

At Ninety Years Old, Rosalyn Drexler Begins Again

It's time for yet another generation to discover the noir incandescence of a New York icon's painting and prose

By R.C. BAKER SEPTEMBER 5, 2017



Rub Out, 1982, acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

A one-woman American Century, Rosalyn Drexler contains multitudes: paintings, novels, plays, essays. She was born Rosalyn Bronznick, in the Bronx, in 1926, three years before the Roaring Twenties crashed into the Great Depression. It is staggering to consider even a minimal list of all that she has witnessed: Hopper, Pollock, Warhol; World War II, the Cold War, the War on Terror; jazz, rock, rap; FDR, JFK, Trump; fascism, feminism, and fascism again.

This week, “Rosalyn Drexler: Occupational Hazard” opens at the Garth Greenan Gallery, focusing on works from the 1980s right up to our current grisly decade. Drexler’s beyond-bold compositions specialize in illuminating the gloom, and so have arrived just in time. In 1982’s *Rub Out*, for instance, she deploys vibrant zones of red, yellow, and blue to frame a gangster gunned down in his tasteful gray ensemble of pinstriped trousers, topcoat, and hat.

“Occupational Hazard” can also be read as a definition of the artistic life. In a wide-ranging interview with the *Voice*, Drexler recounted some memorable, and wild, moments, including watching vaudeville acts and Busby Berkeley movies in her youth, and the time Franz Kline was so impressed with her first exhibit, in 1960, that he exchanged one of his ink drawings — splashed on pages from a New York City telephone book — for a small sculpture of hers. She recalled hanging out with John and Yoko and meeting Fred Astaire in their hotel room, and how one of Warhol’s “13 Most Beautiful Boys,” Freddie Herko, starred in her musical *Home Movies* shortly before he gave his final performance, by dancing naked out the window of a fifth-floor Cornelia Street apartment.

During our discussion I asked her about two small but high-octane paintings that could be seen as flip sides of the 1960s. In one, figures partially obscure bright-yellow letters — “TH BEAT” — angled as if painted on walls tightly enclosing a bandstand. A blank blue rectangle presses down from above, and although the photographic source is scraped almost to oblivion, a Beatles mop-top is instantly recognizable. At five by four inches, the piece is the same size as the newspaper image Drexler painted over, and yet the simple design — the Fab Four congeal into a burgundy blob that writes like a breaking wave — hits the eyes as exuberantly as the opening chord of “A Hard Day’s Night” smacks the cars. In the other, which is eighteen inches tall and was done a year later, in 1965, Drexler painted the robe of Pope Paul VI as a vessel enclosing a crowd of clergy and faithful. The scarlet garb flows like a river of blood through a featureless olive background, the perfectly pitched color contrasts — in their thrumming, agitated beauty — perhaps a metaphor for the machinations of the Vatican II reforms.

Drexler seems as amazed by these images as I am. Pointing to the Beatles piece, titled *Twist and Shout*, she asks her dealer, Garth Greenan, “Where did you find that? I had discarded this.”

After Greenan and I laugh in surprise, he explains that he discovered it amid the scripts, books, paintings, drawings, collage materials, family papers, and business documents piled in her old apartment, the sediment of a committed artist’s life. This collection of treasures and detritus had begun nine decades earlier, when Drexler was born into a Russian-Jewish immigrant family that was too poor to take in Broadway productions and so reveled in the vaudeville acts performing as warm-ups to the Hollywood extravaganzas shown in New York City’s huge movie palaces. During our interview she remembered that around the age of ten she’d been impressed by a Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy movie. (This would’ve been 1936, when the duo starred in the mega-hit *Rose-Marie*, the tale of an opera diva, a murder, and the Royal Canadian Mounties, most famous for the stars’ duet on “Indian Love Call.”) But Drexler had been even more wowed when “a live orchestra came up from the pit. This was all before the movie began. And then the burlesque acts, like the dog that wouldn’t listen to its master, and the minute the master left, the dog would jump through the hoop, on his own. And then came the shorts — Fu Manchu and such.” She also recalled lurid photos of dead gangsters on the front pages of the era’s newspapers: “I loved the way the bodies were laid out. And then catching the gangster who did it — the ones who were hiding their faces because they were guilty.” All of this energy — the farcical opening acts, the blaring music, the Hollywood spectacles, the scandal sheets — have suffused Drexler’s imagery and narratives for eight decades and counting.

