RECLAMATIONS: ROSALYN DREXLER'S EARLY POP PAINTINGS, 1961–67

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We are all in defensive positions.
—ROSALYN DREXLER[1]

As a writer Rosalyn Drexler enjoyed considerable success during the 1960s and '70s. Her many novels were critically well received, she won Obies for three of her plays, and an Emmy for a Lily Tomlin special.[2] As a visual artist, however, Drexler was less successful, unfortunately experiencing what George Kubler would have called a "bad entrance." In *The Shape of Time* (1962) Kubler explains that an individual artist's success will often depend less on temperament, talent, and training than on luck, on where in the artistic tradition "his biological opportunity coincides."[3] The artist whose temperament coincides with the early stage of a tradition is luckier than the one who follows later. With regard to timing, at least, Drexler would appear to have been very fortunate. She began using popular imagery late in 1961 at precisely the same time as Warhol, Lichtenstein, and the other celebrated pioneers of the Pop movement. Although Drexler is mentioned in the early histories of Pop, she received little serious attention at the time.[4] As Robert Storr so nicely put it in a recent reappraisal of her work for a Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery catalogue, "It is the fate of some artists to arrive at the station on time, and still find themselves being left on the platform as the train pulls away without them."[5]

Drexler's problem was two-fold. Firstly, her work was not consistent with period taste. Her themes were hot in an era of cool. And what was perhaps worse, her works evoked narratives at a time when the art world seemed to have accepted critic Clement Greenberg's judgment that stories belonged to literature, not the *visual* arts.[6] Her second problem was gender. In the sixties art was still a male domain, as the pronoun in the Kubler quote above will attest.

Drexler's bigger problem, as it turned out, was that she was too early. The train on which she belonged would not arrive at the station for another two decades. This train would not only welcome women passengers as a result of the feminist movement of the 1970s but

Rosalyn Drexler (b. 1926, United States), *Lovers*, 1963. Acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 55 1/4 x 52 in. (140.3 x 132.1 cm).
Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery

had a special car for the Metro Pictures stable of artists such as Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, and Robert Longo whose interests were very similar to Drexler's. Longo's Men in the Cities series, in particular, closely resembled her early work and was often mistaken as such. It was in the context of these developments of the 1970s and early '80s that a serious reassessment of Drexler's pioneering work was not only possible but mandatory.[7] This essay and the exhibition of which it is a part are but facets of that ongoing process.

Rosalyn Bronznick was born in 1926 and grew up in a lively, contentious middle-class family in the northern boroughs of New York City. The fact that her parents were "always fighting" was particularly upsetting.[8] The trials and tribulations of her rebellious adolescence are the basis of her first novel, *I Am the Beautiful Stranger* (1965). Three years after leaving the High School of Music & Art, where she studied voice, Rosalyn married Sherman Drexler, a figure painter. In 1950–51, hoping to improve the family's finances, she briefly pursued a career as a lady wrestler. "Wrestling was a bitch," she said: "Tough traveling across the country by car. Confirmed my world view that people like to see other people get hurt. I got out of it fast."[9]

Drexler began making visual art in the early 1950s while living in Berkeley, California, where Sherman was finishing his art degree. An early and unrecognized participant in the assemblage movement that would shortly blossom in the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York, she began producing art with trash found at home and in the city streets in order to create a kind of true-to-life museum in her home. In 1955–56 she and Sherman had a two-person exhibition at the Courtyard Gallery. Unlike the well-known Bay Area assemblers, such as Bruce Conner, whose use of junk represented an implicit rejection of American postwar consumerism, Drexler had no social agenda. Nor was she even aware of the budding San Francisco Renaissance centered at the City Lights Bookstore, although she knew its most famous participant, Allen Ginsberg. "If there was a burgeoning counterculture in the SF area," she claims, "I didn't know about it. I wasn't part of anything. I was a loner."[10] On the subject of her work, she said at the time, "I perform rescue work (in memory of the death of the Little Tin Soldier who was lost forever in a sewer). I peruse the sewer with wonder and love."[11] In order to accentuate the fragile, messy lives of her poignant incarnations of the human condition—such as *Pregnant Princess* and *Grown-up Lolita Doll*, both late 1950s—she began adding touches of raw plaster and crude color.

