

# Women in the Spotlight, but Few Behind the Lens

A new award aims to shine a light on a gender imbalance in photography.

By Dana Thomas  
July 2, 2019



A photograph from Susan Meiselas's Carnival Strippers series, now on display in Arles, France. Ms. Meiselas was to be presented with the first Women in Motion photography prize at the Rencontres d'Arles photography fair.

Credit Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

Susan Meiselas, the much-lauded Magnum photographer perhaps best known for her arresting 1979 shot of a Nicaraguan revolutionary lobbing a Molotov cocktail, said she was caught by surprise when Sam Stourdzé, the director of the Rencontres d'Arles photography fair in France, phoned in April to say she had won a major new award — from a luxury fashion group.

"I am the least fashionable person you might ever know," the 71-year-old Baltimore-born documentarian said last month during a hot summer evening in her studio on Manhattan's Mott Street. "I mean it."

She was dressed in a short-sleeved madras shirt that she had bought in India "about 35 years ago," black trousers and fuchsia running shoes. She wore no makeup and her reading glasses were perched atop her head of shoulder-length auburn hair. The space — the naturally cool basement of a Victorian building where she has lived since 1974 — was crowded with long tables stacked with photography books, newsmagazines and other detritus of a life spent, as she said, "humping about" war zones and backwoods, Leica M4 in hand.

So why, she wondered, was she receiving the first Women in Motion photography award from Kering, the Paris-based conglomerate that owns Gucci, Yves Saint Laurent and Balenciaga? Was fashion, which has been co-opting art photographers for some time, now turning its attention toward documentary and news domains to give its wares a more serious — or at least less frivolous — air?



A photograph of Ms. Meiselas that was taken during an insurrection in Nicaragua in 1978.  
Credit Alain Dejean/Sygma

Possibly. Though François-Henri Pinault, Kering's chief executive, has said the prize is an acknowledgment of a long-held gender imbalance.

About 75 percent of the photography students around the world are women, but only about 15 percent manage to turn their skills into a career, Kering said in its announcement of the award, using statistics that it said had been drawn from several sources. It also noted that women took just 12 percent of the pictures that appeared in France's daily newspapers in 2017, and that few of the World Press Photo winners in 2015, 2016 and 2017 were women.

And in 2017, according to Fashionista, only 13.7 percent of 153 covers from 10 leading American fashion magazines were shot by women — Marie-Claire had none. Shocking statistics given that fashion is a female-centric and -driven business.

In advertising, the disparity is worse: Jill Greenberg, a photographer and founder of Alreadymade, an online directory of women photographers, said that her review of advertising agency output from 2013 to 2017 showed that women had photographed less than 10 percent all of ad imagery. "Commercial photography is still perceived to be a man's job," she said in her TEDx talk last year. "In the real world of commercial photography, women are not getting the same opportunities."

Last September, the French daily Libération published an open letter signed by 300 industry leaders calling out Mr. Stourdé and the Rencontres d'Arles for a lack of female photographers in the festival's 2018 iteration.

Headlined "Où sont les femmes?" — or "Where are the women?" — the letter charged that only three of the 15 major exhibitions were dedicated to work by women, and only rarely has the festival's showing of works by women exceeded 20 percent.



Ms. Meiselas's photograph, "Debbie and Renee, Rockland, Maine, USA, 1972," on display in Arles.  
Credit Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

In an effort to begin closing that gap, the festival worked with Kering to create the prize, which will be presented on Tuesday as part of the fair's 50th edition. It includes a check for 25,000 euros, or \$28,420. (In comparison, the World Press Photo Story of the Year winner gets €10,000 and the Pulitzer Prize photography winners each get \$15,000.)

Mr. Pinault said he saw the award as a natural extension of the luxury group's five-year-old Women in Motion forum/award, held during the Cannes Film Festival and conceived to focus attention on the lack of female representation in the movie industry.

"We wondered, 'Why is there discrimination in photography? Why are there more men than women?'" Mr. Pinault said in May over tea at the Majestic hotel in Cannes. "There needed to be a reckoning."

It's a valid point — yet is a prize the answer? While a large number of the digital, accessories and capsule collection campaigns from Kering brands are shot by women, the majority of the most high-profile gigs — the ready-to-wear print and digital portfolios prepared each season — are still shot by men. (Consider Glen Luchford's many campaigns for Gucci, the recent work by Juergen Teller and David Sims for Saint Laurent, and, while Balenciaga went with Catherine Opie for fall 2018, it since has hired Yilmaz Sen and Jean-Pierre Attal.)

Wouldn't it make more sense to simply employ women photographers, rather than create an award celebrating career achievement?