Drexler went on to the High School of Music and Art, in Manhattan, and to Hunter College, where during her first year (and at only nineteen) she married the figurative painter Sherman Drexler, trading an art education for raising a family. This was the mid-1940s, and gender roles were not yet up for grabs the way they would be in the coming decades. A daughter would soon be born, followed by a son, and so Drexler, taking care of the eternal chores of family life, found herself making art in the margins, using the clowns and gangsters she loved in her youth as inspiration. In the mid-1950s, she began cobbling together comic sculptures from blobs of plaster, odds and ends in her junk drawer, and lead melted on the kitchen stove: “Stunk up the house, but I got some weird shapes.” Other than the trade with Kline, her first exhibition garnered few sales, and she naively determined that the problem must be that paintings were more popular than sculpture — and so, like many an unseasoned, searching artist, she changed mediums.

I asked why, back when she was thirty-eight, she had thought the tiny Beatles painting a failure. “I like it now,” she replied. “I’m seeing it with a more mature, more experienced eye. When I began, of course, I didn’t know too much, and I couldn’t judge my own stuff. I could only feel a certain way and delight in certain changes — ‘Oh, I think I’ll do this’ — the pleasure of creating it.”

Drexler might not have been the best judge of her own creations, but she had enough faith to persevere despite receiving little recognition for her powerful pop concoctions, derived from enlarged printouts of celebrities, boxers, mobsters, and couples both loving and battling. (In her sophisticated compositions, such emotions entwine and shift, grappling like wrestlers.) With half a century’s distance, Drexler’s interlocking forms from the early Sixties feel graphically more powerful than Roy Lichtenstein’s ham-fisted comic blow-ups, and there is more humanity in her hard-edged pop than in Tom Wesselmann’s softcore silhouettes, which are punctuated only with lips, nipples, and pubic triangles — woman as logo, sex as consumable as Campbell’s Soup.

Yet many male artists were moving on up while Drexler was having little success, and so she eventually took her themes of love, sex, violence, and family to the stage. Still a homemaker with two kids, she had motivation for her initial foray into playwrighting: “I had to stay home, and so I had to amuse myself, and I wanted to laugh.” Soon the world — or at least downtown New York — would sit down and take notice.

In 1964, Drexler won the *Village Voice* Obie award for Distinguished Play in a year of particularly tough competition, with Samuel Beckett winning Best Play and LeRoi Jones taking the prize for Best American Play. One Obie judge summed up Drexler’s inaugural effort: “Nearly indescribable, it moves impudently, and impishly, through marriage, the family, sexual quirks, and the interracial situation. Advertised as ‘a new musical romp,’ *Home Movies* might better be described as the first musical of the absurd.” Set in the “boudoir” of “Mrs. Verdun,” Drexler’s work traverses the social fault lines of the Sixties, such as when Mr. Verdun emerges from the bedroom closet, attracted not by his wife but by the “pomposity queen” character, Peter Peterouter, played by Herko. Drexler zeroes in on domestic power plays, having the frustrated wife lord it over her daughter and their African-American maid. The family name is undoubtedly a reference to one of the longest and bloodiest battles of the First World War, as well as a prescient acknowledgment on Drexler’s part that the sexual revolution and civil rights movement were sure to have plenty of casualties.

Over the following years, Drexler would go on to win two more Obies, plus an Emmy for writing on a Lily Tomlin comedy special; she also had her say in critical essays for this paper and many other publications. In 1971, the *Voice* sent her to cover the Town Hall fracas, where macho novelist Norman Mailer (a co-founder of the paper) squared off against a bevy of feminists. Drexler keyed on some of Mailer’s most bumptious pontificating — “With women, the difficulty is that any man who is a really superb lover can be about 90 percent as good to a woman as a lesbian.” But when the feminist theorist Germaine Greer stated that “the artists who made the Cathedral of Chartres or the mosaics of Byzantium . . . had no ego or name,” Drexler, who’d had some experience with her own painting being ignored, fulminated: “Ridiculous! They were well-known in their own time to each other and must certainly have had the ego to take pride in their own handiwork.” Elsewhere in the article, Drexler gives this theme of ego a forthright feminist slant: “The Egyptians knew that if you kill the name, you kill the person . . . which is why when Hatshepsut, the first greatest woman in history, a Pharaoh not a queen, died, her husband had her name removed from as many monuments, obelisks, and other statues of the Necropolis as he could.”

Later that year Drexler asked, in a pan of the film *Carnal Knowledge* that she wrote for the *New York Times*, a question that gets at the heart of both ancient and modern misogyny: “Do men hate women, only they don’t know it?” Drexler found the film’s dialogue and sexual maneuverings desultory and unconvincing: “But what we learn of the flesh that any self-respecting carnivore does not already know?” In her final paragraph, she noted, “Women accept paternalism as love.” But she’s having none of it as she closes: “Fight your own battles, but learn how to fight first. And above all, don’t believe the movies.”

During our interview, Drexler added that Jules Feiffer, who wrote the film’s screenplay, was not pleased with the review. “His wife called up and threatened me: ‘How dare you do that to my husband.’ But then, after they divorced, she called up and thanked me — ‘You really got it right!’”