In 1960, shortly after her return to New York, she showed her sculpture at the recently opened Reuben Gallery,[12] where Allan Kaprow and his Rutgers colleagues in Fluxus exhibited. Drexler was given an exhibition on the recommendation of the critic-turned-dealer Ivan Karp, whom she had recently met at an exhibition and who was arguably the best-informed observer of the avant-garde scene in the city at the time.[13] Through Karp, Drexler began socializing with a number of the established and emerging artists of various stripes, from Elaine de Kooning to Donald Judd to Andy Warhol, who made a small series of silkscreen paintings after a Polaroid he took of her dressed as a wrestler.

Drexler gave up sculpture in 1961, despite the encouragement and recommendation of David Smith, partly because "it became too difficult to lug that stuff around." She turned, instead, to painting themes borrowed from popular culture. "I was very guilty about it," she later admitted, "achieving something not out of your [own] head. Little did I know [this technique] would become so hot."[14] As her remarks indicate, she began to appropriate popular materials not because of the contemporaneous examples of artists such as Lichtenstein and Warhol—to which Karp introduced her shortly after she began working with similar sources—but because of the same confluence of art-world influences that led them and others almost simultaneously to recognize the value of popular imagery as a *lingua franca*, most important of which was the permissive examples provided by Rauschenberg and Johns.[15] And

Rosalyn Drexler, Untitled, c. 1958. Plaster and mixed materials, dimensions unknown. Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery

for Drexler, the use of "what I, a homemaker, had available in the house: magazines, posters, etc." was a natural extension of her approach to sculpture.

Drexler clipped images from magazines and newspapers, attached them to canvas or board and then selectively painted out details with acrylics to emphasize the essential action, which she ordinarily set against a contrasting, largely empty monochromatic ground. She soon learned how to enlarge copies on paper, which she also attached to canvas and overpainted. This also meant that she could consider a larger range of source materials, which now included books on Hollywood and photographs borrowed from the library.

For five or six years, before devoting the bulk of her time to writing, Drexler inventoried what she called the "horrible things" going on in contemporary society,[16] including racism. *Is It True What They Say About Dixie?* 1966, was inspired by a newspaper photo of a group of white supremacists led by "Bull" Connor (in hat and red tie), the infamous police chief who, on May 3, 1963, ordered Birmingham police and firemen to attack a group of peaceful civil rights demonstrators with fire hoses, billy clubs and attack dogs.[17] Drexler said that she did not want to paint a scene of a black man being lynched, but "that's the painting's subtext."[18] Karp suggested that she simply leave her source materials unpainted, but she refused: "I wanted them hidden but present, like a disturbing memory." Overpainting not only allowed Drexler to focus on the figures but to add her own expressive commentary. By depicting the image in stark black and white, she effectively articulated both the nature of the racial conflict and its moral clarity. That Connor and his associates are in black is also nicely ironic.

Although the viewer will no doubt be tempted to read *Dixie* as a civil rights commentary, for the artist the work was part of a larger focus on the male tendency to bad behavior. Note that all the figures are men. The theme was most clearly expressed in a series of works, sometimes referred to as the Love and Violence series, that evoke scenes from postwar pulp fiction and fifties B-movies, particularly gangster films, in which men abuse women. Characteristic of the series is *I Won't Hurt You*, 1964, in which a man utters the supposedly reassuring words of the title while holding a terrified woman's mouth closed to prevent her from screaming for help. A similarly unsoothing remark is made by the apparently naked male who holds down the arms of a recumbent female in *Baby It's Alright*, 1963. That he will hurt her and it won't be alright are made clear in works such as *Rape*, 1962, and *Where's the Loot!*, 1963, in which a man pistol-whips a woman.

