

I grew up in the Bronx, not far from Van Cortlandt Park, which is so big it felt like its own country then. I didn't go into Manhattan often until I attended the High School of Music and Art, years later, though I remember visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art with my father and seeing a Jean-Simon Chardin painting of a peach, which impressed me because it looked so juicy, so perfect. That was something to aspire to — a representation of a peach so real it made you feel like you were part of the painting. Most of the artworks I saw in those days were reproductions, though; a local paper had a special offer on posters for its subscribers, at 25 cents each, so I bought a J.M.W. Turner seascape for my bedroom wall. The same newspaper offered book deals, so I built up a library — Charles Dickens, Mark Twain. We also had some strange books, like *The Cardinal's Mistress* (1908) by Benito Mussolini. I would paint and draw when I was sick in bed, because my mother would bring me all sorts of colouring books and crayons to pass the time. I loved the bold outlines and bright colours of those books. The Crayolas smelled like spring to me.



*Masked Reader*, 1988. acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 40 x 30 inches

When I was small, one of my teachers noticed that I was a talented writer, and she had me write little stories about our class trips. My mother offered to be my secretary, so sometimes we'd go to the park together and I would dictate and she would write the stories down. My parents used to argue a lot behind closed doors and, in my poor childish handwriting, I wrote down every awful threat and insult. The next morning at breakfast, I handed the paper to my father, who tore it up and threw it down the dumbwaiter. But it showed me the strength of the written word. It has an effect, even if it's not the desired one.

Chico Marx, of the Marx Brothers, was my uncle through marriage and we were very close. Whenever he came to New York, we would all visit him in his hotel. My mother wanted him to take me to Hollywood so I could be a star, so I sang some songs I had learned in the high register that even my childish voice could barely reach. Suddenly, I felt him behind me cupping my breasts, such as they were at the time — vestigial indications of what were to come. My singing did not win me a trip to Hollywood.

I married my husband, Sherman Drexler, in 1945, when I was 19, and had my first child at 20; my education in art started around that time. We went to museums together and we would talk about what we had seen. Sherman had trained as a figurative painter and our friends were always talking about, involved and interested in all aspects of art: Richard Gilman, an Anton Chekhov expert; Jack Kroll, one of the editors at *Newsweek*; William Klein, the famous filmmaker and Vogue photographer. A few years after we married, we moved to Berkeley, where Sherman was teaching. I had visited museums in San Francisco and New York and I thought: 'Anyone can make a museum, so I'll make my own.' I arranged found objects, statues and small collages all over our house. In 1954, Sherman and I had a show together at the Courtyard Gallery in Berkeley; it was my first.

While we were living in California, I bought my first car and took my daughter to visit Henry Miller at his cabin in Big Sur. Along the way, we stopped at Edward Weston's home and he let my daughter carry his photographs around — she was just a child. He was suffering from Parkinson's then and I had trained to be a masseuse in a small Berkeley parlour that I think was a front for a brothel. So, I massaged Weston's back and arms and walked him down to the beach, where he had taken many of his photographs. When we finally met Miller, he was less friendly — he called off the dogs, but asked why I had come, and so I told him nervously that my husband was a big fan of his work.

Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky visited us while we were in Berkeley. They were very tender with each other. I had written some poems and Ginsberg took a look at them and said: 'Rosalyn, I don't mean to hurt you, but you're not a poet.' Of course I wasn't. And I hadn't been on the road with Jack Kerouac; I had been on the road with my five-year-old daughter!

When we returned to New York, we lived in the neighbourhood around Bottner's, the famous gym on 42nd Street. I went there to study judo. It must've been close to a circus, because every day there were tumbling dwarfs on a long mat in the window and an old woman who came in to hang by her neck in a tutu with rice powder on her face. There was a unicyclist who would carry his wife upside down on his head and businessmen who wanted to put a ball into a hole in the ground. (Play golf, that is.) A girl I trained with said that she could get me an introduction to a guy who had a troupe of travelling lady wrestlers, so I went to audition in a hotel room not far from the gym, which consisted of me walking back and forth in a bathing suit. He asked me if my husband would allow me to go, which set me back a little because I had never asked for permission to do anything. When I said, 'of course', he told me they were going down to Florida and that they would call me when they had an opening.

