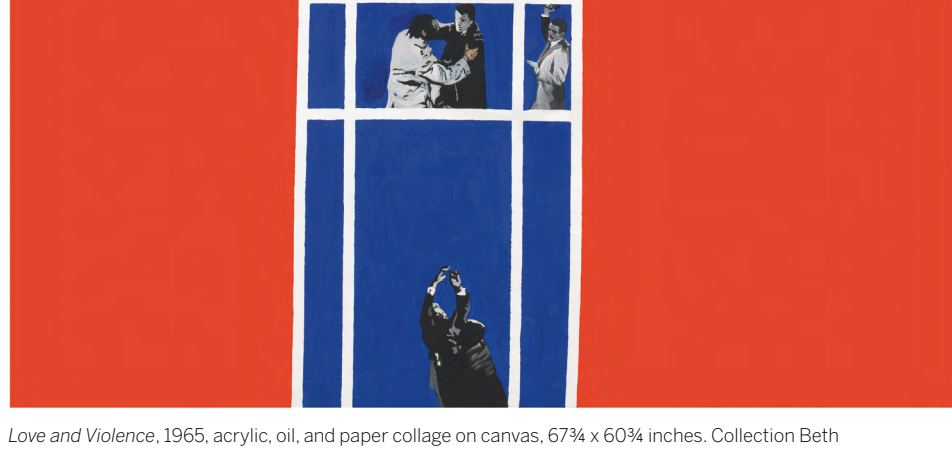


## Varieties of Reclamation

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

A survey of Rosalyn Drexler's six-decade career highlights paintings that meld hard-boiled Pop imagery and bold abstraction.



*Love and Violence*, 1965, acrylic, oil, and paper collage on canvas, 67¾ x 60¾ inches. Collection Beth

Of the many surprises that awaited visitors to this summer's Rosalyn Drexler survey at Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum in Waltham, Massachusetts, was a selection of three-dimensional work. Unlikely as it seems, this artist, known for many decades as a Pop painter whose canvases throng with violent, sensual imagery amid bright field of color, began her career working exclusively as a sculptor. Dating from 1958 to 1961, the sculptures on view were not the result of some ancillary detour branching off from painting but in fact represent an entire, autonomous body of work. Not only that, they offer insight into the beginning of Drexler's artistic life.

In the mid-1950s, Rosalyn and her husband, the figure painter Sherman Drexler, left New York City for the San Francisco Bay Area, where Sherman was attending UC Berkeley's BFA program. Rosalyn, who had dropped out of Hunter College after one term, was juggling art-making and raising a son and daughter. It was in Berkeley that Rosalyn began to build structures out of found debris. As she recalled in a 1971 *ArtNews* conversation with Elaine de Kooning:

I would go to city dumps and collect all sorts of rusty objects which I loved and I made a rusty flower garden in my house, odd shapes in vases, and I invited people to my home so to see my beautiful garden. There was a museum of very old pottery at the University at Berkeley and I wanted to have my own museum so I had to create all my own art. I wasn't aware of the art-world then or of other artists.<sup>1</sup>

Although Drexler, by her account, came to assemblage on her own, it is hard to believe that she didn't catch even a whiff of the assemblage aesthetic being pursued by many young California artists at the time. Unfortunately, all of her earliest sculptures seem to have vanished, though I like to imagine there is at least one of them, seriously rusted but still intact, waiting to be unearthed in a Berkeley backyard. The oldest work at the Rose was *Home Sweet Home* (1959), in which pieces of weathered wood that look like they once belonged to some larger functional object are surrounded by a frame of nails and rusted metal.

