

HYPERALLERGIC

Rosalyn Drexler's Noir Paintings

by John Yau March 15, 2015



Rosalyn Drexler, *Money Mad* (1988), acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 26 x 30 inches

I wonder if the reason Rosalyn Drexler isn't better known is because she is so good at so many different things. We recognize such mastery in men, but rarely in women. Drexler is a novelist, whose books include *I Am the Beautiful Stranger* (1965) and the critically acclaimed *To Smithereens* (1972), based on her experience as a professional wrestler, Rosa Carlo, "The Mexican Spitfire" — a book that I reprinted in 2011. She has also received an Emmy Award for her screenwriting and several Obie Awards for her plays. Finally, Drexler is a painter whose work of the 1960s is central to Pop art.

Even as Drexler's paintings from this period were getting rediscovered, most recently in *Rosalyn Drexler: I Am the Beautiful Stranger, Paintings from the 1960s* at Pace/Wildenstein (March 16–April 21, 2007), which I reviewed for *The Brooklyn Rail*, and in the important group show *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958–1968* (January 22, 2010–April 3, 2011), whose tour included stops at the Brooklyn Museum and the Sheldon Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska, her work seemed to disappear from the public.

And yet, she never stopped painting, and the current exhibition, *Rosalyn Drexler: Vulgar Lives* at Garth Greenan (February 19–March 28, 2015) goes a long way towards setting the record straight. By including paintings and collages from 1959–65, the heyday of Pop art, and from 1988–89, when many were lamenting painting’s fallen status, the exhibition suggests that Drexler has been painting all along, and that we know only a small fraction of her work. Although nearly a quarter of a century separates the two bodies of work, there are certain stylistic continuities and thematic preoccupations, even as the work shifts in unexpected ways. One continuity for Drexler, a self-taught artist, has to do with her aesthetics. According to the artist:

I adored my coloring books [. . .] I was addicted to outlining the pictures in contrasting colors, and enjoyed staying within the lines. Needed the control. My work begs for control. After all, I captured the images and buried them: now they want to escape. They lie layered and still, unable to move. They are contained and I can breathe a sigh of relief.

In her paintings from the 1960s, Drexler’s coloring book aesthetics led her to apply areas of flat color, which evoked the paintings of Barnett Newman as well as the film posters of Saul Bass. The isolation of the figures against a bright monochromatic ground also suggested stage sets and film stills. As I wrote in my review in *The Brooklyn Rail* (April, 2007):

Drexler’s sense of placement and space is always on the mark. In *Marilyn Pursued By Death* (1963), Monroe is striding towards the right hand corner, trying to escape a paparazzo, who is just a step or two behind her. Both are wearing sunglasses and their bodies—a single two-headed form—are outlined by a red aura. They are dressed alike, a white blouse and shirt, blue skirt and blue pants. Derived from a photograph, Drexler reduces the figures to lights and darks, their faces to gray and greenish-gray; they exist somewhere between photograph and cartoon, but always in paint.

While Drexler derives her figures from the mass media, her placement of them animates the composition. In this regard, they differ from the paintings of Warhol, which exude an aura of stillness, of an arrested moment.

In the lurid painting *Self-Defense* (1963), in which a woman, whose breasts are exposed, is on top of a man, pushing down on his head with one hand while trying to fire a pistol with the other, the noir sensibility seems inspired both by film and hardboiled novelists such as James M. Cain, Jim Thompson and Cornell Woolrich. One of the central motifs of film noir and hardboiled crime fiction is the woman of questionable virtue. The gun-toting woman in *Self-Defense* shares something with Drexler’s other women; they are tough as nails, even when they are at the mercy of a vampire or mobster.

In a later painting, *Money Mad* (1988), with its allusion to the phrase “mad money,” which women carried in case a date ended badly, the placement of three figures against the abstract ground evokes a stage on which a violent melodrama is being played out. Greatly outsized in comparison to the three figures, the two one-dollar bills floating above them, one crumpled and the other flat, become props, a key to the narrative. Meanwhile, two overlapping hands in the foreground, one white and the other gray with red fingernails, add another layer of complexity into the melodrama. This is one of Drexler’s great strengths. For all their luridness and violence, her narratives remain open-ended; viewers can speculate about the story, but that is all they can do because the story never reveals itself.

In another painting from the 1980s, *Night Visitors* (1988), a figure on a couch faces a large black, rectangular opening, where a group of four men in suits walk down a winding path towards her. Is it a dream, a memory, or something she has seen? Again, a stage is suggested. I am reminded of William Shakespeare’s line from *As You Like It*: “All the world’s a stage./ And all the men and women merely players.” We want to know what is going on, but there is no answer forthcoming.

It seems to me that Drexler’s knowledge of theater and film influenced her painting, that there was a cross pollination going on among the various disciplines she worked in. What is also evident is that even though her paintings were largely unknown, Drexler was making a terrific work in the late 1980s that doesn’t align with any of the styles of that period. Given the small but revelatory group of later paintings included in this exhibition, isn’t it time a museum put on an exhibition devoted to Drexler, who is now in her late 80s? Isn’t it time we find out what she has been up to all these years?