Given the chief factor in Drexler's reassessment, it is not surprising that critics and scholars have interpreted this body of work as part of the feminist movement that budded in the 1960s and blossomed around 1970. Almost all of the recent writing on these paintings assumes that it was born out of "feminist anger" and aimed either to motivate women to "fight back" or to provide a needed "mirror...for men to see themselves."[19] The result, as Arne Glimcher states in the catalogue for Drexler's 2007 exhibition at his PaceWildenstein gallery, is that the feminist cause is now "central to her identity as a woman and a multidisciplinary artist."[20]

Drexler herself vigorously rejects the feminist label for either herself or her early Pop paintings. In one of our correspondences she pleaded: "Don't try to make me into a politically conscious artist. I wasn't. I don't teach lessons." On the subject of "the feminist movement" she added:

> *I helped liberate McSorley's Tavern [which had historically excluded women]. I danced in the street with women. I went to meetings and was bored. I didn't think painting circles or pasting tampaxes to a canvas was an exemplary feminist goal. I've always been uncomfortable with groups. I'm not associated. I don't want to be used to further someone else's political agenda. My work does not lend itself to causes. Unless it does when I'm not looking.*

Rosalyn Drexler, *Is It True What They Say about Dixie?* 1966. Oil and paper collage on canvas, 61 x 51 in. (154.9 x 129.5 cm).
Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery

The last remark may be interpreted in one of two ways, of course. On the one hand, it could be read as an acknowledgment that she was not self-consciously aware of her own deeper motives. At least one critic reads her work in just this way, as an unconscious expression of period attitudes:

> *There is no feminist manifesto to find in Drexler's work. Instead, it is embedded in the ethos of her work—in the times and attitudes plucked from the mid-1960s' Civil Rights and women's rights movements and collaged into the surfaces of her canvases.*[21]

In the other reading the remark refers to what happens after the artist finishes the work and sends it out into the world to make its own way. As Marcel Duchamp perceptively observed, the meaning of an artwork will depend as much on what the viewer sees in it than as on what the artist puts into it:

> *All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone...the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering it and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus* adds *his contribution to the creative act* [emphasis added].[22]

This is the phenomenon to which Drexler meant to refer, as her irritated objection to being "used" should suggest.[23]

Drexler insists that there is an important difference between "pointing to the brutality of men and pointing an accusing finger." To admit that she "is interested in things that bother me about human relations" is not to say that she is trying to do anything about it.[24] That the feminist interpretation of Drexler's work depends more on what in contemporary literary theory is called "reader response" than on the artist's own purposes is suggested by a closer examination of the works themselves. The writing on Drexler conveniently omits, firstly, that the men in the Love and Violence series are sometimes portrayed sympathetically. The despondent male figure on the side of the bed in *Dangerous Liaison*, c. 1963, for example, apparently suffering from some form of rejection or inadequacy, enlists our compassion.

The most sympathetic treatment given men, however, occurs in a small group of paintings of men quietly alone, which includes the poignant *Al Capone Combs his Hair*, 1964, and the saddest of the group, *A Gentleman from Head to Toe*, 1963. Isolated in the corner of the empty canvas, the self-composed, well-dressed man appears somewhat lost or overwhelmed. The title of the work, and therefore its subtext, is loosely taken from Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem, "Richard Cory":

> Whenever Richard Cory went down town
> We people on the pavement looked at him:
> He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
> Clean favored, and imperially slim.
>
> And he was always quietly arrayed,
> And he was always human when he talked;
> But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
> "Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.
>
> And he was rich—yes, richer than a king
> And admirably schooled in every grace:
> In fine, we thought that he was everything
> To make us wish that we were in his place.
> So on we worked, and waited for the light,
> And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
> And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
> Went home and put a bullet through his head.