In an essay in the catalogue, Caitlin Julia Rubin (an assistant curator at the Rose who co-curated the show with art historian Katy Siegel, curator-at-large for the museum) writes that *Home Sweet Home* "suggests the duality of Drexler's home — the spaces where she lived never all that separate from the ones in which she worked — and her own, twinned role as homemaker and artist."<sup>2</sup>

In this single sentence, Rubin touches on several factors that are crucial for understanding Drexler's art and career. Let's start with the issue of spaces for living and working. During a long conversation I had with Drexler earlier this year, she revealed something that shocked me: apart from a few months in 1998 when she was artist-in-residence for a semester at Radcliffe College, she has never had a studio, that is, a space devoted exclusively to her art. Instead, she worked wherever she could, usually in the domestic spaces that she shared with her husband and children. Of course, many artists can't afford to have a separate studio space, but I never imagined that an artist with as long and significant a career as Drexler could have produced all her work under such conditions.

A second consideration to be taken from Rubin's sentence is Drexler's capacity for taking on multiple roles. In addition to "homemaker and artist" and "sculptor and painter" and, believe it or not, briefly "professional wrestler," Drexler has had an unusually diverse range of occupations in her life, most notably that of successful writer (plays, fiction, film criticism) during the 1970s. While painting has been the medium of expression to which she has always returned, Drexler appears to possess an unusual fluidity in terms of creative identity. It's one of the many ways in which she has been ahead of her time.

By 1960 Drexler was back in New York and having her first solo show at Reuben Gallery, a short-lived but significant enterprise that showed, among others, Jim Dine, George Segal, Robert Whitman, and Claes Oldenburg. Among the handful of tabletop works on view at the Rose were several that suggested Drexler had rethought her approach to sculpture by the early 1960s. Instead of found wood, she turned to plaster, often painting it gaudy colors. *Pink Winged Victory* (1960) features a balancing act of lumpy, intensely colored plaster shapes that reinterpret the Classical motif as an abstract (and, from one angle, unmistakably vaginal) form. *Happy Dance (Joie de Vivre)*, from 1961, is a flimsy decorative armature that includes a painting of a nude figure. In the early 1960s, polychrome sculpture was still anathema to many people. But along with Oldenburg, George Sugarman, and Anthony Caro, Drexler was clearly unafraid of brightly colored objects.

Still, it would be a mistake to view Drexler's sculptures exclusively in an art-world context. While she has cultivated some ties to the contemporary scene around her (most explicitly in a series of paintings of artists she made in the late 1980s), Drexler is motivated by larger issues, and has been from the beginning. Nothing reveals this better than some comments she made in the 1971 *ArtNews* conversation:

There's a cross I made out of wood and rusty metal, hanging in St. Paul's chapel on Vesey street in the financial district. People come and worship beneath it. It makes me feel very good. It was bought from my first show in 1960 and at the time, I couldn't believe that anyone else would want to own it. But I can understand it hanging in a church with all the gold and glitter and precious stained-glass windows. What has been discarded, used, thrown away, is still holy — if not holier. I think art and religion are very close — the spirit of reclamation and love.<sup>3</sup>

While religious iconography is absent from Drexler's post-1960 work, which revels in the vulgarity and violence of vernacular American culture, there is a "spirit of reclamation" in even her Pop work. Still, there is an undeniable break between Drexler's sculptures and her paintings, and the impulse behind that break speaks to the gender politics that permeate her work.

As Drexler explained to writer Roberta Fallon in 2004, when Reuben Gallery closed she watched as all the male sculptors who had shown there were taken on by other New York galleries. "I received no offers," Drexler recalled, because "women [sculptors] were not bankable at that time." And so, in a matter-of-fact, pragmatic shift she changed mediums, seemingly overnight. "In my naivete I thought it was because I was not a painter so I must make paintings."<sup>4</sup>

The Rose retrospective demonstrated what an impressive colorist Drexler is as a painter (which perhaps she was meant to be all along). Coming across Drexler's paintings singly, or even in solo gallery shows, doesn't prepare you for the chromatic intensity of her canvases, especially the mid-1960s paintings, which were the main focus of the exhibition. She turns up the retinal volume again and again in the grounds of her paintings — vast seas of cerulean blue edged by crisp white lines, or enveloping acts of domestic violence; equally riveting cadmium reds, oranges, and crimsons saturating the picture plane beneath angry gorillas, dancing Chubby Checkers, and kissing lovers; Day-Glo yellows that push up against sharp blacks as "bad guys" in black suits point guns and walk up and down staircases — and employs unusual compositional strategies to draw our attention to these expanses of high-key color.

