

Why Do We Have to Go to Buffalo to See a Retrospective of One of NYC's Most Brilliant Pop Artists?

By R.C. BAKER DECEMBER 1, 2016



Lovers, 1963, acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 55 1/4 x 52 inches

Rosalyn Drexler has painted some of the best Pop art you've never seen. She's also written three Obie award-winning plays and won an Emmy (with co-writers including Lorne Michaels and Richard Pryor) for a Lily Tomlin television special, in 1974. Then there are her ten or so novels, with such playfully provocative titles as *To Smithereens*, *Unwed Widow*, and *Submissions of a Lady Wrestler* (she indeed spent a few months as "Rosa Carlo, the Mexican Spitfire" on the female wrestler circuit, in 1950), as well as her novelizations of other writers' successful screenplays, such as *Rocky and Dawn: Portrait of a Teenage Runaway*.

And now you can see a selection of her paintings, collages, novels (many with wittily designed covers by the artist herself), scripts of her plays, and documentary photos, brought together in a long-overdue retrospective, "Rosalyn Drexler: Who Does She Think She Is?"

Problem is, if you want to personally experience this astoundingly broad body of work (which ranges from 1957 through 2013), you'll have to take Amtrak to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo before January 29 of next year — which is the closest the show will come to Gotham since originating at the Rose Museum in Waltham, Massachusetts, and before moving on to a venue in St. Louis.

Drexler was born Rosalyn Bronznick to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents in 1926; her grandparents owned a secondhand shop in East Harlem, where, she told an interviewer in 2007, "I used to climb up to the loft where they kept the mattresses, and I hid there: warm, giggling, sure they'd never find me. . . . Grandpa used to buy stolen jewelry that he kept in boxes under the bed. There were diamond tie-pins, and gold watches. I heard the adults whispering about it." In a 1975 radio interview, she recalled that her family had ordered books by Dickens and Twain from coupons in one of the daily newspapers: "The deluxe edition, which meant it had a white binding with gold embossed stuff on it. And the art we had, which we also got from sending away to the newspaper, was a great big reproduction of a Turner seascape, which was like magic to me, it was just beautiful." Drexler grew up in the Marx Brothers era of vaudeville, reminiscing in the *New York Times* in 1971, "The sparkling gold lamé curtains would part, the big band came up from the pit playing as loud as anything I had ever heard. . . . The comedians were part clown, part aristocrat: poorly dressed, bummy. Calamity was funny. Calamity was deep. I could dig it."

Calamity. Fun. Depth — Drexler's oeuvre in a nutshell.

All the more reason it's a shame that a woman who has achieved success in such wide-ranging arenas is not being celebrated in her own hometown. (Now ninety, she lives and works across the Hudson, in Newark.) As one curator of this traveling exhibition explained in an email to the Voice, "Many New York City institutions responded to the show with enthusiasm, but — with schedules booked well into the future — were unable to add the exhibition to their existing rosters." It's no tribute to the city's museums that none planned such an important exhibition anytime in, say, the past quarter-century, since Drexler's work has been exhibited sporadically in the city, beginning with her first show at the downtown Reuben Gallery in 1960. Drexler had no formal training in either art or writing, but her husband, the painter Sherman Drexler, encouraged her to show the sculpture she was making from the detritus in the household junk drawer. Sales were elusive, however, and decades later she told an interviewer that she thought her problem was her chosen medium, not the boys'-club atmosphere of the New York art world: "Women were not bankable at that time. . . . In my naïveté, I thought it was because I was not a painter so I must make paintings."

Over the next few years, Drexler concentrated on developing a painting style that cribbed imagery from B-movie posters, which she enlarged and pasted directly onto the canvas and painted over with stark swaths of acrylic paint. This technique imbues a work such as *The Defenders* (1963) with a dynamic aura beyond the wiggly depiction of a grimacing gangster blasting viewers with a machine gun while nattily dressed lawmen aim their pistols ineffectually into the rich yellow background. The gold border of *In the Ring* (2012) encompasses a black square cut by a small gold rhombus sliced with dark figures, a gorgeously attenuated evocation of a boxing match. Drexler's subjects include hoodlums, the tragic celebrity of Marilyn Monroe, and both sexual assault and attraction — narratives that are always in danger of violent interruption from bright abstract shapes. The painting *Put It This Way* (1963), which features a man in a white suit slapping down a woman in an orange dress against a midnight-blue background far outstrips Lichtenstein's banal irony while matching Warhol for graphic brio — this is polymath Pop with sharp edges.

So if you can't make it to Buffalo, you can at least trek to the Strand and pick up the show's catalog, which is chockablock with color reproductions of Drexler's work, archival materials, and far-ranging essays by curator Katy Siegel, critic Hilton Als, and novelist Jonathan Lethem, among others. The tome serves Drexler's bold-as-all-get-out compositions fairly well — at least, as well as five- or seven-foot-wide canvases viscerally layered with paper, paint, and glue can be reproduced on eight-by-ten-and-a-half-inch pages. And being unable to see the show provides impetus to read scholar Kalliopi Minioudaki's barn-burning essay, which opens with the lines, "For more than half a century, Rosalyn Drexler has been contemplating with philosophical profundity and vernacular wit what she calls 'the human dilemma — hit or be hit.'" The art historian and curator includes a 2015 email from Drexler, who laments, "Art for art's sake is a joke these days — not too many artists willing to die in filth, covered by a pile of straw — they crawl out to die in full view of the public, hoping to get paid for it. . . . Artist — a reminder of all that was good and true but in the end useless."

Co-curator Caitlin Julia Rubin notes in her essay that a newspaper review of one of Drexler's first exhibitions portrayed her as a housewife and mother "with a 'lively imagination' (more an amusing example for her daughter than an artist of genuine merit)." Rubin quotes Drexler later pointing out that the male artists she knew were not as encumbered by family life: "It invades everything . . . making sure there's food. You do the laundry. I had to fit in to the interstices. Luckily I had energy for it all."

Drexler crammed more into interstices than most folks wring from their entire lives. Where did she find the time outside the studio to write so many novels? Drexler's fiction spans from 1965 to 2007; in 1975 Norman Mailer provided this blurb for *The Cosmopolitan Girl*: "I think Rosalyn Drexler is one of the most vivacious, audacious, and crazy writers we have." One of the joys of the exhibition catalog is the full-size reproduction of pages of her biting fiction, such as a scene from *I Am the Beautiful Stranger*, in which a teenager presents a gift from her brother to a young woman. "She said to read the note inside, and it said: 'A talisman for you to carry forever.' Before I even opened the package I swore I would. . . . I closed my eyes and peeled off the paper. It was heavy. It was a"

What a tease. Just like the rest of the catalog.

But you know what? Buffalo is only six hours away.

"Rosalyn Drexler: Who Does She Think She Is?" will be on display at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery until January 29, 2017. *Rosalyn Drexler: Who Does She Think She Is?*, edited by Katy Siegel, 224 pages, Gregory R. Miller & Co.