Drexler took her own advice about fighting — in her mid-twenties she studied judo and toured briefly as a female wrestler under the nom-de-ring Rosa Carlo, the Mexican Spitfire. Having discovered through her earlier playwrighting that the pen was mightier than the hammerlock, she turned those experiences into her wrestling novel *To Smithereens*. Published in 1972, when Drexler was forty-six, the narrative centers on a female wrestler (also named Rosa) and on Cuban and an art critic with a fetish for robust women — “To be handled roughly by the last in line, the funky fat, the tough tomboy!”

By the early 1970s, Drexler had enough work in print that she could title an essay for the *New York Times* “Notes on the Occasion of Having ‘Line of Least Existence & Other Plays’ Remaindered at Marboro Book Shops.” The article relates her fears of putting her role as a painter on hold in order to transfer her artistic drive to the stage: “I wrote *Home Movies* in secret, at night, in a locked room as if I were gestating a bizarre mutant which only I could love. When it was produced in 1964 and other people dug it, I was amazed.” When the play moved to a tonier downtown venue, a producer demanded that she take out the word “friggin’,” fearing “it would offend the ladies from New Jersey who came in busloads to see New York theater.” Drexler refused, insisting that the “evil, obscene, dirty, salacious, repugnant, lewd, smutty WORD” would not overly corrupt “innocent voyagers from the celestial regions.” If the “male gaze” could be indulged through centuries of womanly flesh slathered across acres of canvas, Drexler would be damned if her “female voice,” as it were, would be censored. In this same article she mentions a connection to the Marx Brothers. “I was related to Chico: my father’s cousin was married to him. Chico’s mother, whom we called Tante, had once lived with my grandma, and they all considered it a kind of miracle that the ‘boys’ had become Hollywood stars.”

But then, in 1987, in a special issue of *Dissent* magazine subtitled “In Search of New York,” Drexler, now sixty-one, revealed a dark edge to her family’s reminiscences. When Rosalyn was a child her mother had had visions of her as another Deanna Durbin, a popular Hollywood songstress of the 1930s and ’40s, one of those stars the Bronznick family would have seen on trips to New York’s raucous movie theaters. Mrs. Bronznick took her daughter to meet Chico and had her sing “A Heart That Is Free.” Drexler wrote that after she gave her performance, “Chico took me into another room supposedly to discuss my career, and felt me up. It embarrassed me. ‘I don’t have too much up there,’ I said. Obviously it was enough for him. Well, actually I was mortified.” Despite this encounter with a celebrity who felt sexual favors were his for the taking, Drexler still took much from the Marx Brothers’ art: “the wordplay, the inspired non sequiturs, the irreverence. This influenced my work a great deal.”

Drexler brings a signature brand of crepuscular humor to her many novels. (There have been almost a dozen, starting with *I Am the Beautiful Stranger* in 1965, as well as novelizations of movie scripts, including Sylvester Stallone’s screenplay for *Rocky*.) Twenty-one years ago, in 1996, at age seventy, she wrote *Art Tells (Not!) Exist*, a meta chutes ’n’ ladders ride that reads in part like a visual-arts grant application. In a follow-up email, Drexler tells me she wants her notes to tease the reader “into remembering something. Making wisps of memories that are not hers/his. Believing what is put before them as if it is happening in real time. A written book is a magical vehicle of transportation: get off, get on.” And indeed, over the decades she has received numerous awards, fellowships, and grants. In the novel her droll prose captures the existential tedium of filing out seemingly endless forms and questionnaires, that feeling of time irretrievably lost on a low-probability quest — death not on the installment plan but measured out in filing deadlines. And for most of Drexler’s long career, the process of applying for largesse from rich foundations or government agencies involved brutally hot photofloods clamped to light stands, rolls of Fujichrome slide film, and light meters, cameras, and tripods, rather than an iPhone and a laptop. Add to that the typewriter ribbons snarling in your trusty Smith Corona and plenty of Wite-out to change a paragraph from self-aggrandizing to self-deprecating to self-destructive and it’s no wonder the main character in the novel, almost penniless and searching for a cheap apartment, says, “I’m thinking of putting myself in storage, but there’s no lock on the inside.”

Ten years ago — when she was eighty — Drexler wrote *Vulgar Lives*, in which the narrator discusses a painting she did of JFK before he was assassinated. First she has him standing up in his car, “waving to people who were waving their flags back at him — then on an impulse I painted him out — the people were waiting to see him, but he was gone — his car became a funeral car.” After the president’s murder, the character’s friends wonder if she “had pre-cognition. Well, I’ve never predicted anything, not even the success of a plate of spaghetti. Who owns the painting now? I don’t know.” In these lines Drexler gets at the fact that commercially successful artists will lose track of their works as collectors snap them up and auction them off. But unknowns know intimately each of the four relatives and three friends who own a piece of their artwork. And every artist eventually dies and has no idea where his or her work ends up — maybe a landfill or, with a bit of luck, a thrift shop, or even — who knows — a museum. Just ask van Gogh’s brother. There are painters you’ve never heard of in museum storage vaults, big names in their day who are no longer ready for prime time, as tastes and donors change year by year, century after century.