Not always, but quite often, Drexler places the figures in her paintings at the very edges of the canvas. I'm thinking, for instance, of *Lovers* (1963), where the kissing couple of the title is corralled into the lower left-hand corner; the powerful *I Won't Hurt You* (1964) in which an image of male-on-female aggression is again positioned in the lower left; and *The Syndicate* (1964), a diptych that is one of Drexler's largest paintings, where the gathering of two dozen black-suited men is dominated by the bright yellow expanse above them.

Such asymmetrical, off-balance compositions can certainly be explained in relation to the narrative content of the paintings — as means of heightening the drama, disorienting the viewer, conveying a sense of isolation and alienation, and so forth. But after seeing them used so frequently I started formulating another kind of explanation. What if Drexler were shifting her figures so off-center simply to make room for her monochrome fields? Possibly she was making more room for herself to paint them and for us to look at them. I began to think of her asking the figures in her work to step to one side so that she could better see the fields of color, as if she were a frustrated museum visitor whose view of an abstract canvas was being blocked by the people standing in front of it.

In fact, one of the most distinctive aspects of Drexler's 1960s work is her boldness in situating Pop imagery within the realms of Color Field and geometric abstraction. Writing in a brochure that accompanied a 2004 Drexler survey show in Philadelphia, Robert Storr noted how at times her "formats borrowed from contemporaneous hard-edge abstraction, in particular grid-based divisions of the picture plane that slyly allude to Barnett Newman . . . as well as Ellsworth Kelly and Al Held."<sup>5</sup> Storr, whose essay is full of perceptive comments about Drexler's work (as when he notes how the "vernacular" quality of her colors evokes "sideshow signage") is certainly correct in making the connection between Drexler and her abstract contemporaries, but we shouldn't let the existence of such strong affinities (whether with Pop or with abstract styles) distract us from the distinctive qualities of Drexler's art, especially when it comes to materials and process.

Look, for instance, at the roughness of the taped edges of *Home Movies* (1963), a detail that suggests not so much casualness as a refusal of or disinterest in conventional protocols of geometric abstraction. Featuring the gangster imagery that recurs in many of her paintings, *Home Movies* is a four-foot-tall, eight-foot-wide canvas (proportions similar to those of a movie screen, which is surely no accident, or a Newman painting, again surely by intention) in which violent-looking men (one wielding a tommy gun pointed straight at the viewer) are inserted into a blue, red, and white geometric abstraction. Drexler slips in a further stylistic variant by employing expressionistic brushwork for a couple of the figures; she also pursues her usual practice of shifting figures to the side (either of the entire painting or within gridded units) in order to give more scope to the fields of color.

Among the fifty or so paintings hanging on the walls of the Rose there was another component even more noteworthy than Drexler's electric colors or her stylistic joining of opposites — the figures themselves. It's here that one discovers Drexler's most effective technique: overpainting. It's generally thought that Gerhard Richter is responsible for the widespread contemporary practice of applying paint to photographs. In fact, Drexler started doing this in 1962, many years before Richter. Although casual viewers may not notice it at first nearly every figure in Drexler's paintings consists of a photographic reproduction glued on to the canvas and then overpainted so that what we see is not the reproduction but Drexler's version of the image. In layering what is essentially a handmade copy on top of the image itself, Drexler respects the original shape, carefully remaining within its contours, but she frequently introduces colors, and sometimes patterns (on clothes or furnishings) not present in the original.

