

# Rose Art Museum presents Rosalyn Drexler: *Who Does She Think She Is?*

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*Climbing Out of a Painting Ain't Easy*, 2012. Courtesy the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

The Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University will present the historic, monographic exhibition *Who Does She Think She Is?*, a long-overdue retrospective of Rosalyn Drexler's multidisciplinary practice, February 12–June 5, 2016. Showcasing Drexler's major paintings and collages as well as her captivating early sculptures, award-winning plays and novels, and photographic and video documentation of the flamboyant performance aspects of her life and work, the exhibition is co-curated by Rose Curator-at-Large Katy Siegel and Curatorial Assistant Caitlin Julia Rubin. An opening reception will be held on Thursday, February 11, 2016 from 5–9pm.

Drexler was an active participant in New York's artistic scene of the 1960s, and her collages and large format paintings—which borrow imagery from movies, advertisements, and newspapers—reverberate with the Pop art of her contemporaries. Yet Drexler's work unfolds personal and social conflict with a political consciousness rare in the cool art of that moment and an explicitness that fearlessly courts vulgarity, anticipating the feminism of 1980s appropriation art, as well as its photographic techniques. A vivid portrait of both Drexler's singular artistic persona and the histories in which she has played a vibrant role, *Who Does She Think She Is?* will show Drexler to be both a sharp critic of and a joyful participant in contemporary American culture of the past 50 years.

Rosalyn Drexler (b. 1926) has always moved between worlds. In the late 1950s and early 60s, she showed sculpture at New York's Reuben Gallery, a gathering place for artists like Allan Kaprow, Robert Whitman, and Claes Oldenburg, who combined installation and performance with an engagement in traditional media. Drexler took part in exhibitions, Happenings, and theatrical productions at Reuben Gallery and Judson Church. Her engagement with performance, however, precedes her years as a visual artist: her brief stint as the female wrestler 'Rosa Carlo, the Mexican Spitfire' in the early 1950s (a quasi-performance in its own right), was the subject of a photo essay in a 1957 issue of *Ultra* magazine and memorialized by Andy Warhol in the series *Album of a Mat Queen* (1962).

While her sculptures were received with enthusiasm and encouragement from her peers, in the early 1960s Drexler turned her attention to painting, building compositions from the groundwork of collage—found images cropped, layered, and emphasized with paint. Drexler's collages and large format paintings of the 1960s depict conflict and sexuality with unusual frankness. Reverberating with Pop art, Drexler's work exceeds the conventions of that category to include technology and politics, crossing hardedge painting with direct depictions of sex, violence, race, femininity, and masculine power in postwar America. The exhibition follows her work through the present moment to her most recent paintings, which are dream-like, retrospective and introspective all at once.

Drexler has long been a cult literary figure, and her visual sensibility is related to literary models that include theater of the absurd and Samuel Beckett; avant-garde peers such as Whitman, Oldenburg and playwright Maria Fornes; and the popular American culture of J.D. Salinger, B-movies, and *Rocky* (for which she wrote the novel, rendering the anti-hero impotent). In Drexler's writing the gendered role-playing of her paintings becomes outrageous melodrama, crossing high and low genres to include avant-garde theater, writing for television (including an Emmy-winning Lily Tomlin special), and novels both experimental and popular.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully-illustrated monographic catalog, offering a comprehensive look well beyond the scope and scale of the exhibition, treating in detail the development of Drexler's work to date. The catalog includes an introduction by Katy Siegel; an essay by novelist Jonathan Lethem on Drexler's writing; an appreciation by Hilton Als; and new scholarship by Michael Lobel, Kalliopi Minioudaki, Caitlin Julia Rubin, and Allison Unruh that ranges across five decades of Drexler's art.

## About the Artist

Bronx-born artist Rosalyn Drexler first began exhibiting her work in the late 50s, showing sculpture at New York's Reuben Gallery and at the O.K. Harris Gallery in Provincetown, MA. In the early 1960s, she transitioned to painting, incorporating images culled from a variety of popular sources by copying and collaging found graphics directly onto her canvases.

In addition to her work as a visual artist, Drexler is an accomplished novelist and playwright. She won three Obie Awards for the Off-Broadway productions *Home Movies* (1964), *The Writer's Opera* (1979), and *Transients Welcome* (1985). Drexler was awarded an Emmy for writing excellence for Lily Tomlin's 1974 television special *Lily* (co-written with Richard Pryor). She has also authored the novels *Vulgar Lives* (2007); *Art Does (Not!) Exist* (1996); *Bad Guy* (1982); *The Cosmopolitan Girl* (1975); *To Smithereens* (1972); and *I am the Beautiful Stranger* (1965). Drexler published *Rocky*, the novelization of the screenplay, under the pseudonym Julia Sorel.

Her work can be found in the collections of museums such as The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Wadsworth Athenaeum, The Greenville County Museum of Art, Colby College, The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and The Walker Art Center. She is represented by Garth Greenan Gallery.