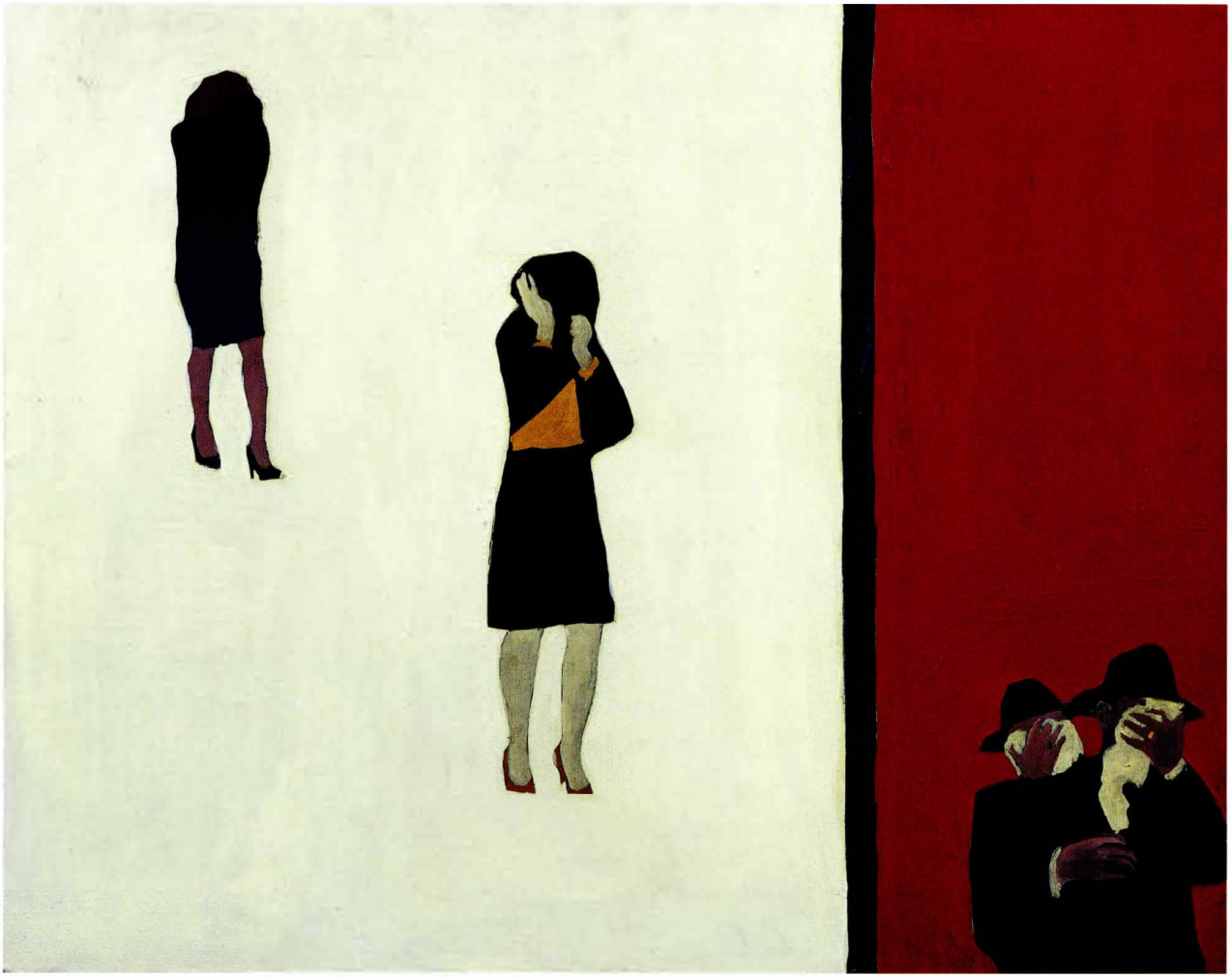
Rosalyn Drexler, *Love and Violence*, 1965. Acrylic, oil, and paper collage on canvas, 67 3/4 x 60 3/4 in. (172.1 x 154.3 cm).
Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery

Omitted, too, is any reference to Drexler's occasional depictions of female faults. In *Study for No Pictures*, 1963, for example, four people ashamedly shield their faces from reporters' cameras. The two men, taken from a photograph by Weegee, are being arrested for bribing basketball players. Drexler cannot recall why the two women, appropriated from a contemporary newspaper story, were being taken into police custody. Exactly what they are guilty of is therefore unclear. Judging from Drexler's other work in the series, it would probably be more a matter of stupidity than cruelty. Because we do not know which of the two figures utters the title of *Kiss Me Stupid*, 1964, we have to assume that the label applies both to him and to her. Although some of the women in Drexler's works, such as *I Won't Hurt You*, are clearly blameless, most, like those in *Where is the Loot!* or *Love and Violence*, 1965, find themselves in peril largely through their own poor choices. Although a feminist could understandably view such works as exhortations to women to "wise up," we must not confuse such readings with Drexler's purposes. The overwhelming evidence, which includes not only the artist's statements and paintings but her books and plays as well,[25] attests to the fact that she was not sanguine about the prospects of human reform. Though it would be an overstatement to say that she was a pessimist, she was no optimist. As Arne Glimcher so nicely put it, her worldview might best be described as "a cross between daytime serials and Samuel Beckett."[26] "If you're alive," she told one curator, "things aren't going to be that good."[27]

If Drexler's purposes in depicting male brutality and female complicity are not feminist, what are they? Surely she is not simply indulging that popular taste for seeing "other people get hurt," which she witnessed during her wrestling career. The answer lies in her formal treatment of these themes. Although Drexler's reliance on compositional devices borrowed from contemporary minimalist painting has sometimes been noted, it has never been analyzed and properly plumbed. The scenes in *Love and Violence*, for example, are set within the grid that had come to dominate Hard Edge painting of the period. The violent encounter in *I Won't Hurt You* occurs beneath an Ad Reinhardt–like black painting. And the monochrome grounds of so many of her works, including *Kiss Me Stupid* and *A Gentleman from Head to Toe*, must be seen, given their date of production, in relation to the current fashion for such features in the work of so many artists of the period, including Yves Klein, Ellsworth Kelly, and Barnett Newman. The role of the last-named in Drexler's work is most clearly revealed in *Study for No Pictures*, which comes straight out of his series of "homages" to Mondrian. The most interesting of her Newman-inspired works, however, is *A Gentleman from Head to Toe*, wherein Newman's abstract "zip" is cleverly returned to its original source in the erect human figure. That this was her purpose is subtly indicated by the narrow vertical strip that extends below the gentleman's overcoat.

For the art-wise spectator the result is a sharp counterpoint between the purist, Greenbergian aesthetic evoked by the formal elements and the impure events embedded therein. Although this opposition was meant to be understood both as a means to heighten our experience of the nature of the depicted events and a satirical indictment of the naiveté of the transcendent, purist enterprise,[28] its ultimate purpose was to provide the artist with a deeply satisfying psychic experience. As the literary critic J.L. Austin persuasively demonstrated, literature, and by extension art, is less a form of *saying* something than of *doing* something.[29] Drexler says that the formal means she chose to use

> *has more to do with my early coloring books. [As a child] I adored my coloring books.... I was addicted to outlining the pictures in contrasting colors, and enjoyed staying within the lines. Needed the control. My work begs for control. After all, I captured the images and buried them; now they want to escape. They lie layered and still, unable to move. They are contained and I can breathe a sigh of relief.*



Rosalyn Drexler, *Study for "No Pictures,"* 1963. Acrylic over paper collage on canvas, 16 x 20 in. (40.6 x 50.8 cm).
Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery

`Drexler's remark explains why she chose not to take Karp's advice to leave her sources unpainted. By overpainting them she could not only take control of them but bury them, freeze them, thus rendering them harmless. Kalliopi Minioudaki nicely summarizes the defensive aspect of Drexler's early Pop paintings:

> *Traumatized by contemporary media reality and social reality itself... Drexler overpaints her traumatic cut-outs to "screen" with paint the repetitive return of the real. The result... is both the warding off of the wound and its unavoidable melancholic production.*[30]

In addition to relief from anxiety, however, Drexler's work also effected a more positive pleasure for herself and her audience, as well: the alchemical transformation of sordid reality into high art. Just as her early sculpture rescued the Little Tin Soldier and the Pregnant Princess, her Pop paintings reclaimed the problematic lives of her subjects, raising them from the gutter of the popular press to the lofty plane of aesthetic experience—which is why in her correspondence with me she keeps insisting that she, like one of her favorite artists, Lichtenstein, is essentially a formalist, less concerned in the end with messy stories than with effects that are "clean and clear and selective."