

Rosalyn Drexler: Occupational Hazard

BY COLIN EDGINTON | OCTOBER 2017



Hello and Goodbye (Art History: Warhol and Basquiat), 1988, acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 59 x 56 1/2 inches

A woman falls from heights unknown. We see her from below. She wears a blue bikini, marked by red hands on her breasts and red hearts on her pubis. Behind her in the distance, neon rays the color of sunset hours burst forth at dynamic angles into the black nothingness that surrounds them. Within these rays, which seem to emanate from the falling figure, black squares in repetitive patterns, shaped by subtle forms, morph into the shape of buildings and mountains. The woman's arms are stretched out, bracing for impact. She is alone, isolated, in this eternal descent. This is a death fall in the golden hour of earthly beauty.

The painting by Rosalyn Drexler is titled *Ana Falling (Was She Pushed?)* (1989). It is Ana Mendieta, the fierce performance and visual artist, whose death in 1985 has provoked countless questions since she fell 33 floors from the Greenwich Village apartment she shared with Carl Andre, her husband of eight months. Was she pushed? But the painting doesn't depict Mendieta explicitly. As Drexler explained to Roberta Fallon in 2004, "My painting is not her image. It's a reminder of her falling. The picture is from a news story of a lady and child who fell down from a fire escape. The lady fell first; the child was saved because she fell on top of the lady."¹ The painting extends outwardly from Mendieta's death to the anonymous death of this "lady," and so suggests the historical assault on the female body. Every painting on view in *Occupational Hazard* is drenched with secretive barbarities, loving homage, and hidden narratives — hidden but there, seeping forth in Drexler's blocks of color, illustrated figures, and media sources. Glittering violence and beautiful blood.

The paintings on view, made since 1982, continue Drexler's method of appropriating images from media sources, enlarging and collaging them onto canvas, and then painting them over with blocks of color. The square painting *Hello and Goodbye* (Art History: Warhol and Basquiat) (1988) consists of two distinct images, one nested inside the other. The bottom left corner frames an immediately recognizable image of Andy Warhol and Michel Basquiat, back to back with arms folded against a field of orange. Both figures gaze out towards the viewer; Warhol wears a green mask with red and purple maquillage, while Basquiat is dotted with purple marks. This image is dwarfed by a larger one of Basquiat, pictured as a winged ghost with a paintbrush, partnered with a strange grinning figure revealing a red smile and black teeth. Is that his addiction, the one that took him from us?

Drexler does not hide her source material but plays with their images, sometimes with adoration, sometimes with melancholy, and sometimes with mischief, not to alter their meaning, but to eke out their subtleties and open up their narratives. In *Nazi in the Garden*, clearly pulled from the famous Alfred Eisenstaedt photograph of Joseph Goebbels at the 1933 League of Nations conference, Goebbels sits in a chair gazing at the viewer. The insidiousness of Goebbels's glare in Eisenstaedt's photograph is instead masked with pathetic trepidation, his skin searing white and light blue in the shadows, his hair bright red. He is wearing dark blue fingerless gloves and his nails are painted red with golden tips while two vampiric figures hover over his right shoulder. In fact, the figures throughout the exhibition, both known and unknown, mirror and complicate each other. Basquiat's bright red hair matches Goebbels's exactly (the two paintings hang right next to one another). In many of the works, the figures emerge from the void or fall into it and seem, despite some being recognizable, to be one and the same. Or rather, they are all alike and unlike in their mysteriousness and obfuscation.

The paintings feel like they were made with a writer's mind as much as a painter's hand. Her use of appropriation was in step with Pop artists of the '60s, conceptual artists of the '70s, and the Pictures Generation of the '80s. But this exhibition swells with troubled characters in visually incomplete yet fully realized worlds. Anachronisms, reimagined historical events, old figures reworked as new figures. These are as old as fiction itself. This literary quality of Drexler's art might surprise those who don't know that she is also an established novelist, playwright, and screenwriter — a *rara avis* or "rare bird" as John Yau called her in 2007 — "a novelist and painter whose art was as good as her writing."² It is this, in addition to the legacy of misogyny, that has kept her from achieving the greater recognition given to the peers (Andy Warhol and Franz Kline, Norman Mailer and Donald Barthelme) who have championed her work. But it is also because, aside from her prescient approach to subject matter and form, the works that she creates are layered, open, oblique, and difficult. More difficult than Warhol. They point to specific political events, (see her painting *Glasnost* (1988), which depicts masked figures on a crumpled newspaper under the word Glasnost, Russian for "publicity," referencing the Soviet Union's transition in the 1980s towards transparency and openness) and to perennial issues concerning gender, race, authority, power, and history. "My work was a secret kind of thing," Drexler said to *Artforum's* Prudence Peiffer last year, "No one realized I was a painter because I was writing about painting. I was happy being productive and having good friends and being ignored. But now I'm getting angry about it, looking back!"³ In *Portrait of the Artist* (1989) Drexler's left hand holds a brush that points to the deckled colorful border of the painting. She covers her mouth with her right hand, silencing herself. Her blue eyes pierce through a colorful mask, and the helmet topped with an airplane tells of her head in the clouds, the imaginative writer. Her figure hovers in front of a black rectangle, a door to the unknown. Or to the known world, to us. Her work is multivalent: intimate and revelatory, but also public and historical. It pulls from high art and pulp with equal rigor. It cannot simply be Pop — it goes beyond the gloss. Hers is a space one ought to live in.

1. Roberta Fallon and Rosalyn Drexler, "Rosalyn Drexler: 'You Couldn't Have Known My Work. How Could You?'" *Artblog*, March 4, 2015.

2. John Yau, "Rosalyn Drexler." *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 2, 2007.

3. Rosalyn Drexler as told to Prudence Peiffer. "Rosalyn Drexler Speaks about Her Retrospective at the Rose Art Museum." *Artforum.com*, February 8, 2016.