

Art in America

REVIEWS MAY 2015

Rosalyn Drexler

GARTH GREENAN GALLERY



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

In opening his essay for the catalogue to “Rosalyn Drexler: Vulgar Lives,” critic and curator Robert Cozzolino aptly writes that the artist “has been discovered and rediscovered so many times that the art world should be checked for amnesia.” The show, mounted by Garth Greenan Gallery, which newly represents the 89-year-old Drexler, was the first solo of her paintings in New York since 2007, when PaceWildenstein staged a survey of her work from the 1960s. The Greenan show manifested yet another “discovery” concerning the polymath Drexler, also a three-time Obie-winning playwright, novelist and critic, by including some more recent paintings. The earliest of the 21 works on view dated to 1959 and the latest to 1991. A group of tiny (just a few inches per side) collages showed that Drexler was experimenting in this form while making her larger mixed-medium paintings, which she first showed in 1963. The little collages are adroitly laconic gems—clippings of racehorses, men eating lunch or reading—set against solid colors.

Drexler has remained consistent in method, choosing photographs from media sources and sometimes enlarging them photomechanically, and gluing them onto canvas. Over these, she paints in thick oil and acrylic. She follows her source in essence but applies unmodulated colors that eliminate photographic nuance and detail. Pop content thereby feels personalized, as one senses her hand almost tenderly at work. Early on, the backgrounds are almost always solid colors, but there is a landscape in *Maui Wowie (Jean-Michel and Andy Take a Trip)*, 1989, her homage to the then-recently deceased Basquiat and Warhol, whom she imagines on a road trip in paradise. In *Our Lady of Doves* and *Night Visitors* (both 1988), domestic interiors with patterned furnishings are reminiscent of Vuillard.

The show presented some signature themes of her early work: movie subjects (*The Misfits*, 1960, portrays Marilyn Monroe, her hair a garish yellow, and Clark Gable in a cowboy hat); celebrity shots (*Marilyn Pursued by Death*, 1963, shows the star creepily pursued by a paparazzo, the two connected by a menacing red outline); and violent encounters (a raging “victim” turns the tables on her would-be rapist, straddling him and raking her nails across his face, in *Self-Defense*, 1963). A real surprise was *Death of Benny “Kid” Paret* (1963), depicting, against black, six successive TV-monitor shots of a notorious bout in which a boxer was killed on-screen—perhaps the first such incident of its kind. Here Drexler’s elisions only heighten the drama and tragedy by creating sharp contrasts in light and dark that feel like flashes from the underworld.

Drexler belongs neither here nor there, straddling with a strange warmth the cool worlds of Pop (though more John Wesley than Andy Warhol) and appropriationism. And her work from the late ’80s is little known. One of the best paintings in the show was *Night Visitors*, for which she appropriated a famous news photograph of the gangster Bugsy Siegel dead on a flowered sofa, framed against a pale green wall with yellow trim, like an Albers nested square. Siegel reclines languidly, blood pooling from his head in a stylized red blot, almost one with the surrounding florals. Beyond, in a huge picture window, we see the Feds arriving, as if on a vast dark movie screen. Like so many of Drexler’s paintings, *Night Visitors* embodies the seductions of spectacle while nailing its sinister undercurrent.

—Faye Hirsch