

Rosalyn Drexler

GARTH GREENAN GALLERY

“Women in Pop art” is a thing these days. And I’m not just talking about a few big shows, such as the 2010–11 American touring exhibition “Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958–1968” or the concurrent “Power Up: Female Pop Art” in Vienna. Individual artists including Evelyne Axell, Pauline Boty, Dorothy Iannone, and even Niki de Saint Phalle have lately been accorded critical attention as never before while also exerting influence on younger artists. The welcome reappearance of Rosalyn Drexler is part of this trend, and indeed crucial to it, but “Vulgar Lives,” a presentation of selected works from the 1960s and ’80s, suggested that the Pop label, while not exactly inaccurate, does not do full justice to Drexler’s art.

Or at least that’s the case if one takes as paradigmatic the best-known American Pop artists—the Warhols, Lichtensteins, Wesselmanns, et al.—who were Drexler’s contemporaries. In comparison to hers, their work is cooler in affect and far more refined in technique; their surfaces, even if concealing darker overtones, reflect the slick, shiny, appealing side of postwar consumer culture. Unlike those male colleagues, Drexler is self-taught as a painter, and her paintings have the rough, funky facture to prove their provenance in the school of hard knocks. The figures have been collaged onto the canvas, then overpainted to veil their specificity; the source material is, as Drexler herself once said, “hidden but present, like a disturbing memory.” The resulting jerry-built, cobbled-together look—and a repertoire of images that highlights crime, violence, and sexual conflict—serves as a reminder that what might once have looked like glossy, airbrushed promises of happiness are shadowed by a film-noir sense of doom and a disillusioned eye for the culture’s underlying crudeness. Warhol showed Marilyn Monroe as an eternal icon, tragic yet ever-perfect; Drexler gives us a *Marilyn Pursued by Death*, 1963, its two black-and-white figures outlined in red in motion on a black field. Both are anonymized by dark glasses—a matched pair. He’s just about to catch up with her.

The harsh ironies of Drexler’s paintings of the ’60s and their DIY technique, constrained palette, and willfully uningratiating appearance suggest that it might be more rewarding to think of these works not as Pop but as proto-punk. If the Standells or the 13th Floor Elevators were garage bands, then this is garage painting: three colors and the truth. Particularly revealing were a group of very small collages, dated 1960, featuring grainy clipped-out news photos—showing a horse race, what looks like a business lunch of mafiosi, etc., none of them overpainted, as Drexler would later do with her paintings—superimposed on blank fields of color à la Ellsworth Kelly or Barnett Newman. The works’ impact, out of all proportion to their scale, illustrates Drexler’s genius at getting the most out of the least visual input.

Though Drexler’s work of the ’60s is in the history books, albeit too often overlooked even there, her art since then is terra incognita for many of us. “Vulgar Lives” began to redress this with the inclusion of several paintings made between 1988 and 1991. *Night Visitors*, 1988, is particularly intriguing because it’s as if the artist had set one of her own earlier paintings within the framework of a newer one: It shows a woman asleep on a bright-green, flower-patterned couch—the room is schematically rendered but still far more clearly defined than the blank abstract backgrounds Drexler gave her earlier figures. Through a picture window (surrounded by drapes with a similar pattern to the couch) we see four ominous-looking men in black approaching in total darkness. Death still in pursuit? Cheery decor won’t keep them at bay.



Night Visitors, 1988, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches