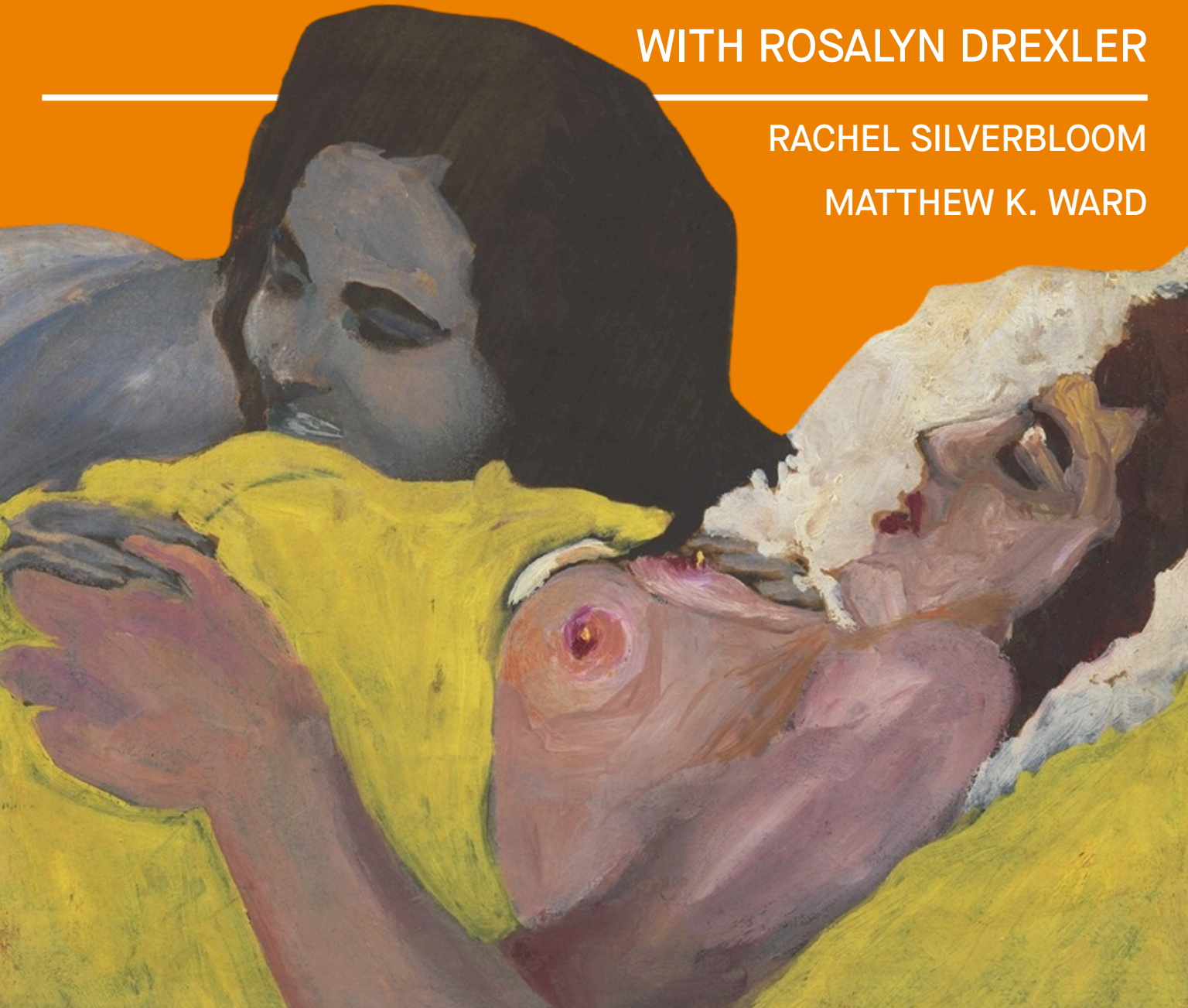


AT HOME

WITH ROSALYN DREXLER

RACHEL SILVERBLOOM

MATTHEW K. WARD



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Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center

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Cover image: Rosalyn Drexler, *Lesbians*, 1963, Acrylic and paper collage on canvas board, 10 x 8 inches



Rosalyn Drexler

Boxed In

2017

Acrylic and paper collage on canvas

10 x 8 inches

INTRODUCTION

This catalog was produced in conjunction with the exhibition *At Home with Rosalyn Drexler*, staged at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center in the Spring of 2025 and curated by Drs. Rachel Silverbloom and Matthew K. Ward.

Rosalyn Drexler (b. 1926) is a painter, sculptor, novelist, playwright, singer, and former professional wrestler. Regarded as a key figure in American Pop Art, Drexler's varied career extends well beyond that period and defies easy categorization.

Among the themes present in her work, the danger of domesticity is one of the most persistent and the concept of *home* is one she repeatedly scrutinizes, dissects, and often rejects. For Drexler, home is rife with tension and conflict.

The exhibition *At Home with Rosalyn Drexler* collects some of the artist's works that deal with this theme. Together, these works beg the question: is home a place to escape to or escape from?

Another dimension presents itself when these works are shown within the context of the Pollock-Krasner House, a historic home in which great works of art were made and in which a complicated relationship was carried out by its two participants.

The curators would like to thank the Garth Greenan Gallery, Arte Collectum, and Beth Rudin De Woody for their generous loans to the exhibition and also the supporters of the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center for making projects such as this possible.



Rosalyn Drexler

Self-Portrait

1964

Acrylic and paper collage on canvas

40 x 30 inches

Collection of Beth Rudin De Woody



Rosalyn Drexler
Portrait of the Artist
1989

Acrylic and paper collage on canvas
48 x 36 inches

THEFT AS AN ACT OF CARE

ROSALYN DREXLER'S (AUTO-)APPROPRIATIONS

BY RACHEL SILVERBLOOM

Rosalyn Drexler's art demonstrates that theft can be an act of care. Best known for her techniques of collage and appropriation—cutting, pasting, and painting over images culled from all corners of our visual culture—Drexler combines the work of an artist, archaeologist, and semantic surgeon. She explains, “I work as a saver of this image by painting over it. It gives it another life and another skin.”¹ A careful look at her paintings reveals that we can interpret this second (and sometimes third or fourth) skin quite literally. Drexler's layering of canvas, paper, and paint creates a textured and sculptural quality, difficult to discern in photographs but more evident in embodied encounters. These are

paintings you want to touch—their skin reaches out for contact. If you traced your finger over the faint ridges of Drexler's paintings, you would discover something akin to a desire line—a path created when one cannot or does not want to take the official paths that have been cleared by others. Drexler decidedly forges her own way, and leaves traces for us to discover. Cut-and-pasted images sometimes peek out behind strokes of paint, refusing the impression of naturalness or autonomy that could otherwise be produced by a more thorough concealment. This literal second skin also complements and enhances its figurative dimension—the iterative, transformational power of Drexler's revisionings. If the

multiplicity of meanings and experiences activated in and by an artwork constitute its life, then Drexler is a resurrectionist—with each iteration, return, and re-visioning, she activates new possibilities, new meanings, with renewed force.

Collage, as a medium, is not only about fragmentation, but also about relation—it is as much about undermining false unities and homogeneities as it is about generating a hodge-podge, misfit assemblage of another kind. To be not-quite-fully integrated, yet undeniably in meaningful relation, to exist as an assemblage of disparate and often conflicting perspectives, textures, and contexts—collage serves as an apt aesthetic expression of the necessary labor of experimentation, improvisation, and making-do that is so often necessitated for those who experience marginalization and oppression. As American art critic

Lucy Lippard has said, “feminist identity is itself...a collage of disparate, not yet fully compatible parts. It is a collage experience to be a woman artist or a sociopolitical artist in a capitalist culture.”²

I read Drexler’s artistic practice as part of a constellation of feminist and queer techniques—within and beyond the art world—of creating paths for expression where there have been closed doors; of generating different meanings by subverting established scripts; of stealing, appropriating, reusing, in ways that activate new potentialities, new meanings, and new trails for others to find. For those of us who labor toward freedom in a space of enclosure—which, for Drexler at the start of her career, was the domestic scene of the home and its repressive gendered and sexual politics—we must make do with what’s around us. And it is this generation of other possibilities for

meaning and for belonging within conditions of constraint that renders Drexler's thefts acts of care.

**DREXLER'S CARING LABOR:
PERUSING THE SEWER WITH LOVE**

Drexler's work demonstrates that the practice of covering over an image can also be a process of excavation. She is a master of bringing the submerged to the surface and rendering tangible what otherwise exists as the suppressed and silenced background of our culture. One could read her oeuvre as a meditation on an insight she shared in a 1973 *New York Times* article, "Women on Their Own":

*Neglect can kill the spirit. Art does not feed on itself alone. Flesh does feed on flesh. The thinner we get, the closer we are to the skeleton, and women have been the skeletons in men's closets for many a year, cannibalizing themselves for want of other nourishment.*³

Around the time when Drexler wrote this article, fellow New York resident and feminist scholar and activist Silvia Federici and her comrades launched *Wages for Housework*, a political movement predicated on the imperative to recognize (and refuse) the necessary yet invisibilized labor of women as the foundation of the functioning of patriarchal, capitalist society. Federici and others analyzed the auto-cannibalistic mechanisms of capitalism, arguing that its capacity for accumulation and profit in the zone of production relies upon, even as it degrades, disavows, and invisibilizes, the reproductive labor of women (all of the caring, cleaning, and other "physical, social, and sexual services" women perform to restore men to their productive capacities).⁴ And, of course, one must consider not only the caring labor but also the violence and abuse women were and are expected to tolerate or even interpret as love—"the more



Rosalyn Drexler

Abduction

1989

Acrylic and paper collage on canvas

10 x 8 inches

blows the man gets at work the more his wife must be trained to absorb him, the more he is allowed to recover his ego at her expense.”⁵ Flesh *does* feed on flesh. So what happens when the skeletons in the closet refuse to remain quiet?

Frequent depictions of the violence subtending the domestic scene and heterosexual romance in Drexler’s work of the ‘60s and ‘70s resonate profoundly with the swell of feminist consciousness at that time, especially about the ways in which women are trained to derive pleasure from self-sacrifice and to interpret masculine aggression and possessiveness as emblematic of heterosexual love. She raises her own singular voice among a chorus of women who have meditated on the paper-thin boundary that separates intimacy from violence, stemming from the vulnerability (both bodily and social/political) that contextualizes

each heterosexual encounter in a world wherein gendered violence and exploitation is the rule, not the exception. This element of her work is well-documented and discussed, and is most evident in her collage paintings like *Lovers* (1963), *I Won’t Hurt You* (1964) and *Kiss Me, Stupid* (1964). But my question, to return to where I began, is: how can we read her appropriation and re-presentation of these images of erotic violence as an act of care? What does it mean for Drexler to position her practice as a kind of “rescue work” in which she “peruse[s] the sewer with wonder and love?”⁶ Love for what or for whom? How does Drexler’s artistic practice not only critique dominant heteropatriarchal conceptions of love but also embody another kind of romance, a way of being in intimate and reciprocal relation?

The answer, I think, lies in Drexler’s particular way of inhabiting violent

representations. Drexler's collage and appropriation works refuse to turn away from harmful images (and images of harm) and instead repossess them. There is a durative quality to many of Drexler's painting—their subversive power is less about antagonism than it is about sitting with the appropriated image, dialoguing with it in a mode of receptivity and curiosity that embraces the contingency of its meanings and its vulnerability to transformation. Drexler explains, "I let it live—or it lives more—when I paint over it. But the intent of what the image means is mine. Sometimes I'm surprised. I think I'm just doing a painting and its "violence" or its "love" but then as I look at it, as I work on it, it has more meanings, it changes."⁷

In *Kiss Me, Stupid*, a highly saturated orange background lifts a scene of strangled romance: a man with his

back to the viewer forcefully kisses a woman while keeping an immobilizing grip on her wrist, her neck strained at an angle, eyes squeezed shut in a expression that might be pleasure, pain, or both. Drexler freezes this moment in time, cuts it from its context, and patiently paints it over stroke by stroke—a process she has referred to as a kind of embalming of the image in paint—opening it up for examination.⁸ The scene depicted is one of urgency and intensity, but it is dilated and held in place. The image is hard to look at. The bright red and orange are competing, the shadows and whites are starkly contrasted, the lines of the gripping hand are harsh and eye-catching. The undeniable tension and discomfort of this image disrupts and refuses the romanticization and normalization of violence and abuse that the 1964 film of the same title uncritically (and comedically, albeit falteringly) represents. The spectator of this



Rosalyn Drexler

Kiss Me Stupid

1964

Acrylic and paper collage on canvas

20 x 24 inches

Collection of Arte Collectum

encounter is rendered culpable, implicated, as a witness. The status of *Kiss Me, Stupid* as critique and intervention is brought into even starker relief when put in conversation with *Lesbians* (1963). The two paintings offer visions of intimacy whose utter foreignness to each other is heightened by the same bright orange terrain upon which they each unfold. They are worlds apart, yet contained within the same universe. *Lesbians* depicts a lovingly rendered scene of reciprocal intimacy, with fingers intertwined, providing a stark contrast to *Kiss Me, Stupid's* strangulated grip. The harsh, competing colors are nowhere to be seen, here; instead, the yellow blanket partially concealing each figure brings a warmth to the composition, the reclined figures relaxed and embracing with tender and erotic mutuality. These two works, considered side-by-side,

demonstrate an element of the complex spatio-temporality of Drexler's works. In choosing to suspend the images on featureless backgrounds, linked by color alone, they are simultaneously bound together yet set adrift. The viewer is freed up to associate between them or not. But in any case, one is left with the impression that something is giving way, unsettled. The very ground of the image has receded from view, has become substitutable, transposable. And so the image itself becomes opened up, vulnerable, unmoored, its meaning no longer fixed but always on-the-go, in suspension, in flux. Drexler has said, "My pictures are like ice floes, jarred loose and floating nowhere. On them, the people act violently, but their foothold is melting."⁹

SELF-REVISIONING AND AUTO-APPROPRIATION

While the pop-cultural source



Rosalyn Drexler

Lesbians

1963

Acrylic and paper collage on canvas board

10 x 8 inches

materials of Drexler's work attest to the extent to which she is a critical observer of the social world around her, she is also committed to a process of self-reflection, exposure, and iteration. Drexler is far from immune to the cut she so often wields. She has gone under the knife in paintings like *Self-Portrait* (1964), *Beware, Beware, God Sees You* (1986), *Portrait of the Artist* (1989), *Sueño Revista* (Rosalyn and Sherman in a Rousseau) (1989), and *The World According to Roz* (2012). This is perhaps not surprising, given that the representations proliferated and circulated by cultural media are not simply outside us but also within. Their meaning is transmissible through our identification with them without that, they would be unintelligible to us. Drexler's occupation with/of images of violence and intimacy are not one-sided; the scenes she inhabits and opens up for reflection also occupy her. The labor

of reworking cultural meanings and one's own identity are inextricably linked. The self-reflexive quality of Drexler's work is not simply limited to self-portraiture, however. In gestures of auto-appropriation, Drexler often returns to her own previous paintings to playfully reimagine and contextualize them in a new time and place. In other words—she steals from herself. This choice demonstrates the thoroughness with which Drexler undermines the fetishism and valorization of the “original” or of the “artistic genius.” She is not interested in simply displacing the authority of the original with her own—this would be, in my estimation, the artistic equivalent of the noxious “girlboss feminism” of our present age that anemically envisions a liberated world as one in which women occupy positions of patriarchal power, leaving violent hierarchies and infrastructures of exploitation intact. Instead, Drexler insists on a horizontal

set of relations between artist, art, and viewer—each has a hand in the labor of representation and the production of meanings, none are immune to critique or implication, and all are vulnerable. She does not have the final word, even in conversation with herself. The meaning, the work, the message remain unfinished, open, and in flux, rearticulated in each new context and iteration. There is a humility to this way of being in relation to one's own previous work and one's previous selves. It is a testament to the ongoing labor of fashioning oneself—a project that has no end, that does not result in a final, completed, and more perfect state, but rather endlessly (sometimes joyfully, sometimes painfully) mutates.

The other consequence of Drexler's auto-appropriation is a remarkably distinct temporality. By returning to previous images and compositions,

recontextualizing and transmogrifying them across time, Drexler makes beautifully tricky work for art historians who might want to categorize her life's labor into distinct periods that can be articulated neatly and sequentially. Her auto appropriations forge cross-temporal relations that act like wormholes.

We might regard, for example, *This is My Wedding* (1963), *This is My Wedding II* (Unmask Me) (1988), and *This is My Hell* (2013) as a kind of transtemporal triptych. Unlike typical triptychs, Drexler's are not readily legible as a linear narrative sequence from one "panel" to the next nor as one unified image in three parts; rather, the three paintings are iterations of the same scene, three possible worlds, speaking to one another from across decades of the artist's own life. These iterations glibly dialogue with one another in composition and title. The dialogue is

neither unidirectional nor linear, but a pluriphony with a complex temporality—voices speaking over and across one another and in all directions, modifying each other as they do so. The more recent work iterates on the previous, and the previous works are constitutive to how we might read the later. And these voices that speak over and across space and time are undeniably Drexler's—the dialogue is, at the same time, a cross-temporal monologue. Note, for example, the inclusion of Drexler's iconic masks in *This is My Wedding II (Unmask Me)*—which one could read as a signifier of the presence of gendered and sexual performance, of drag, of getting carried away by the compulsory performances in which we coercively and collectively participate. While the mask is, in a way, painted over the face of the woman being carried from the 1963 iteration, it is also possible to read the 1988 iteration as revealing

the underpainting of the former. If we do, then the two pieces conspire to address the compulsory gendered and sexual performances inextricable from the normative sociality of marriage and domesticity. But what to make of *This is My Hell* (2013) in this context? Yet another underpainting, what lies beneath the mask that constitutes the performance? Or is this something entirely different, perhaps a more straightforward biographical self-insert, an expression of the anguish experienced around the time of Sherman Drexler's cancer diagnosis? Or a humorous commentary on the artist's entrapment in a loop of iterations, of returning to the painting again and again, compelled to a process of generation that is always a reproduction of sorts? French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre is known for theatrically insisting, in *No Exit*, that "Hell is other people." Is Drexler playfully commenting on the hell of



Rosalyn Drexler
This is My Wedding
1963

Acrylic and paper collage on canvas
board
9 x 12 inches

This is My Wedding II (Unmask Me)
1988

Acrylic and paper collage on canvas
8 x 10 inches

This is My Hell
2013

Acrylic and paper collage on canvas
24 x 36 inches

her own creation, endlessly looping, reiterating, returning to the images that she occupies and that occupy her, in turn?

Finding satisfying and stable answers to these questions is, of course, not the point—the ways in which Drexler’s work compels them is. She wields the power of the “copy” *as* copy, and does not shy away from its status as such. Whereas some would disregard the value of appropriations, Drexler extends a profound care to them, recognizing in them their capacity to instigate reflection, critique, and change. This insistence on the creativity of the copy, it turns out, was an insight Drexler had as a young girl. In a 2015 interview, she recounts a childhood memory of proudly showing her father a picture she had traced—she recalls his derisive challenge, in response: “*You* didn’t do that! If you did that, why don’t you do another one?” He tries to catch

her in an act of perceived deception, exposing her as a thief. Whereas other children might have recoiled from the accusation of not being sufficiently “original,” compliantly accepted the devaluation of copies, and been successfully inaugurated into the cult of authenticity, Drexler reflects on her response: “He challenged me. So I copied another one!”¹⁰ I am so glad she did.

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Rosalyn Drexler

So Long Sucker

1982

Acrylic and paper collage on board

3.5 x 7 inches



Rosalyn Drexler

Not Again!

2017

Acrylic and paper collage on canvas

8 x 8 inches



Rosalyn Drexler
Cezanne reaches for His Fruit
1963
Acrylic and paper collage on board
5 x 7 inches



ROSA CARLO - Girl Wrestler

Promotional photo for Rosalyn Drexler as her alter-ego
"The Mexican Spitfire" Rosa Carlo

WORKING ARTIST

ROSALYN DREXLER AS PROFESSIONAL WRESTLER

BY MATTHEW K. WARD

In the parlance of professional wrestling, a “work” refers to any aspect of the performance that is planned or choreographed. Like a trompe l’oeil painting, a “work” is an illusion meant to trick the eye. In contrast to so-called “amateur” wrestling matches, professional wrestling matches are a theatrical exhibition. The purpose of a professional wrestling match is not to be violent, but to appear violent. The illusion is that of legitimate combat. When two, or more, competitors enter the ring, they do so as collaborators, not as competitors. That the audience knows professional wrestling is a “work,” and they have since its inception, does not render the performance any less enjoyable nor

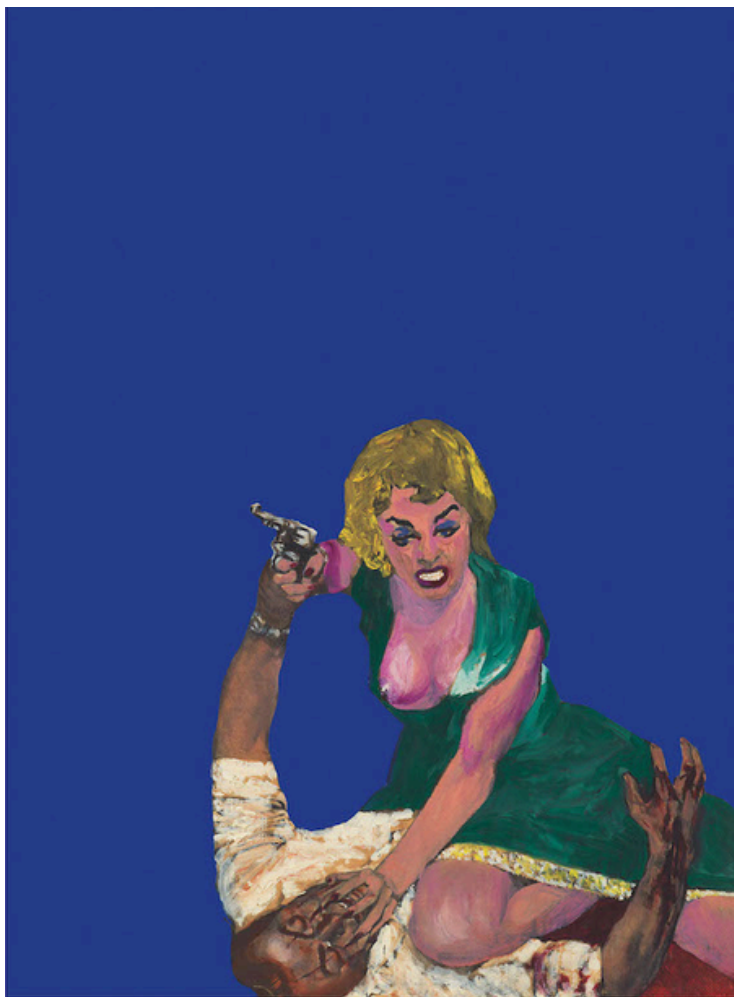
any less real. After all, the viewer of a trompe l’oeil painting knows that what they are looking at is a painting – and therein lies the magic. In this phenomenon, commonly referred to as the “suspension of disbelief,” the spectator willingly submits to the spectacle and accepts it, if only temporarily, as reality.

In his 1957 essay “In the Ring,” Roland Barthes argues that the “worked” nature of professional wrestling renders it more real than a competitive bout. “Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle,” Barthes writes, “and it is no more ignoble to watch a wrestled performance of Suffering than the sorrows of Arnolphe or Andromaque.”¹

The theater of professional wrestling provides its viewers with an essential catharsis. Whereas competitive sport delivers an abstract and potentially nihilistic exhibition of skill, professional wrestling offers a morally legible ritual. “Hence the wrestler’s function is not to win,” Barthes continues, “but to perform exactly the gestures expected of him.”² Through this series of symbolic gestures, the wrestler acts as a conduit through which the spectator can experience justice achieved or justice thwarted. The melodrama of professional wrestling is made all the more relatable for its embellishments.

This is a familiar dynamic for viewers of Rosalyn Drexler paintings. Like the professional wrestler, Drexler isolates singular gestures, like a kiss or a slap, from their broader contexts, oftentimes scenes taken from pop culture sources, and through a system of collaging and overpainting

imbues these gestures with mythological significance. “Wrestling presents man’s suffering with all the amplification of tragic masks,” writes Barthes.³ Indeed, each hold, each strike performed by the professional wrestler is so dramatically delivered that it becomes a symbol. The wrestling fan “does not wish for the actual suffering of the contestant,” Barthes continues, “he only enjoys the perfection of an iconography.”⁴ Viewers enjoy a perfect iconography in Drexler’s *Kiss Me, Stupid* of 1964, a pure extract of misogyny. Conversely, 1963’s *Self-Defense*, in which a woman straddles her attacker, wresting his gun away with one hand while brutally clawing his face with the other, delivers the potent essence of revenge. *Self-Defense* teems with the satisfaction of a good wrestling comeback. In Barthes’ words: “...what wrestling is above all meant to portray is a purely moral concept: that of justice.”⁵



Rosalyn Drexler

Self-Defense

1963

Acrylic and paper collage on canvas

16 x 12 inches

Yet, wrestling is a “work.” Therefore, just as wrestled violence is only a simulation, so is wrestled justice. Justice vicariously siphoned from theater may feel genuinely satisfying, but it does not correct the genuine injustice present in everyday life. What does this mean for Drexler’s own work? Her own appropriations? Her own simulations? Are Drexler’s works of art “works” in the wrestling sense?

Considering Drexler’s affinity for the iconographic and flair for the dramatic, it comes as no surprise that she was once herself a professional wrestler. An understanding of Drexler’s experience in the world of professional wrestling may provide further insight into her psychological approach as an artist. In her 1966 essay “A Woman’s Place is on the Mat,” Drexler recounts her stint as a wrestler in the early 1950s. After marrying the artist Sherman Drexler

at the age of 19 and giving birth to her first child a year later, Drexler found herself suffocated by domesticity. In a 2007 interview with The Brooklyn Rail, she recalled, “...my whole idea was, I’ve got to get away from this family thing for a while. It was too much for me. I wanted to go away, and I would’ve done anything.”⁶ Professional wrestling presented itself as one such “anything.” However, whether or not professional wrestling was truly the antidote to the poison of domesticity seems questionable. In “A Woman’s Place is on the Mat,” Drexler details her decision to enter the ring: “One winter evening in 1950, I walked into my own apartment where three of my dearest friends (Big Al, Sherm, and Jack) were eating the only food left in the house, and announced that I was going to support them in style.”⁷ According to Drexler, she became a wrestler to “support” the men in her life, men who appear helpless, haplessly

scavenging for “the only food left in the house.” When Drexler triumphantly announces her plan to conquer the stereotypically masculine arena of professional wrestling, they become ecstatic. The men, each of them artworld aesthetes, wax philosophical about the cultural value of professional wrestling in a manner that echoes Barthes. Drexler claims that her decision to wrestle was her own. Her decision to continue wrestling, it seems, may not have been.

By this time I felt, having been indoctrinated by my friends, that the wrestling profession was as traditionally grounded in America as commedia dell' arte was in Italy, and that its function was the function of all good theatre, to hit 'em where they live, move in, and make them like it, or hate it. I could hardly wait to participate in the classic morality play (in the exaggerated absurdity of its ribald roustering, in the grandeur of its sweeping gestures, in the vocalization of its pitched intensity). Every time I complained that it sounded undignified, queer, sadistic, and just

plain dirty, and that I was involving myself in a disservice to the female sex, they'd give me the whole bit; the catharsis of emotion, the Everyman plays, the battle of good and evil, and you get to travel free.⁸

Drexler's male friends permit her to participate in wrestling by comparing it to cultural products more commonly accepted by their milieu. In this way, they excuse the existence of the genre and their friend's participation in it. They encourage her to continue despite her own misgivings, among them that professional wrestling exploits rather than empowers women. As Drexler's story unravels, she discovers that the woman wrestler is fetishized more than she is celebrated. After a match, a male fan delivers a letter to Drexler's dressing room.

I am not the only one who believes that a woman's place is on the mat where she can disprove the irreverent theory that man is stronger than woman. I am a rugged male and yet time and time again I have been

*beaten in fair contest by a lovely damsel. I imagine you would be able to support a much heavier person than yourself astride your midsection...Should we meet, as I so ardently desire, you would find me a most willing slave, ready to do your bidding.*⁹

The fan pretends to be a feminist of sorts, ready to “disprove” “irreverent” ideas about woman’s inferiority. Of course, this is only an aspect of his fetish. He sees Drexler as a sexual object for him to consume. The “power” he ascribes her is in service of his own sexual desires. Notably, his fantasy has Drexler straddling his midsection like the subject in *Self-Defense*, desecrating the supposed strength of that pose. Drexler’s own husband is guilty of similar fetishizing. “Sherm would say to me: ‘How can a woman be so strong and yet so womanly?’”¹⁰ Sherman Drexler’s awe does not honor his wife so much as it diminishes women at large by suggesting strength to be an atypical

quality of their gender. Drexler’s male associates dote on her, anticipating her transformation into a wrestling goddess, a deity made to serve their interests. “I was being treated like a prize animal, a milk cow allowed to sleep in the king’s bed,” Drexler writes, “everyone was sure that I would make my mark and theirs!”¹¹ She will not only financially support her network of male acquaintances through her physical labor, but she will also allow them to live vicariously through her heroics. At first, she revels in this attention. “I began to think of myself as Mother Earth (and Mother Earth provides).”¹² Through the alchemy of professional wrestling, Drexler hopes to become something greater, more than human. She is primed to become an actor in one of Barthes’ great “solar spectacles.”¹³ However, she soon realizes that the spectacle exists for the benefit of the spectator, not the performer.

Rather than free her from the domestic, Drexler finds that wrestling itself operates within a domestic system. Her New York apartment is mirrored by a series of motel rooms which collectively form her new home. Her adopted family is comprised of fellow wrestlers and wrestling promoters. The personal and professional are conflated within her new social circle in an incestuous web of toxic relationships. Billy Wolfe is Drexler's promoter and the long-reigning kingpin of women's professional wrestling. He runs his promotion alongside his wife, women's wrestling champion Mildred Burke. On the road, Drexler is trained by June Byers, Burke's chief rival and Wolfe's mistress. Drexler receives her training not in the gymnasium, but in the motel rooms in which she lives alongside the other wrestlers, Byers, and Wolfe. Billy Wolfe presents as another manipulator, joining Drexler's male companions from earlier in her

