

Drexler's visceral, violent Pop on view at Rose Museum

BY SEBASTIAN SMEE FEBRUARY 19, 2016



The Defenders, 1963. Courtesy the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

WALTHAM — In the late 1940s, working out at a New York gym founded by champion wrestler George Bothner, Rosalyn Drexler was invited to join the women's wrestling circuit. Drexler, who was married to the painter Sherman Drexler, figured it might be a way to improve their household income.

Also, she liked the violence.

She accepted, and spent several months traveling the country as Rosa Carlo, "The Mexican Spitfire."

Drexler's brief experience as a wrestler, which she later drew on in her art and fiction, was sobering: "Confirmed my world view that people like to see other people get hurt," she said. "I got out of it fast."

Born Rosalyn Bronznick in 1926, Drexler is the subject of a fascinating retrospective at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University. It's good. She's good. She's certainly overdue some serious attention.

Her paintings set figures from movie posters and magazine advertisements, and occasionally from news media, against bold grounds of saturated color, subdivided into rectilinear shapes. When she began, a friend who worked at a cinema supplied her with old posters. She cut them out, copied and enlarged them, and painted directly onto the paper reproductions.

Visually, the results have a lot of pop and pizzazz. But their subject matter is dark. "Put It This Way," painted in 1963, shows a man in a suit and tie putting his entire body into hitting a woman in a yellow-and-orange dress. As his arm follows through, she falls into the picture's foreground, as if into a glamorous nightmare.

The painting's charge comes from the action depicted, obviously, but also from the bold cropping, the zing of the flaming dress against the sea of blue that surrounds it, and the hieratic, centralized composition. It should be static, yet it's anything but.

"Violence," said Drexler, "is the most intimate thing that can happen to a person." She is as interested, you feel, in the intimacy as in the violence itself.

Subsequent paintings from her so-called "Love and Violence" series include "Self-Defense," "Rape," and "I Won't Hurt You." The latter is a lie: He will hurt her. His hand is already covering her mouth.

Most of the works in the show, which was organized by Katy Siegel and Caitlin Julia Rubin, date from the 1960s, when Drexler was peaking as a visual artist. There is a smattering of more recent works, too. Some of it is very good, but like Edvard Munch's post-1910 work, it has a feeling of redundant reiteration.

If the show as a whole doesn't ever quite amount to something rousing, ringingly great, it is perhaps because, even as Drexler was hitting her stride as a painter, she was also writing fiction like a woman possessed.

The first piece of writing she had published was an autobiographical sketch in the *Provincetown Review*. It came out in 1961, and was later worked into her first book, "I Am the Beautiful Stranger."

Drexler designed the cover herself. We see a copy in the exhibition, where it operates as a window not only onto the book (as covers should) but as a mirror reflecting its knowingly pulpy, hard-boiled vibe back onto the paintings around it.

Drexler went on to write nine novels, as many plays (several of which won awards), and several screenplays.

Nonetheless, despite this division of creative focus, the best works here constitute a major contribution to the history of Pop Art. Among them are "The Dream," "Home Movies," "Lovers," "Love in the Green Room," "The Syndicate," "The Defenders," and "Untitled." The latter is a tiny but brilliant painting. It's based on a photograph taken graveside at the funeral for a girl killed by a bomb that was planted by the Ku Klux Klan outside a church in Birmingham, Ala.

Drexler is one of several women artists — among them Marisol Escobar, Martha Rosler, and Evelynne Axell — who have been grossly neglected in histories of the movement. Slowly, that's being overturned. All featured prominently in "Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958-1968," an exhibition organized by Sid Sachs in 2010, and more recently in "International Pop," a global overview of Pop Art organized by Darsie Alexander.

These women's elastic, surprising, provocative takes on Pop's traditional conflation of consumer desire, mass media, and sexual politics feels like a much-needed corrective to a predominantly masculine plot.

Drexler always acknowledged that her art was rooted in popular culture. But she didn't much like the "Pop" label.

"In fact," she wrote, "my art is hot — related to a search for the bizarre in ordinary encounters, to the underbelly of modern life, not to Pop's embrace of chilly indifference."

One could counter by saying that "chilly indifference" — the spiritual vacancy at the heart of consumerism — was exactly the "underbelly of modern life" that classic Pop artists, including Warhol in the US and Richard Hamilton in the UK, were seeking to capture. But Warhol, Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, and Rosenquist were simultaneously celebrants, embracing the democratic energy pulsing through modern consumerist life.

Drexler's own interests in violence, sex, intimacy, and masculinity, as filtered through pulp fiction and the movies, set her apart. What she was attempting was not so much to bring a high style to low subject matter as to keep it all quite stylishly and knowingly low.

Her technique is often a bit indifferent, neither interestingly gauche nor ever quite as bracingly tight as the subject matter seems to demand. But Drexler, for all her compositional skills, was no fanatical formalist. She was always more interested in the narrative implications of her pictures.

This made perfect sense: Narrative was there, after all, in her source material. Unlike, say, Lichtenstein, whose paintings couldn't care less about the contents of the comics they appropriated (except to the extent that they animated his high-ironic sensibility), Drexler embraced the melodramatic story lines of cinema and fiction.

Drexler had earlier made sculptures from assembled junk; some of them are on display here. When she first took up painting, she treated her source material in a similar way.

"I like to paint things in action," she later said. "I'm a violent person myself. But it's not a sublimation. It doesn't stop me. I mean the picture can be violent and I can be."

I take the quote as a threat. Drexler is saying, Don't think I'm some sweetie-pie artist with good manners who happens to do a nice line in nasty pictures. She's saying: You think my pictures are nasty? Wait until you meet me.

I have not read Drexler's novels — I have "I Am the Beautiful Stranger" on order, and can't wait! — but various editions are on display at the Rose. Some are open to pages that reveal a terse, noir-ish style, a fascination with male-female power dynamics, and a taste for violence.

"I think all of my books are rescue attempts . . . to rescue myself from some unbearable thoughts or situations. An attempt at some kind of freedom."

A similar quality is there in the paintings, too. The violence is always implicit, but the figures are constantly on the verge of floating away into a pulpy dream, like the spinning, falling figures in the memorable opening sequence of "Mad Men."

"The first thing I do when I look at something is isolate it," Drexler has said. The effect, transposed to her pictures, is to concentrate our attention on a decisive moment or freighted action. But the strategy's downside is that it robs events of context, makes them into something separate, iconic, and set apart from the flow of causes and consequences.

Drexler played with this in all sorts of interesting ways. But it's hard to escape the feeling that she grew bored with the limits of the approach, and came to the conclusion that her true métier was literature. It would be writing that would allow her to bore deeper into what she once described as "the human dilemma — hit or be hit."