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Boston's online arts magazine
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Fuse Visual Arts Interview: Artist Rosalyn Drexler at the Rose Art Museum — Reasons to be Cheerful

by Tim Barry March 18, 2016

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Reasons to be cheerful if you're the artist Rosalyn Drexler:

1) You've been re-discovered — for what seems the umpteenth time — with a retrospective exhibition of your paintings, sculptures, and books currently at Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum, in Waltham, MA.
2) A Brooklyn publisher has brought one of your classic novels back into print, for a new generation of guys and girls in flannel shirts, scruffy beards, and retro glasses.
3) Though approaching your ninth decade, you still have all of your marbles, and then some.

"I never felt neglected," asserts Drexler, eyeing me a bit warily while working on her chicken salad with havarti, on a baguette. We're perched across from one another at a table in Garth Greenan Gallery, which represents her, on the 10th floor of a Chelsea art building. We're discussing the critical heritage of women in the contemporary arts, and her heritage in particular. The prolific and much heralded novelist, painter, and playwright has no shortage of opinions, many of which run contrary to the art-historical party line.

On the topic of women's under-representation in museums: "Why should anything have to be the equal of anything else," she muses. "Take the case of outsider artists; you couldn't confront someone like a Henry Darger and say 'you don't line up with Rembrandt, so take your brushes and pencils and go.'"

She cocks an ear as I relate what the New York Times critic Ken Johnson wrote in 2010 about an exhibition of women Pop artists in which she was included:

Johnson: "Few women of this era, evidently, were ready to challenge male domination in life or in art openly. Female artists were expected to play the role of wife, lover, helpmate and caretaker first, and that of professional artmaker last, if at all."

A smile appears on her face like the winter sun on the River Volga. "I wasn't thinking of a career. There was no struggle. I felt fortunate to be around people who I looked up to, that I loved and admired. Elaine and Bill, Richard Gilman. And Barney (Barnett Newman) would often be there. . . . I was always listening, always learning."

"Look," she says, exuding a warmth I never felt from my own grandmother, "I grew up in the Bronx, during the 1930s. We were Russian jews, they would go to the park and play mah jongg. I'd pretend I had to use the john, and sneak up to my aunt's apartment and read her books. I remember one title — *Quiet Flows The Don*. There were about three books in our own house: a book Mussolini's mistress wrote, a Dickens, and a Mark Twain you got with grocery store coupons. If you paid a little extra you could get the embossed version."

I'd made my way down to the tenements of the art world, on West 20th Street hard by the Hudson River, to meet with Drexler on the occasion of the opening of her most comprehensive museum exhibition yet. The show, organized by Katy Siegel and Caitlin Julia Rubin, is beautiful and sensitively curated. One sign of their curatorial savvy: only one of Drexler's late '80s paintings was included. For me, they are a low-water mark in an otherwise stellar painting career. Her works at the Rose Art Museum show from 2012 and later signal a zesty return to form.

Drexler's most important works in the exhibit are the '60s paintings, rendered in rectangles of vivid, primary colors, atop which collaged images culled from newspaper photographs have been arranged, and painted on. Source imagery ranges from the ambulance-chasing mid-century news photographer Weegee's back alley tableaux, to anonymous figure groupings chosen, explains Drexler, "for no particular reason except that I liked how they looked." Pop culture sources abound — Chubby Checker, movie posters — but is Drexler a Pop artist?

Asked to define Pop, she warms to the task: "I don't, nor have I ever found myself needing to define Pop art. Others have had a go at it, and left the remains sulking in half-lit corners, waiting to be claimed. I'm still musing on the meaning of 'Pop Goes The Weasel.' I don't have the inclination to consider myself needing to be categorized. Whatever pocket I manage to roll into, I don't give a damn. Just because there is an overall name/designation doesn't mean it will help in understanding a work."

Susan Sontag, in her book Against Interpretation, characterized Drexler's dramatic works (it also applies to her visual pieces) as "fast, witty, with vitality, insouciance and joy, and full of an irreverence (for art)." Sontag's vision of Pop art as "an exhilarating freedom from moralism" lands right in Drexler's wheelhouse.

"One great virtue of the Pop art movement," Sontag argues, "is the way it blasts through the old imperative about taking a position toward one's subject matter."

Asked whether she considers herself primarily a literary or a visual artist, Drexler needs about a nanosecond to think it over: "Once again, I don't put anything I do on a scale. At the time I am working (at writing or painting) I don't stop to qualify it's importance in my life, or how it will be judged beyond the study or studio. There is no final analysis. Even after death there is a shifting of opinion, and critical quibbling. It's stupid busy work for so-called experts in the field."

Much of the work appears to traffic in political and cultural commentary and critique, but Drexler warns against such easy assumptions. When I pointed out that a painting such as "Rape" (1962) appears to depict a black man attacking a white woman, suggesting a statement about race relations, she demurred — "You think he's black? Are you sure? I don't think so."