narrative, puppeteering her journey through the world of wrestling. Characters like Wolfe discourage an interpretation of the women's wrestling circuit as a feminist utopia. Another such character is Toots Mondt, a colleague of Wolfe's who auditions Drexler to join the promotion. Mondt's interview with Drexler consists of having her model a bathing suit for him and making her feel his pectoral muscles. The qualifications necessary for Drexler to become a wrestler do not have anything to do with wrestling skill and are not the abilities Drexler herself was particularly proud of (for example, her ability to do a one-legged squat or one-hundred uninterrupted leg raises), but rather her status as a woman who will submit to the desires of the male authority figure.

Corruption in the business of professional wrestling need not

necessarily disqualify the redemptive potential of the performance itself. After all, Barthes locates the value of professional wrestling not in the machinations that surround it, but in the dramatic act itself. Drexler's first match was a high-profile bout with Mae Young, a respected champion and established headliner. Young had a reputation as a legitimately tough woman and something of a bully. In Drexler's retelling of the match, however, Young is depicted as a no-nonsense leader who guides an overwhelmed novice through a chaotic experience. "Hooking up, I froze," Drexler writes, "I heard nothing and saw nothing."¹⁴ Drexler is completely at the mercy of Young. Amidst a raucous crowd, so hungry for their facsimile "justice" that they do not hesitate to pelt the wrestlers with trash and epithets alike, Drexler submits to Young's experience. The apparently ruthless Young delivers for the crowd a convincing portrayal

of violence while safely coaching Drexler through the match. In doing so, she exhibits great care for an "adversary" who is, in truth, her partner. This unique brand of care is likewise present in Drexler's wrestling paintings. As in her 1963 painting *Lesbians*, Drexler's wrestling paintings depict scenes of consensual, synchronistic physical intimacy between female subjects. Interestingly, in the wrestling paintings, this intimacy is disguised as violence. On the surface, a painting such as 1963's *Take Down* appears decidedly violent. One woman straddles another, fist cocked, threatening to level a punishing blow. However, when we consider the "worked" nature of professional wrestling, we arrive at a different interpretation. *Take Down* portrays a veneer of violence, but a reality of cooperation and trust. The "victim" trusts her "abuser" implicitly. She willingly submits to her opponent.



Rosalyn Drexler
Take Down
1963
10 x 8 inches

She gives her body to her opponent, trusting that she will be protected in the process. The attacking wrestler trusts her partner as well. The attacker performs her attack, her symbolic gesture, trusting that her opponent will react accordingly, registering the gesture in a manner that imbues it with meaning and fulfills the goal of their performance. The ultimate success of the simulation is the responsibility of both women.

While Drexler's short time in professional wrestling may not have permanently freed Drexler from the confines of marriage and motherhood, it did introduce her to concepts that would reappear throughout her career. Drexler's experience in professional wrestling predates her serious forays into the visual and literary arts. As "The Mexican Spitfire" Rosa Carlo, Drexler learned how to navigate the

consumptive, reductive lechery of men in its barest form, how to perform for the masses and engage their emotions through clarified gestures, and how to manipulate reality in all its nuance. Is a Drexler painting, an appropriation of a film still from a Hollywood movie, itself an edited recording of a once-live performance, any less real for the filters the artist passes it through? Or does this filtering produce a purified image that is more real than its source ever was? In the ring and on the canvas, Drexler performs a mimicry. But, as Barthes writes, "in both, a light without shadow generates an emotion without reserve."¹⁵

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1. Roland Barthes, "In the Ring,"
Mythologies, (New York: Hill and Wang), 1957/2013, p 3.
 2. Ibid., p 4.
 3. Ibid., p 8.
 4. Ibid., p 8.
 5. Ibid, p 10.
 6. Rosalyn Drexler quoted in
"Rosalyn Drexler with John Yau,"
The Brooklyn Rail, 2007,
<https://brooklynrail.org/2007/07/art/rosalyn-drexler-with-john-yau/>
 7. Rosalyn Drexler, "A Woman's
Place is on the Mat," *Esquire*,
February, 1966, p 81.
 8. Ibid., pp 81, 120.
 9. Ibid., p 126.
 10. Ibid., p 81.
 11. Ibid., p 81.
 12. Ibid., p 81.
 13. Barthes, "In the Ring," p 3.
 14. Drexler, "On the Mat," p 126.
 15. Barthes, "In the Ring," p 3.
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