

## Vulgar Lives — Rosalyn Drexler at Garth Greenan Gallery

By Joshua Bell March 18, 2015



*Marilyn Pursued by Death* (1963), acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 50" x 40"

[Joshua examines an exhibition of Drexler's work spanning the heyday of Pop Art to the late '80s, when painting was no longer in vogue. – the artblog editors]

At Garth Greenan Gallery, Rosalyn Drexler presents the absurd and ominous in a comic-like manner in her most recent exhibition, *Vulgar Lives*, bringing together work that spans several decades. Her works border on violent and vulgar, highlighting central themes such as violence against women, racism, and social alienation. Her use of bright colors and whimsy juxtaposes these serious topics in an amusing way — a practice common among Pop artists. Drexler brings together reality and invention, which, according to her, is the human experience; she claims that “Vulgar Life is life itself.” It is uncouth and unrefined.

### **Drexler's details**

Drexler, nee Bronznick, was born in the Bronx in 1926, where she remained until she withdrew from Hunter College in 1946 to marry artist Sherman Drexler and move to Berkeley, California. Her artistic career began shortly thereafter, through experimentation with found-object sculptures. While living in California, she also undertook a brief stint as a professional

wrestler under the pseudonym Rosa Carlo. Her experiences there would later serve as fodder for her critically acclaimed novel *To Smithereens*. The novel, in turn, inspired the 1980 film “*Below the Belt*”.

Upon returning to New York City in the 1960s, Drexler began to explore painting as a medium, identifying with Pop Art. Not only was Drexler a pioneer Pop artist, she was also one of the few recognized female artists of the time period, often serving as the only woman in exhibitions that would feature male artists such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Claes Oldenburg. Similarly to her peers, Drexler culled her images from a variety of popular sources — newspapers, magazines, and advertisements — and appropriated them to fit her needs. However, unlike her Pop contemporaries, Drexler worked with these images directly, pasting them onto her canvases and painting over them.

For more on her technique, history, and personality, see the 2004 artblog interview conducted by Roberta Fallon.

Drexler has had over 15 solo exhibitions and countless group shows in museums and galleries throughout the country. Many Philadelphians will remember her 2004 solo exhibition at the University of the Arts’ Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, *Rosalyn Drexler: To Smithereens, Paintings 1961–2003*. She returned to Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery again in 2011, where she was a major part of the exhibition *Seductive Subversion: Women of Pop*.

### **Tension highlighted by monochrome backdrops**

Drexler depicts her subjects in a very straightforward manner, usually against monochromatic backgrounds. The figures appear uncomfortable and still, isolated in a foreign scene. The saturnine scenes are further augmented by the exhibition’s curation, with works sparsely hung upon stark white walls and strong white lighting. A glance across the room confuses the mind: vibrant colors that grab the viewer’s attention are juxtaposed with scenes of death, rape, and assault. Empty purple, blue, and green faces stare. Death is hot on the heels of a smiling Marilyn Monroe in “*Marilyn Pursued by Death*” (1963) — a reminder that the true human experience is ephemeral.

“*Self Portrait*” (1964) stands out among her group of canvas works. The figure is silly and sexual—with soft baby-blue skin, black garters and stockings, and a subject that engages the viewer through an outward stare—yet tinged with anxiety and sadness. Here, Drexler is explicitly satirizing the way women were depicted in mass media and pornographic material. The blue of her skin makes subtle reference to “blue movies,” a slang term at the time for pornographic films (See Andy Warhol’s “blue movie” of 1969, in which he films Viva and Louis Waldon engaged in sexual intercourse).

### **Lesser-known works**

In other works, such as “*Self Defense*” (1963), violence is more evident, while humor is more reserved. An exposed white woman with a fashionable blond bob aggressively defends herself against a supposed black male attacker. However, the truth of who is attacking whom is left unanswered. She straddles the man, leaving deep, bloody gashes across his face while both fight desperately for a pistol. As is typical of her style, Drexler offsets this drama through the use of a calm, royal-blue background, completely isolating the two figures.

In addition to her larger canvases, Drexler has also included a series of small thumbnail-size paintings and paper collages. Some are simple and banal, such as “*Figure Reading*” (1960) or “*Last Furlong*” (1960). Others have much darker and deeper implications, such as “*Over There*” (1960), in which an accusatory hand points into the distance, creating a simple whodunit for the viewer to ponder.