

HYPERALLERGIC

Caught Up in Rosalyn Drexler's Dramatic Moments

by Leah Triplett Harrington May 17, 2016



The Defenders, 1963. Courtesy the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

WALTHAM, Mass. — *Who Does She Think She Is?* is a remarkable monographic exhibition of Rosalyn Drexler's varied work. Organized by Curator-at-Large Katy Siegel and Curatorial Assistant Caitlin Julia Rubin at Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum, the exhibition showcases Drexler's better-known paintings in context with her collages, drawings, and sculpture, in addition to her scripts, screenplays, novels, and photographic ephemera. Drexler began producing this wide range of works in the 1950s, and together, they demonstrate her fascination with the duality of gender, the fluidity of identity, and the precise moment of action.

"All of Drexler's work stresses character or role — her own included — over narrative as a naturalizing effect," writes Siegel in the exhibition's generously illustrated catalogue. Drexler's interest in person over place is clearly articulated in the exhibition's opening section, "Love and Violence," installed inside the Rose's first floor. Large but not histrionically so, these works teeter towards abstraction but prevail as figurative renderings of intensely private moments.

Drexler foregrounds her compositions with figuration, isolating people within abstracted color fields as if she'd plucked them from their lives and placed them into voids of paint. The figures are all caught in the middle of something: some action (a slap, a kiss, a struggle with a gun) or some manifestation of a private, interior presence (daydreams, mourning, fantasies). Many are framed by thin, boxy stripes of paint, which allow Drexler to focus our attention on these actualizations of emotion.

Often, these take the form of kissing or loving motifs. In "Embrace" (1964), the figures melt into one another, their affections visible in their hold. But it's her use of violence as a theme that is most powerful. In "Put It This Way" (1963), a man and woman are captured just as his hand strikes her face; the smack is felt through their contorted bodies. Perhaps the most vivid and potent work in the show is "Rape" (1962), a small picture of a man overpowering a woman, who, with her arms held down, attempts to defend herself with brandished teeth. Nearby is another small work, "Self-Defense" (1963), in which a partially bare-breasted woman struggles with her presumed attacker over a pointed gun, gnashing her teeth as she knees him and mashes his face. Likewise, in "I Won't Hurt You" (1964) and "Love and Violence" (1965), men and women are portrayed at the exact instant in which tension flashes into violence. Over and over, Drexler confronts us with the mercurial nature of heterosexual relationships, stressing male physicality and its potential for bodily domination of women. She interrogates the essential differences between the sexes, questioning what distinguishes one from the other.

Descending into the Rose's lower-level galleries, we're greeted by "The Syndicate" (1964), a large, two-panel work that shows a mirrored set of seated, suited men. As if gathered for a meeting, the men surround two white, oval tables, their postures attentive but relaxed, expectant yet inactive. "The Syndicate" is visually simple, but it captures an essential concentration of Drexler's: the inherent duality of identity. The piece expresses this duality all the way through: two panels, two sets of figures, two types of media, painting and collage. As with almost all of her paintings, Drexler cut images from magazines, posters, and other popular-culture print media and glued them to her canvas before painting over them. Looking closely at "The Syndicate," printed Ben-Day dots are visible, as are drips of glue and paint, recalling both Jackson Pollock and Roy Lichtenstein. Yet Drexler subverts any overt stylistic reference or homage to these painters: She undermines the identifiers by making them nearly invisible and entirely inconsequential. Similarly, the men are represented as almost entirely identical, which challenges their identities as singular, powerful businessmen. Drexler is slyly skeptical here, presenting the figures at the table as authoritative yet emasculated by sameness and inactivity.

Siegel and Rubin have divided the lower gallery, one floor below, into two thematic sections, "I Am the Beautiful Stranger" and "Bad Guy." The latter features several movie posters that served as Drexler's source material, one for the film *Twist Around the Clock*, another for *FBI Code 98*. The posters, which present vignettes of narrative, inspired Drexler's iconography and compositions, and their influence is present in almost all the nearby work. But unlike the posters' attempts to tell stories, Drexler hones in on the male figures, extracting them from their pop cultural homes and examining them in isolation, picking apart the allusions to character and reducing them to mere men.

In "Bad Guy," Drexler is particularly absorbed with the depiction of the male hand. "Over There" (1960) features a large hand dominating a small composition; the cuff of a business suit identifies it as male. With its forefinger extended, the hand points beyond the edge of the work; it is strong and authoritative but dwarfed in scale. In the *Men and Machines* series (1962–66), which depicts both of the titular subjects at work, Drexler gradually loosens her representation of the male hand into a more relaxed, painterly form. She's still interested in the form some 20 years later in "Money Mad" (1988), which is foregrounded by overlapping grey and white hands. Drexler's continued, emphatic imagery of hands demonstrates her underlying awareness of this body part as a connector, a communicator, a harmer, and a protector.

Drexler seems most captivated by hand-to-hand contact, as boxing subjects dominate her visual, literary, and theatrical work. Observing how Drexler evolved her perspective of boxers from close-up to long-range, Allison Unruh suggests in the catalogue that the artist is compelled by not only fighters, but their spectators as well. In her most recent work included in the show, "In the Ring" (2012), two boxers paused between bouts are almost completely subsumed by their audience, which is represented by yellow flickers in a black void. Though the spectators are entirely reduced, we sense their presence and enthusiasm as they excitedly anticipate the next jab or punch. This, coupled with the small scale of the work, intimately draws us in as spectators ourselves, forcing us to question our own feelings towards the commercialization of violence as entertainment. Drexler here seems just as interested in boxing as a spectator sport as she was in the 1960s, but her focus has shifted from the ruthlessness of the competitors to the bloodlust of their audience, and what that means to society at large.

Such introspection and reflection continue in the section "I Am the Beautiful Stranger," which is dominated by Drexler's self-portraits or portraits of the artist made by others. The most poignant of the latter is "Amazon" (1965), the late Sherman Drexler's portrait of his wife from behind, lithe and mid-dance and painted in varying shades of pink. This section also includes tenderly quirky sculptures, which Drexler began creating in the mid-1950s by assembling various items from her own household. Robust and tactile, these sculptures seem to hedge towards the human form while never fully materializing it. "Portrait of Rosalyn Drexler" (1960) offers an apparition of the artist as a disembodied head attached to a thin length of wood; her face can be found in the round of a soup spoon. Pieces of Drexler as a woman, wife, mother, competitor, athlete, chain-smoker, and writer are here, but they remain just that: particles that float separately even as they hang together.

In *To Smithereens*, Drexler's 1972 semi-autobiographical novel about her career wrestling as "Rosa the Mexican Spitfire," a frustrated art critic, Paul, struggles to define new art of the 1970s. Groping for words as powerful and elemental as "pop" or "minimal," Paul sometimes uses the phrase "Stop Art." The expression is appropriate for Drexler's works, which, be they painting, drawing, collage, performance, or writing, arrest action, catching and freezing one particular moment. Such moments, collected, are the essence of Drexler's visual work, which from the mid-century onward has questioned identity as a series of characters performed. Drexler's own stint fighting as Rosa, as well as her work as a screenwriter and her roles as wife, mother, and lover — the stuff of her character — are similarly palpable in quicksilver flashes that elude easy definitions. These pieces of performance come together, creating a chorus of identities that harmonizes in a conflicted but coherent whole in *Who Does She Think She Is?*.