc Karlin that presents Meiselas's reflections on her relationship to the history she witnessed; *Pictures from a Revolution*, Meiselas's 1991 film following her search for the people featured in the photographs twenty years earlier; and *Reframing History*, which traces her return to Nicaragua in 2004 for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the revolution to install mural-sized images of her photographs in the site where they were originally taken.

The final section of the exhibition will present Meiselas's work with Kurdish communities in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. In 1991, after more than a decade of work in Latin America, Meiselas obtained access to the "liberated" zone in northern Iraq and later accompanied a forensic anthropologist to document the mass graves of Kurds killed in Saddam Hussein's "Anfal" campaign three years earlier. Her interest in understanding the cultural identity of the Kurds led to a six-year foray into the photographic history of the region. Meiselas gathered family photographs, portraits, documents, and stories that interweave with her own photos to create "a sourcebook of suppressed history." *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History* was published in 1997, and an associated website called akaKURDISTAN

allows viewers to add their own images and stories, creating a virtual national archive for a stateless people. In its massive scope and meticulous detail, *Kurdistan* is a major statement about the relationships between photography, memory, archives, and history. It also represents an important shift in Meiselas's practice toward collecting and curating found images, presaging the rising cultural interest in vernacular photography and archives.

Background

Meiselas received her M.A. in visual education from Harvard University and at the age of twenty-four taught photography workshops for teachers and children in New York's South Bronx. During her summers, she traveled to New England to photograph and interview women who worked as strippers in itinerant carnivals. On the basis of that work, Meiselas was invited to join the Magnum Photos cooperative, of which she remains a member.

Meiselas's coverage of hostilities in Central America during the 1970s and 1980s was widely published throughout the world. She was presented the Robert Capa Gold Medal for "outstanding courage and reporting" by the Overseas Press Club in 1979 for her work in Nicaragua. She served as an editor and contributor to the books *El Salvador: The Work of Thirty Photographers* (1983) and *Chile from Within* (1991). Meiselas has also co-directed two films based on her involvement in Nicaragua, *Living at Risk: The Story of a Nicaraguan Family* (1985), and *Pictures from a Revolution* (1991).

In 1997, she completed a six-year project on the one-hundred-year photographic history of Kurdistan. *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History*, an exhibition, book, and website, earned her a MacArthur Fellowship. Like the recent ICP/Steidl book *Encounters with the Dani*, which pieces together a richly layered visual history of an indigenous people through the eyes of outsiders, *Kurdistan* examines the relationship between power and representation. Meiselas's own photographs play a supporting role in both projects, with painstakingly gathered archival images and documents carrying the weight of the story.

The complicated trajectory of Meiselas's work has often been reduced to a simplified narrative: a war photographer who rejects photojournalism and puts down her camera in favor of mining found imagery and promoting the work of other photographers. A closer examination of her career shows that, from her earliest activity to her most recent, Meiselas has consistently interrogated and expanded the documentary tradition, fueling cross-genre dialogue with anthropologists, human rights workers, and critical theorists to work toward a new understanding of the role of photographs in understanding histories and communities. The staff of the Hood Museum of Art is excited to be able to bring that dialogue to the campus and surrounding community of Dartmouth College through the activation of many curricular connections and interesting programs in the coming several months.

The exhibition was organized by Kristen Lubben, Associate Curator at the International Center of Photography.

About the Hood Museum

The Hood Museum of Art is dedicated to teaching and promoting visual literacy for all of its visitors. This dynamic educational and cultural facility houses one of the oldest and largest college collections in

the country, with more than 65,000 objects acquired since 1772. Among its most important works are six Assyrian stone reliefs that date from around 900 BCE. The collection also presents art from other ancient cultures, the Americas, Europe, Africa, Papua New Guinea, and many more regions of the world. The Hood seeks to inspire and educate through direct engagement with works of art and offers access to the rich diversity of its collections through ongoing highlights displays, special exhibitions, an online collections database, and a wide array of programs and events.

Image credit: Susan Meiselas, *Sandinistas at the wall of the National Guard headquarters, Esteli, Nicaragua*, 1979, chromogenic print. Collection, International Center of Photography. © Susan Meiselas, Magnum

Additional images available upon request.

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