And now here we are, more than half a century after Drexler thought she’d thrown that little Beatles gem away. The paintings on the walls in “Occupational Hazard” give us some idea of what has happened in between. The fedoras, skinny ties, and knee-length skirts in *Nuclear Blast/Amusement Park* (1998) convey a hard-boiled insouciance, the grayscale figures, milling and disinterested, casting stark shadows against billowing hot yellow air; only a single, centrally placed character is intrigued enough to shade her eyes and gaze at the defining spectacle of the Cold War.

Even wiggier, 1988’s *The Machine (Who Art These Masked Men?)* portrays three men — politicians? businessmen? — in front of a bizarre apparatus that might be a loom for fiber-optic cables, the cosmic-blue strands contrasting with the figures’ dark suits, which blend into the inky background. The thrusting composition implies a cavernous void behind the masked figures, who wave with the bland menace of Kremlin bigwigs at a May Day parade.

I asked Drexler about her painting techniques and she explained that she glues enlargements printed on thin paper onto the canvas and restructures the images with vivid planes of color; in rare cases the big printing dots peek through like gray scabies. She fleshed out her thinking in a later email: “The images cannot resist. They allow themselves to take part in this tender embalming. Above the secured image another image is painted on, a double image (almost the same but changed). No longer on the lam the image breathes a sigh of relief: waiting to be discovered in spite of its disguise. The viewer, by looking, rescues the painting from its layers of deception.” This poetic method suffuses 1989’s *Ana Falling (Was She Pushed?)* with audacious pathos. In the mid-1970s, Drexler taught at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where she met the young, Cuban-born Ana Mendieta, who was studying art in the University of Iowa’s multimedia program. Drexler told me that Ana was excited and happy about the photography and performance art she was exploring, and that she liked the young artist and admired her intense performances, such as those in which Mendieta used her body to make prints in the earth. But, Drexler added, “It scared me. This burial in the sand, and the death feeling I got from her work.”

Mendieta died in 1985 after plunging from the window of a New York City high-rise. Her husband, the minimalist artist Carl Andre, was acquitted of her murder, but many in the art world still question if, after a night of heavy drinking, he pushed the diminutive Mendieta to her death. For her painting, Drexler appropriated a well-known photograph of a young woman and her goddaughter plummeting from a fifth-floor apartment after the fire escape gave way, painting over the tragic godmother and giving “Ana” a flamboyant red-and-blue bikini. With perspective lines shooting upward in the background of this nearly seven-foot-tall canvas, the viewer seems to be looking at Ana from above, as if there’s still hope to reach out and snatch her into the present.

Although *This Is My Hell* was painted in 2013, the despairing woman being trundled into a gibbering inferno by two faceless suits feels absolutely current, perhaps the victim of what Drexler calls “Trump and his pals — the haters, traitors, ‘I can’t get no satisfaction’ masturbators of the far right and beyond.”

Obviously, Drexler’s mind remains incisive. She gets around with the aid of a walker and continues to paint and write in the Tribeca apartment she recently moved to. During the interview, Greenan mentioned that when they were cleaning out her previous place, he found, in the depths of an old trunk, some terrific early drawings inside a forgotten envelope marked “Kline Letter/Early Work/Provincetown.” The artist, who has outlived most of her friends and colleagues, chuckled, explaining, “I didn’t even know there would ever be another, work beyond ‘early work.’”

Rosalyn Drexler has been on this earth long enough to have seen her share of hard times and harder tragedies, themes that toss their sharp elbows into the vivacious realms of her art and writing. The sardonic jousts with the sunny on her canvases and in her writing, and she has never stopped working. In the early 1970s, in her mid-forties, she wrote a play about “Hatshepsut, that female pharaoh whose names were stopped to erase her from history. At the time, Drexler wrote that her heroine “ruled in peace and tranquility for 21 years,” adding, “My feeling is that it can happen again.” The speech that opens the play might be seen as a map to Drexler’s own unflagging journey of artistic perseverance:

*We are mud dug out of earth bed
wet hands
bring us to the wheel
hands
press us into shape
Newly thrown
we have been brought
into a center of stillness
Our shape changes
inward, outward
receptacle or slab
tower or ball
spinning
We emerge whole
but we will be broken in time
pounded up for grog
and shaped again
for another beginning.*