



The Defenders, 1963. Courtesy the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

Before she showed Pop paintings at the Whitney and the Guggenheim; before her madcap plays were performed at the Judson Poets' Theater and La MaMa; before she traveled the female wrestling circuit as Rosa Carlo, the Mexican Spitfire—before all that, Rosalyn Drexler was Rosalind Bronznick, a Jewish girl from the Bronx with a wimple of sprayed hair. In her teens, she studied piano and voice because her family wanted her to be a star like her uncle Chico Marx, but she never made it to Hollywood. Instead, she had walk-on parts in “Midtown hotels where distant relatives and businessmen dangled college money and felt her up.”

Well: in *Rosalyn Drexler: Who Does She Think She Is?* (Gregory R. Miller & Co., \$50), the catalogue for a retrospective of her work at Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum, which closes on June 5, the art historian Katy Siegel makes it clear that there's more than one way to be a star. Drexler's roles also included sculptor of wire-and-found-object assemblages, participant in happenings at the Reuben Gallery, and author. She published novelizations of *Rocky* and assorted TV movies (*See How She Runs*, *Unwed Widow*, *Alexander: The Other Side of Dawn*) under the pseudonym Julia Sorel; under her own name, she issued funny, fragmentary fictions, including *I Am the Beautiful Stranger*, a coming-of-age story about an adolescent and her older lovers, and *The Cosmopolitan Girl*, a sex comedy about a woman and her dog.

The child of Russian immigrants who stocked their home with middle-brow treasures—a deluxe dictionary, a print of a Turner seascape ordered from the newspaper—Bronznick dropped out of Hunter College to marry a painter named Sherman Drexler in 1946. *Who Does She Think She Is?* has little to say about Sherman, but he doesn't seem to have stood in the way of Drexler's fun. Shortly after they moved to 49th Street, she started practicing judo at Bothner's Gymnasium, where suits lifted weights next to carnival performers, among whom there were, according to the art historian Allison Unruh's contribution to the catalogue, “dwarfs tumbling, an old lady in a tutu who hung from the ceiling, and a man who rode a unicycle as his wife performed a headstand on his head.” In early 1950, Drexler began wrestling. A 1957 spread for *Ultra* magazine, “From the Private Photo Album of a Mat Queen,” shows her modeling in brassiere and garters, and hunched in a staggered stance. Her expression is impish, her hands open, and her fingers flexed, as if to say, Come and get it! Her friend Andy Warhol copied this image for a silk screen—a dozen ghostly, crouching Drexlers in red and blue, ready to vanquish life or scoop it into a crushing bear hug.

“I wasn't trying to be an artist, be a writer,” she told an interviewer in 1975. “I wasn't even trying to be a wife. All these things are a sorta natural process to me.” Drexler's notion of the natural was playful and dark, idiosyncratic: and mass-produced. She began making sculpture in the mid-1950s, and a few years later turned to painting. Her method was bricolage. She would paste blown-up reproductions of clippings and photographs onto rich monochrome backgrounds and paint over them with acrylic. The sources she chose were generally “vulgar”—B-movie posters of G-men, gangsters, or molls, as well as newspaper advertisements, Weegee photos, and images of boxers. Many of her canvases feature a man and a woman locked in an embrace that could be rape or seduction, or one person stalking or striking or holding down another. Drexler's figures tend to be caught mid-gesture, with an arm flung out or raised high, but their bodies are often placed off-center, so that they seem to be falling into an abyss. “My pictures are like ice floes,” she said, “jarred loose and floating nowhere. On them, the people act violently, but their foothold is melting.”

Drexler does not treat her themes of power, sex, violence, abuse, and jealousy despairingly. “I perform rescue work,” she said. “I peruse the sewer with wonder and love.” And with a wicked, deranged sense of humor. In her novel *To Smithereens* (1972), a groper named Paul hides out in the men's room at the movie theater, glued to the toilet and contemplating his pleasures: “As I so often ask myself, ‘Dear God, why do I get hot for big?’ The very question gets me hot. To be overcome by big! To be handled roughly by the last in line, the funky fat, the tough tomboy!” In the play *Room 17C* (1984), Linda Normal, based on Linda Loman from *Death of a Salesman*, shares a hotel room with a seductive cockroach named Sammy Gregor (ahem). When her son catches them together, he demands to know, “What does he have that Dad doesn't?” Linda's response: “Feelers! He has feelers!”

It's hard not to read a scene from the play *The Writer's Opera* (1979) as Drexler's ars poetica. Susan, a woman in her early forties, comes onstage pushing a shopping cart filled with newspapers and magazines. Armed with some paste and a pair of scissors, she begins cutting out words and arranging them into a list. She sings:

If you want to be a writer
Learn to cut and paste
Nothing is worth saving but waste.

Any small scrap
might carry within it a great idea

So whatever you find
that's broken
splintered
or loose,
gather it up
make it whole
tape it down . . .

Intelligence and wit bind all of Drexler's work, as strong as crazy glue.