

HYPERALLERGIC

Rosalyn Drexler Does Not Look Back

Since the 1960s, Drexler has continued to make powerful art and to go her own way.

by JOHN YAU September 10, 2017

Rosalyn Drexler, who just turned 90, is an unlikely grande dame of painting, but that is what she is. Her rediscovery began a little over 10 years ago when a mini-survey, *I am the Beautiful Stranger — Paintings of the '60s* (March 16–April 21, 2007), thoughtfully curated by Arne Glimcher, opened at PaceWildenstein to wide acclaim. Here was an artist that the histories of Pop Art, with their focus on male painters, had left out. And yet it was immediately clear that such charged paintings as “Marilyn Pursued by Death” (1963), “Chubby Checker” (1964), and “Is It True What they Say About Dixie” (1966) more than held their own with works by Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, and, frankly, outshone works by Tom Wesselmann, Mel Ramos, and other better known figures. In 2016–17, a traveling retrospective, *Rosalyn Drexler: Who Does She Think She Is?*, which originated at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, co-organized by Katy Siegel and Caitlin Julia Rubin, helped elevate her to the pantheon of important artists associated with Pop Art.

Still, when I recently visited The Museum of Modern Art to see *Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends*, I found a painting by Drexler, “Hold Your Fire (Men and Machines)” (1966), directly across from the bank of elevators, flanked by screens on

which videos were looped. Drexler had gotten her foot in the door of this prestigious institution, but she has not yet been invited upstairs to play with the big boys of Pop Art. I would like to think that it will happen soon, given the artist’s age, but the museum runs on a different clock, which has nothing to do with mortality and everything to do with a frozen view of history.

However, as much as we know about what Drexler was up to in the 1960s, it is time to see her in a larger context, as a figure who has continued to make powerful art and to go her own way. In contrast to Wesselmann and Ramos, she never got into a rut. The current exhibition, *Rosalyn Drexler: Occupational Hazard*, at Garth Greenan (September 5–October 21, 2017) focuses on paintings done during the 1980s, at the height of Neo-Expressionism, and they look neither dated nor straining after effect or meaning.

Using a method she developed early in her career, Drexler, who is self-taught, finds and arranges images, which she enlarges on sheets of paper and subsequently glues to the canvas. In an interview that I did with Drexler for *The Brooklyn Rail* (July–August 2007) on the occasion of her PaceWildenstein show, Drexler described her genesis as a painter:

When I was a little girl, my mother bought me coloring books, and cut out dolls with their cute outfits, and lots of crayons; the big box — there was a gold crayon and a silver crayon and all kinds of blue. I hated finger painting. Most kids wanted to color outside of the lines, but I loved staying in the lines, because that way I felt protected. That was my only training (laughs)

In the 11 paintings in this exhibition, Drexler expands upon her technique in ways that are surprising, eye-catching, absurd, distressing, and mysterious. Why is a man, dressed in a black suit and tie, wearing a red and green mask while reading documents in “Masked Reader” (1988)? He is holding a coffee cup and a cigarette in the same hand, which is, frankly, weird. How does he drink from the cup without burning himself?

Why is the figure in “Portrait of the Artist” (1989) wearing a beanie with an airplane on top of it? Are the propellers going to airlift the artist toward a higher realm? What about the bands of pointillist dots that frame the painting’s left, top, and right edges? Drexler’s artist — who is wearing black fingerless gloves to show off her red manicured fingernails — is holding a paintbrush and wearing a suit and tie, which turns the artist into a cross dresser. Why is her hand covering her masked mouth? I was reminded of another groundbreaker, Marlene Dietrich, who wore a suit in a number of films.

Drexler, who is a novelist, Obie-winning playwright, and Emmy-winning screenwriter, has had a long interest in masks, dress-up, and disguises. I first knew her as a novelist and did not see her paintings until her show at PaceWildenstein. Her novel *To Smithereens* (1972), which I republished in 2011, is based on her days as a professional woman wrestler under the name, Rosa Carlo, the Mexican Spitfire. In these paintings, she marries images from the mass media with her imagination. Here the masks are both incongruous and uncanny, which is one reason why we keep looking at Drexler’s paintings.

In “Rub Out” (1982), a dapper gentleman in a gray overcoat and matching gray hat is slumped forward, his head pressed against a yellow tablecloth. The bright, cheerful colors — the turquoise ground, red chair, yellow tablecloth spattered with red spots (blood) — offset the violence as much as the gangster’s gray and black clothes. Drexler’s attention to detail is extraordinary. The awkwardness of the man’s legs, and the fact that he is seated on the edge of the chair, fold another dimension into the painting. This is especially true of the overcoat, which rides up over the man’s shoulders, as if it were about to swallow this head.

It is the quirkiness of the paintings that gets my attention. Nothing is as straightforward as it initially appears. Once you notice the first odd or inappropriate detail, you begin to see others. And yet, despite the oddness, the paintings hold together — they become believable visions. Drexler is not trying to be surreal or strange. She ponders what is disturbing about everyday life — from the murder of gangsters in public to the violence depicted in movies — with the same unerring eye that painted “Marilyn Pursued by Death.” The difference is that her paintings from the 1980s are more complex, literally and metaphorically speaking, more meaty. Nothing you see in her work should fit together, but it does. That’s what Drexler does that no other artist associated with Pop Art was able to do — she brought a lively imagination to bear on the banal and absurd images that dominate our lives, and especially the banal imagery emanating from the art world, and made them into something to contemplate.

In “Ana Falling (Was She Pushed?)” (1989), Drexler is referring to the death of Ana Mendieta, whom she met in the mid-1970s, while at the University of Iowa. Mendieta either fell from a 34th-story window or was pushed by her husband, Carl Andre (depending on who you believe). A judge found Andre innocent, but not everyone accepts that verdict, and for a good reason: Mendieta was deathly afraid of heights. According to Drexler, the source of the image was a woman who fell from a fire escape. In the painting, she is wearing a turquoise-colored bra with the image of a red hand on each cup. Her turquoise bottom has hearts on it. These images feel inappropriate and make no sense. Neither does death.



Portrait of the Artist, 1989, acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 48 x 36 inches