One of the fascinating aspects of the survey is that the curators have tracked down many of Drexler's original sources — mostly movie posters — and included some of them in the exhibition. A poster for the 1961 movie *Twist Around the Clock* provided the dancing figures in her 1964 painting *Chubby Checker*; a quartet of men in suits and fedoras have migrated from the poster for *FBI Code 98* (1962) to a painting titled *F.B.I.* (1964). As is typical in Drexler's work, the compositions of the paintings are significantly different from those of the posters. Equally important, rather than simply collage the cutout images onto her paintings, Drexler had the figures she excised from posters enlarged by a photographic studio, and it was these blowups that she would glue to the canvas and paint over. The photo-enlarging process allowed the artist to freely scale up her paintings; it also exposed the printing process of the movie posters, visible sometimes where the paint doesn't perfectly cover the entire reproduction.

When asked by an interviewer in 2004 why she didn't outline or project her images — much simpler processes that were, then as now, widely employed by painters — Drexler noted how she "loved to feel the brush against the edge of the image."<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on the materiality of paint-on-photos seems to reach back to Drexler's beginnings in sculpture. In the same interview she spoke about the ontological and spiritual dimensions of her method: "I was hiding the image and giving it another face . . . like bringing the dead back to life."

A parenthetical observation: While there is nothing casual about Drexler's paintings — iconography and compositions are lucid and controlled — there is a sense of individually arrived-at technique that refuses any hint of a smoothly humming studio practice, any gallery-ready professionalism. Could this be, at least in part, the result of Drexler's neither highly attended art school nor worked in the realm of commercial art? It could be that a lack of formal training better positioned her to develop such an original method. At the same time, she is obviously deeply informed about art history: a thesis could be written, for instance, about the dialogue between the collaged letter motifs in her paintings and the legacy of Kurt Schwitters.

Although she never ceased to rely on preexisting images, Drexler described to Fallon sometimes feeling "very guilty" about building her paintings from "something not out of your head." The bias or the "original" image dies hard. Even today, after decades of appropriation-based art, some viewers are taken aback, at least momentarily, when they realize that Drexler is "merely" painting over borrowed images. But as they continue to look, and look more care-fully, initially skeptical viewers may come to realize the virtues of Drexler's technique. In a kind of reverse engineering, she transposes the mechanical into the handmade, reclaiming mediated images. Her paintings contain the photographic image while rendering it effectively invisible.

Why, I have to ask, would Drexler feel the need to reclaim her source images through the movements of her hand, to hide them, to give them "another face"? I propose that it has much to do with the violence pervading her 1960s paintings: dead gangsters, men shooting guns or punching each other, boxers in the ring, or, in some of her most memorable paintings, men slapping, violently subduing, or sexually assaulting women.

There is an important countercurrent in her work to the male-on-female violence of paintings like *Rape* (1962) and *Put It This Way* (1963). In *Take Down* (1963), *Lost Match* (1962), and *The Winner* (1965), she celebrates women wrestlers, finding in the supposedly tawdry and corrupt world of professional wrestling (a world that Drexler knows through firsthand experience) a vision of female empowerment. While the combatants in the wrestling paintings are all women, a small but powerful painting titled *Self-Defense* (1963), in which a pistol-wielding woman is living up a man, makes explicit the feminist content of the wrestling paintings and identifies the greatest threat to women's bodies and lives, and what they need to do about it. By no means do all of Drexler's scenarios involve such explicit conflict but they are always complex, as in her paintings of embracing heterosexual couples such as *Lovers* (1963) and *Kiss Me Stupid* (1964). As art historian Kalliopi Minioudaki observes in her contribution to the catalogue, "Drexler matched her exposure of women's abuse with critical contemplation of romance and its media stereotypes."<sup>7</sup>

One of the great challenges in depicting violence is how to navigate a double agenda: a desire to convey the real costs of violence (to its victims, to the society that permits it, and even to its perpetrators) and a desire to make great art, in the case of Drexler, formally beautiful art. The violence in Drexler's paintings arrives at a double remove: first as we have seen, she reclaims the original images through an intimate, even tender process of painterly lamination; second, she rarely uses images of actual conflict instead, most of her paintings depict staged violence drawn from the fictional realm of Hollywood films and TV gangster shows, which is in stark contrast to Andy Warhol's documentary-style "Death and Disaster" paintings. On the relatively rare occasions when she does use a real-life image (as in *Night Visitors*, a 1988 painting that depicts the bleeding corpse of mobster Bugsy Siegel amid cheery floral patterns and crisp geometry), it is transposed into a mise-en-scène intentionally far removed from everyday reality. This deployment of the fictional is yet another way in which Drexler has long taken prescient positions: she was asserting the triumph of the Spectacle decades before such insight became common in the New York art world and Baudrillard warned the world about "simulacra and simulation."