"We believe that equality will also be met by triggering the discussion, participating in research that will feed the debate, creating the conditions for change, as well as casting a light on female talent," a Kering spokeswoman said in a prepared statement. (Company policy does not allow her to be identified.)

Mr. Pinault echoed that sentiment in Cannes. "Why are there more men than women?" he asked. "Because in the beginning, there were more male photographers than female. And why? Because there were fewer breaks for women." He said he was trying to create those breaks in his own brands. Obviously, there is still a ways to go.

Ms. Meiselas's photograph, "Tentful of Marks, Tunbridge, Vermont, USA, 1974."  
Credit Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos



As for Ms. Meiselas, who received the Robert Capa Gold Medal from the Overseas Press Club of America for “outstanding courage and reporting” in 1979, a MacArthur Fellowship in 1992, the International Center of Photography’s 2005 Cornell Capa Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2015, and, in May, the prestigious Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize, “it was the title of the award — Woman in Motion — that got me,” she said. “I really wanted to identify with that idea.”

“I’ve had a few little bouts with shooting fashion,” she said, including a portfolio last year for Garage magazine based on her 1995 pictures of dominatrixes at the New York S-and-M club Pandora’s Box. “And, actually, the Nicaraguan photographs” — her award-winning coverage of 1970s revolution that included “Molotov Man” — “at some point were critiqued as being about fashion, though I didn’t know how to read that.”

Kering has not asked her — yet — to photograph an ad campaign for one of its brands. And if such a request did come, she is not sure she would accept.

“I don’t know about the whole luxury brand part of it because that’s not my life,” she said. “But I do feel I’m still a woman in motion.”

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media release



Susan Meiselas  
Photographs of 20-year-old Kamarin Abdullah Saber are held by his family at Saiwan Hill cemetery. He was killed in July 1991 during a student demonstration against Saddam Hussein, Kurdistan, Northern Iraq, 1991  
© Susan Meiselas/Magnum

## Susan Meiselas: In History

On view from  
September 19, 2008  
through  
January 4, 2009

Media Preview  
September 18, 2008  
9:30—11:00 am

RSVP:  
info@icp.org  
212.857.0045

Best known for her work covering the political upheavals in Central America in the 1970s and '80s, Susan Meiselas's process has evolved in radical and challenging ways as she has grappled with pivotal 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. Her insistent engagement with these concerns has positioned her as a leading voice in the debate over the function and practice of contemporary documentary photography. From September 19, 2008 through January 4, 2009, the International Center of Photography (1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street) will present *Susan Meiselas: In History*, the first U.S. overview of the work of this major American photographer.

This exhibition is structured around three key projects, presented in their complete form, which exemplify the evolution of Meiselas's process and approach: photographs and audio of New England carnival strippers (1972-76); photographs, films, and public installations from Nicaragua (1978-2004); and photographs and collected archival objects and video from Kurdistan (1991-present).

*Carnival Strippers* is 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. But the work only reaches its complete form when paired with the interviews, which mediate, interpret, and counterbalance the photographs, unearthing the complexity and contradictions of the women’s feelings about their lives and what they do. 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. The desire to comment on the use and circulation of her images led to the exhibition *Mediations*, first presented at Camerawork in 1982. This project, which will be restaged in the ICP exhibition, presents the *Nicaragua* book pages alongside outtakes, tear sheets showing the images’ use in magazines, and prints sold to collectors. *Mediations* attempts to dismantle the meanings created and revealed by the dissemination of photographs. 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 *Re-framing History*, which traces her return to Nicaragua in 2004 for the 25th anniversary of the revolution to install mural-sized images of her photographs in the sites 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. An exhibition of the material toured internationally, but has never been shown in New York, and has appeared at only two venues in the United States. 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. Since 2007 she has returned to northern Iraq numerous times to document the radical transformations in the region brought upon by the Iraq war. Coupled with archival material and her own photographs from 1991-92, this new photographic work will be seen for the first time in the ICP exhibition.

## Background

Meiselas received her M.A. in visual education from Harvard University, and at the age of 24, 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 ‘80s 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 100-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 traditional 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 exhibition is organized by Kristen Lubben, Associate Curator at the International Center of Photography.

## **Publications**

*Susan Meiselas: In History* will be accompanied by a catalogue, published by ICP/Steidl, which will be the first compendium of Meiselas's work. Containing both celebrated and unpublished bodies of images, it will also feature texts by Kristen Lubben, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, David Levi Strauss, Lucy Lippard, Edmundo Desnoes, Diana Taylor, Elizabeth Edwards, Caroline Brothers, and Allan Sekula.

In addition, reprints of both *Nicaragua* (Aperture and International Center of Photography, 2008) and *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History* (University of Chicago Press, 2008) are now available.

## **Sponsor**

This exhibition is made possible by Shell