There can be no such ambiguity regarding a work like "Put It This Way" (1963), with its in-your-face image of a man slapping a woman's face. The source material recalls the realistic cartoon characters that populate Roy Lichtenstein's work.

But is the work "about" violence against women? Drexler won't commit. "Meanings come later," she submits drily. "But if that's what you think it means. . . . okay."

The exhibition also features little seen works, such as a group of primitive, mostly abstract sculptures from the '50s. Drexler remembers trying to drum up attention for the pieces around 1959: "I took them around to the Museum of Modern Art, and set them up in the hallway by the offices. I thought they might get noticed, and someone would discover me. I was so naive," she smiles.

Co-curator Rubin's catalogue essay examines Drexler's sculpture closely, giving us a detailed look at the artist's formative years. It is understandable why this grouping makes sense in the context of the exhibition, and Rubin has scrutinized the pieces with impressive scholarship. But, on their own, the sculptures do not measure up to the paintings. Not even close. They resemble the work of many other artists of the period.

Drexler comments: "I did sculpture early on, in the '50s. I got encouragement, people liked it. I didn't regard the sculpture very highly. It was just too easy. I did it, I was satisfied, I left it." "You see," she continues, "I never went to art school — I wasn't against it, it was just never offered. If Hans Hofmann had offered me a scholarship, I probably would've been pushing and pulling with the best of them. But it would have ruined me"

She may well have bumped into Hofmann during her early years showing her work in Provincetown, MA, where she was something of a rising star in the summer art colony. "I had a one-woman show for Ivan Karp at OK Harris there in 1963. I came up from New York a week early, and didn't have enough work for the space, so I went out onto the beach to gather materials. I pulled it together. After the opening we all went to the A-House, have you been there? Helen Frankenthaler would be there dancing with David Smith. I was quite friendly with the owners (Reggie and Mira Cabral) — everybody knew everybody. It was so lively, so friendly. And the drinking was very heavy — all those guys drank an awful lot."

Getting attention for her art was never a serious problem; she showed at key galleries alongside all the big boys. She was in early New York shows with Warhol, Jim Dine et al, but somehow she did not ride their wave to fame. Critics such as John Yau offer an explanation of sorts for this lack of notice. "I wonder if the reason Rosalyn Drexler isn't better known is because she's so good at so many different things," he suggests, though not wholly convincingly.

Why isn't Drexler a household name in artsy homes that care about such things? Yau is perhaps closer to the mark when he points out that she made work heedless of what was popular at the time. Or as he puts it: "Drexler was making terrific work in the late '80s that doesn't align with any of the styles of that period."

In truth, her late '80s work is her weakest measured against the totality of her oeuvre. So it's possible that she ventured so far outside of the parameters of what is considered to be 'good' art that everyone felt free to dismiss her. For years. And because timing is everything, when interest began to lag for her artwork she began to concentrate on her writing, to great success; plays in the dozens, some winning awards and critical kudos; novels tripped from her typewriter seemingly without effort. ("Oh no," she retorts, "what you call breezy writing is the result of many drafts, carefully edited.") Had Drexler never picked up a paintbrush she would still have a solid place in literary and cultural history.

Could it be her sensibility ran counter to the period's jokiness? Her Pop period paintings such as "The Rescue" (1963), with its stark depiction of first-responders trundling away a stretcher-case, has what Drexler terms "gravitas," a quality very much off-program in the Pop milieu.

Or you could take Ken Johnson's opinion, put forth in his New York Times review of the 2010 *Seductive Subversion* show of women Pop artists at the Brooklyn Museum: "there were no women producing Pop art as inventively, ambitiously, and memorably as their male counterparts."

Take or leave Johnson on that opinion. I do subscribe to his observation that Drexler's "figures lifted from news photographs and isolated on flat, gridded, Mondrianesque backgrounds anticipate the cool Neo-Pop of Pictures Generation artists like Robert Longo and Sarah Charlesworth."

Especially Longo. Walking into the galleries at the Rose Art Museum, the resemblance is so strong that at times you think you might be at a Robert Longo "Men In The Cities" exhibition. Though, of course, Drexler's work predates Longo's by decades. To put a sharper point on the observation — drop a Longo onto a Barnett Newman zip-painting and voila, you have a Drexler — not that she would agree with that equation.

Our conversation zig-zags to Gauguin, Van Gogh's letters, the place of artists in history.

I wondered aloud how she knows so much about art-history. "I read, I visit museums, I discuss it with my friends. Hey, what do you think about Installation Art," she asks me, then doesn't wait for an answer. "Are you kidding me? That girl with the bed (Tracey Emin), I mean, c'mon! Who gives a fuck?"

We touch on the world of academia and the way in which it homogenizes creativity; the 'MFA affect' as I term it, where you have a generation all making the same paintings, and who seem to worry more about which art colony to apply to next than whether their work rings true.