Given Drexler's focus on the fictional in her paintings, it's perhaps not surprising that in the 1970s she largely devoted herself to writing novels and plays. (The exhibition catalogue includes extracts from some of her writings, plus a hilarious text by novelist Jonathan Lethem — a big fan of Drexler's art and writing — which, appropriately, weaves together facts from Drexler's life and Lethem's own wild inventions.) Since the early 1980s, Drexler has looked ever more relevant — the work of the Pictures Generation artists, who emerged around 1980, seems like a direct continuation of her practice of appropriating imagery and creating a new work.

When she returned to painting with full force in the mid-1980s, Drexler created a series filled with masked figures. The current show includes one of these paintings, *Masked Trio* (1988), in which three elegant, cigarette-wielding gentlemen dressed in white tie sport gaudy and weirdly incongruous masks. The theme of the mask also turns up toward the end of Drexler's 2007 novel *Vulgar Lives* (mostly set in the luxurious ambience of Bellagio, Italy, but really concerned with the narrator's mourning her dead brother in New York). The narrator (who isn't explicitly Drexler but shares many facts of her biography) describes to her deceased brother the making of a painting:

You said that I should paint a self-portrait, something I was loath to do. Too literal, I thought, but then it occurred to me to paint a mask over my face — who would paint a self-portrait, then? So I took over the entire canvas — was seated there wearing a "beanie" with a large airplane top/center that could actually spin around. And yes, once again the artist is holding a paintbrush. She has on a bright blue shirt and a red tie. Her shoes are red leather. She is a traveler. She is on the move. But who is she?<sup>8</sup>

This expression of self-questioning, which is echoed in the subtitle of the current survey ("Who Does She Think She Is?"), may contain the secret of Drexler's remarkable ability to sustain such a rich oeuvre over so many decades. While many other artists seem to foreground their egos with assurance and, not infrequently, a strong dose of arrogance, Drexler has never ceased to leave the big questions open, to be ready to adopt whatever new role, whatever necessary mask, her art requires.

1 "Dialogue by Elaine de Kooning with Rosalyn Drexler," *ArtNews*, January 1971, p. 65.

2 Caitlin Julia Rubin, "Lost and Found," in *Rosalyn Drexler: Who Does She Think She Is*, ed. Katy Siegel, New York, Gregory R. Miller in association with the Rose Art Museum, 2016, p. 28.

3 On a recent visit to St. Paul's chapel I could find no trace of Drexler's cross sculpture, although the chapel, which is directly across the street from the World Trade Center site in Lower Manhattan, includes many shrimelike tributes to the victims of 9/11. "Dialogue by Elaine de Kooning with Rosalyn Drexler," p.66.

4 Roberta Fallon, "Rosalyn Drexler: You Couldn't Have Known My Work. How Could You?," Mar. 27, 2004, [theartblog.org](http://theartblog.org).

5 Robert Storr, "Pulp Pictures," in the brochure accompanying "Rosalyn Drexler: To Smithereens: Paintings 1961–2003," University of the Arts, Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, Philadelphia, 2004.

6 "Rosalyn Drexler: You Couldn't Have Known My Work. How Could You?"

7 Kalliopi Minioudaki, "Rosalyn Drexler: Madly and Transgressively Embracing the Vulgarity of Life," in *Rosalyn Drexler: Who Does She Think She Is?*, p. 88.

8 Rosalyn Drexler, *Vulgar Lives*, Portland, Chaismus Press, 2007, p. 131.