

Drexler paints picture of 1960s women

BY BRETT M. RHYNE MARCH 11, 2016

When Rosalyn Drexler, 89, appeared at the opening of her retrospective at Brandeis University's Rose Gallery last month, it was easy to see how her person was reflected in her art. She was beautiful, edgy and full of humor.

At the heart of Drexler's work is her life as a Jewish, Bronx-born wife and mother in the 1960s. She keeps house and raises the kids; at the same time, she and her husband, the painter Sherman Drexler, live a Bohemian life in New York, counting among their friends artists like Allan Kaprow, who coined the term "happenings" for what he did, Andy Warhol, and other giants of Pop Art.

Drexler's unconventional conventional domestic life allowed her to express her tremendous creativity, as a painter, a sculptor, a playwright and a novelist, at a time before the women's liberation had taken hold.

"I wasn't trying to be an artist, be a writer," she notes. "I wasn't even trying to be a wife. All these things are a sorta natural process to me. And all connected. I didn't have any preconceived ideas about what I should be. Or I should only be one thing. So I really dug doing all these things. If I was stuck in the house and alone I wanted to do something, I'd go through all my drawers and I'd make a collage because I had to . . . I used to love sculpting because I'd put the kid in the playpen and I would work in the same room. I didn't have a living room. I used it as a studio. So I mean getting back to women again, you always have to find time and find a way."

Drexler's retrospective at the Rose shows off her work in a number of media, in all of which she found artistic, if not commercial, success. The show includes sculpture, video of produced plays and interviews with the author, and books she has written; but the best work is the paintings.

"My pictures are like ice floes, jarred loose and floating nowhere. On them, the people act violently, but their foothold is melting," she notes.

An undercurrent of anger and violence runs throughout her work.

"When I'm angry I work best, you know," she notes. "I hate certain sons of bitches that are making it and don't deserve it, or when I was a very poor kid and didn't have enough to eat and stuff like that and my relatives were rich and this one and that one was respected and this one and that one went to college and I hated them. You know? And I wanted to show 'em. And that may be very simplistic, but I know that that's in me. I still want to show them. I don't even know who they are anymore."

"I like to paint things in action," she notes. "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. There is humor, too."

"My rich Uncle Moe bought me a song sheet; that, and my first bicycle, which my father bought at a discount from my grandfather's second-hand store, made me the envy of my friends," she notes. "Mother said that some day I'd be another Deanna Durbin. All I had to do was study the lyrics on the song sheets. Prepare for the big break. So I did: 'They say some day you'll find/all who love are blind . . . / So I smile and say / When a lovely flame dies/Smoke gets in your eyes.' I didn't quite understand the words but became deadly afraid of falling in love and losing my sight."

A product of her time yet out of time, Drexler notes: "I have always done what I wanted to, creatively, in spite of everything."



Self-Portrait (1964)