Drexler: "I have nothing bad to say about residencies; I was very glad to receive a Bunting Fellowship from Radcliffe. It was a very nice feeling, of recognition, and a sense of freedom to work. I'd never had a studio of my own — I still don't! — I always had to share. And it was nice receiving little packets of money in my mailbox from them. Helped me along."

I'm considering a 25-inch wide shelf of books on Pop art, the art of the '60s, and women artists. None of which mention Drexler. She shows me Alastair Sooke's 2015 book, *Pop Art: A Colorful History*, in which she is indeed prominently featured. Good news for her.

However there's a little problem. Though the author is a Courtauld Institute art historian, he still describes Drexler, in the jacket-copy no less, as "lady wrestler Rosalyn Drexler." That overstates the case — Drexler says she wrestled only a few times. Frankly, it is a characterization she wishes would go away. Meanwhile, the 'branding' has devolved into a facile marketing hook for lazy journalists and museums. Shouldn't someone research Drexler's time on the mat fully and close the book on the subject? Catalogue essayist Kalliopi Minioudaki is maddeningly vague on the topic: "matches as far away as Florida and Ohio." Do these matches have dates and places? Who won?

Drexler comments with derision on the wrestling label: "Forget the wrestling bit. Foolishness of youth. Did it on a bet. Short time doing it. Don't remember how long or how many. Now it follows me as if I really give a damn. Cause I don't." Yes, indeed.

If you want to know about Drexler and wrestling, read *To Smithereens*, her 1972 pseudo-roman a clef about the world of women's wrestling. It is textbook Drexler, a stream-of-consciousness hellride through the culture-scope. Yes, she channels Terry Southern and Charles Bukowski, with a whiff of Bruce Jay Friedman — still, the book is an original. It's a compelling page-turner, not so much in the sense of 'I care about the characters and what's going to happen to them,' but rather because what you already read blew your mind, and what's coming next?

Critics tackling Drexler always cite her books, including mentions of how her volumes were "widely read and discussed." Norman Mailer, a pal of hers, cited her as "America's most audacious, vivacious, and crazy writer." (She told me that whenever Mailer would see her on the street, or at an event, he'd come up to her and drop down into a boxing pose.) Question is, how many people today have read her any of her books?

Drexler waxes resigned on the topic: "There is no readership out there anywhere . . . I don't know of anyone who has read anything I've written (except for some movie reviews, articles, etc). I'm not out on the shelves with the other literary hopefuls, though I recently published Three Novels (a reprint of a trio of early works) from Verbivoracious Press. And *To Smithereens* has been reprinted. . . . One of the books that influenced me (recently) a great deal was *Mrs. Caldwell Speaks to Her Son* by Camilo José Cela.

"From childhood on I've always wanted to be a writer. Practically lived in libraries. Sunny Saturday mornings were best, when the librarian would read to us (children). I would sometimes just go past the shelves looking at the titles of books, overcome with desire to have something of mine up there, cuddled by books just waiting to be read. The fairy tale books were color coded. I read every one of them. I found Bomba the Jungle Boy exciting, Nancy Drew was teenage involvement. The foreign books, French and Italian were mysterious, even in translation, and chock full of detail: Colette with her gardens and affairs, Balzac with his droll tales, Joyce and his discovery Italo Svevo (*As A Man Grows Older*), the Ionesco plays, Nathanael West (*The Dream Life of Balso Snell*), Alice (or *Through the Looking Glass*), Gogol (*My Childhood*), *Grey's Anatomy*, Perelman's short stories, assorted Kafka."

"I was an avid reader — that's how I got to write a novel in the first place. All I had to show for years as a writer was a story I dictated to my mother about two kids lost in a department store, and a school assignment about a visit to Governor's Island, a few descriptive paragraphs going nowhere. But I met someone who asked me to write a novel. He meant it. Came back two years later with a contract. So I made myself do it. I managed to write my first book. The publisher was Grossman who also published Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed* (among many others)."

"There was no rejection. Any book I wrote was published. I was encouraged (mostly by my close circle of friends). Nowhere, no how did I even dream of being an artist. It sneaked up on me. My work has a hidden agenda, the narrative is more than I reveal, than is seen or heard. The viewer must intuit the rest of the story. But I want the painting to demand attention. To live again. After all, the images have been captured and held tight. Hidden. It might be a cruel thing. Release can only come when the viewer is moved by the image. Most of all I have fun. Writing, painting, any creative activity is grist for the mill."

"I wouldn't know how to interest a publisher in republishing my books. I'm unknown. Not in the right category. I've been working on a book (a few years) that resists understanding, yet I don't want to let go."

I notice her carefully wrapping up the uneaten half of her sandwich. Are you taking that home? "I was going to," she says, looking suddenly a little worried, "why, do you want it?"