These lady wrestlers were always travelling by bus and always getting into accidents, which is how slots opened up. They soon called me, and I went to a hotel in Florida to meet the other women. These were tough dames. One of them was leaning into a mirror and taking bone fragments out of her gums with a tweezer. I had never met anyone like that. Here I was, a nice Jewish girl from the Bronx — I don't know what gave me the idea that I could fit into this crowd.

They asked me for my wrestling name, so I flipped through the phone book and came up with Rosa Carlo. I was wearing dark makeup and I had a perm, so they added the 'Mexican Spitfire' bit. I quickly learned how to fly through the air and fall properly but, most of the time, I figured the best way to fight back is to lie down and do nothing and then find your opportunity, though I rarely did. I was the baby face, the inexperienced wrestler, and then the other wrestler would be wreaking all sorts of dangerous holds upon my body and the crowd would go crazy, shouting: 'Retaliate, retaliate!' Finally, I did retaliate. I knew a couple of holds to get them down, and then she was counted out and the crowd was so happy that the loser had finally won. Fake wrestling is a great, grand drama of life and death; the real thing, which you see at colleges, is a fantastic athletic event like a board game, all strategy.

When I was 54, I wanted to see what it felt like to be an authentic weightlifter. So, I had a bunch of equipment installed in my studio loft on Greene Street in SoHo, before it was gentrified, and began learning special power lifts. I had a trainer to prepare for a power-lifting contest. It was a public performance, and it was very difficult. I didn't win anything, but I completed each event. Ultimately, it was strenuous, and working out like that makes you very compulsive, so I gave it up.

Around the time I first started wrestling, I had been writing brief little paragraphs, just short texts to experiment with style. Klein read a few and introduced me to a friend in publishing, who had published *Unsafe at any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile* (1965) by Ralph Nader. He liked the little paragraphs, for some reason, and he said: 'I'll be back in two years. I want you to write me a novel.' I told him I had never written a book, but he offered me a contract anyway. Two years later, he returned and I had finished *I Am the Beautiful Stranger* (1965), my first novel.

What's important in writing is honesty. You never know when it might mean something to someone else. I was in Paris, not long after *I Am the Beautiful Stranger* came out, and I received a letter from the beat poet Gregory Corso at the Madison Hotel, thanking me for the book. He called it 'honest and compelling' and said it reminded him of the time he was incarcerated. I'm not sure how I managed that, but his words meant more to me than selling copies. You can't turn your back on encouragement unless you have problems with motivation, which I've never had. I love writing, though it can be an isolating experience.

*To Smithereens* (1972), my novel about wrestling, was my third book; *The New York Review of Books* editor compared me to this and that and then, at the end of his review, wrote: 'Why despair of literature?' I had read Honoré de Balzac, D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Stendhal, but I never aimed to produce a work that someone like him might regard as 'literature'. In everything I do, there's something that I lived through, though I don't really write autobiography. I have kept some diaries over the years that contain drawings and other artworks. I would always tell myself stories as I was painting, though the relationship between the content of a painting and a story or play is not always so direct.

I wrote my first play, *Home Movies*, in 1963. Gilman, the Chekhov expert, was involved with a theatrical company and offered to bring it to Judson Church. They particularly liked Gertrude Stein there and my work is nothing like her's but, in the end, they loved the play. Judson was a very safe creative space. All the avant-garde dancers like Yvonne Rainer were performing there and Jim Dine and Claes Oldenburg had a big show in the basement. Most of my friends were abstract expressionists, though — Elaine de Kooning and Franz Kline — and it's obvious that none of their paintings influenced me whatsoever. Kline and I did an exchange once: a small painting of mine for one of his studies on a phone-book page.

Elaine and I were very close. In 1971, we published 'Why Are There No Great Women Painters?' in *ARTnews*, our response to Linda Nochlin's article 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' Elaine was very bright, but she refused to acknowledge that women artists had a problem being recognized. She was married to the greatest painter of that age, which I think affected her perception. I knew of so many female painters who weren't getting their dues.

I had been practising for as long as many of the men of pop, but I did like a lot of their work. When I first met Roy Lichtenstein, in Provincetown, he showed me some paintings that he'd done as a teacher. I thought they were quite dull but, then, beginnings sometimes are; when we reconnected years later, through the art dealer Ivan Karp, I really appreciated his work. I like painting that's clean, with the lines well delineated, and the idea immediately obvious.

In 1964, I posed for a George Segal sculpture, *The Dry-Cleaning Store* (1964). He made a cast of me bending over with a pencil in my hand. The plaster cast process was slow, but I loved suddenly being encased in quiet. It was a mysterious experience. I know some people cannot be confined, but I was confined by a terrific sculpture. As payment, he gave me a bas-relief bust of myself, which looks like the death mask of Amadeo Modigliani.

I always thought Andy Warhol was so clever. He was quiet and it was hard to tell whether it was acquired or natural — I wondered if Karp advised him to give evasive answers to questions and keep people guessing. He wanted me to star in one of his movies, *Kitchen* (1966), which would have involved me being murdered, so I had to decline. In the end, he made a couple paintings of me as a wrestler.

I got my first show in New York when Karp introduced me to Anita Reuben, who had opened a gallery in her name so her sister could have a place to show. The gallery showed the crème de la crème at that time — Oldenburg, Lucas Samaras, Segal — but no one was interested in Reuben's sister, so the gallery closed after two years. I was making sculptures at the time, with plaster and found objects. All the men found new galleries, but I didn't. I thought it was because I wasn't a painter, even though David Smith had written me a glowing letter encouraging me to continue as a sculptor. In that letter, he wrote that he didn't understand why so many women artists start making good work and then disappear from the scene.

In any case, I thought I had to paint in order to continue my career as an artist, and I didn't know the first thing about drawing or painting. I told myself that if I knew how to work with found objects, I could find images the same way and simply paint over them and that would help me learn how to paint. It was naive, but it worked — my paintings grew larger and I found my place. I was painting over commercial advertising collages clipped from magazines and posters, newspapers and books. My choices weren't necessarily about intellectual attachment as much as whether there was compelling activity that would look good on a canvas. If it spoke to me, I would pin it down and embalm it with paint, so it could never escape me. The 'Love and Violence' series (1962—66) was an interesting experiment because the crime photographs I was using as source images were so second-hand; I was thinking about Weegee and film noir as much as these crimes I knew nothing about. Rerecorded, the image felt decorative. I'd know in advance what size canvas I was going to use, and I would have the image enlarged and printed. Then, I would very carefully apply it to the canvas and flatten any bubbles. My use of colour has always been fairly instinctive — I started with primaries and expanded from there. Right now, I'm working on a series of 20 x 25 cm canvases, freehand, which I think have the same graphic impact as the older works. Everything is very intensely contained in them, like concentrated versions of my larger paintings.

In the 1980s, I began painting men and machines. I was very much interested in the relationship of men to their machines and the things they work with: I felt a certain intensity in that interaction. I wasn't thinking about patriarchy, though politics did creep into the work. I had always struggled with painting faces, so someone suggested I paint figures in masks. I loved the symbolism of a mask: they're ritual objects, but they're also used to conceal identity, for an act of celebration — or crime. My friend Joy Harjo, the poet, had some indigenous ceremonial masks that we once wore together and I felt free to say things, to be philosophical, in ways I hadn't before.

Sometimes, masks can be very sinister, like in *The Machine (Who Art these Masked Men)*, 1988 — my painting of Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev standing masked in front of a large machine — or my painting of a masked Joseph Goebbels (*Nazi in the Garden*, 1988). One of my largest works, *Is It True What They Say about Dixie?* (1966), shows the men who set dogs and water cannons on civil-rights protesters and the title refers to a very nostalgic song about the South, a denial of the horrible violence there. Last night, I finished a small painting of a kid sprawled inside a shop window, based on a photograph of the looting and police response in Baltimore last year. I guess he had been looting and was killed for nothing. But it was also partially based on a page in my notebook from 1970 — I mix these sources together freely. The same stuff is going on today.

If I can get a larger studio, I'd like to start making bigger paintings again, because the process and the feeling are so different. I'd like to tackle sexual themes in some strange way. I painted Mickey and Minnie Mouse having sex once or twice, which I thought was charming. I wanted to show that sex isn't terrible or disgusting. If Mickey and Minnie are having a good time, why shouldn't you?

I've been working on a book for about nine years and I'm glad not to have finished it because it's been hard to pin down the voice. It's sort of in chunks. There's a whore in it, and a guy who lives in a plastic bag because terrible things have been happening to his skin. And then there's the little story that one of the characters reads to the whore's daughter: a sad tale about Tommy the Turd and how he entered the world and how he moves from one adventure to another. It's very funny.