

MEXICAN SPITFIRE RETURNS

{ BY R. C. BAKER }

If you don't know Rosalyn Drexler's paintings, don't beat yourself up—it's taken much of the art world five decades to catch up with this 80-year-old painter/novelist/former lady wrestler (under the nom de grapple Rosa Carlo, the Mexican Spitfire), and multiple-Obie-award-winning playwright.

It might help to meet Alicia Zorn and Effluvia Bouyant-Smith, two pioneering female artists who influenced Drexler. In the early 1800s, Miss Zorn turned lace, laundry lists, train tickets, rhinestones, love letters, and mascara smudges into ephemeral, beautiful collages. She also worked as "a whore, warming the frozen wastes of the North with her body. . . Her art had been executed between less imaginative acts of passion, and was her only means of true expression." Bouyant-Smith—"known to her friends as Luv"—was, at age 24, "the preeminent painter of her time: 1985 to 1986 and one half."

Don't feel bad if you've never heard of these feminists either—Drexler invented them. The excerpts are from an essay that introduced a 1986 exhibition of her work, a blast of fictional backstory supplying mordantly funny context for an artist who'd begun showing sculpture in 1960, only to butt up against the track-lit ceiling of the white cube. "Women were not bankable at that time," she explained during a 2004 interview. "In my naiveté I thought it was because I was not a painter so I must make paintings." And she did, becoming one of the first artists to appropriate and enlarge mass-media images as grounds for her paintings. Her flat areas of bold color surrounding stark figures still pack a wallop decades later, but they did not warm the hearts of '60s dealers, even as a male artist, Alex Katz, using similar (though more sedate) compositions, saw his career skyrocket.

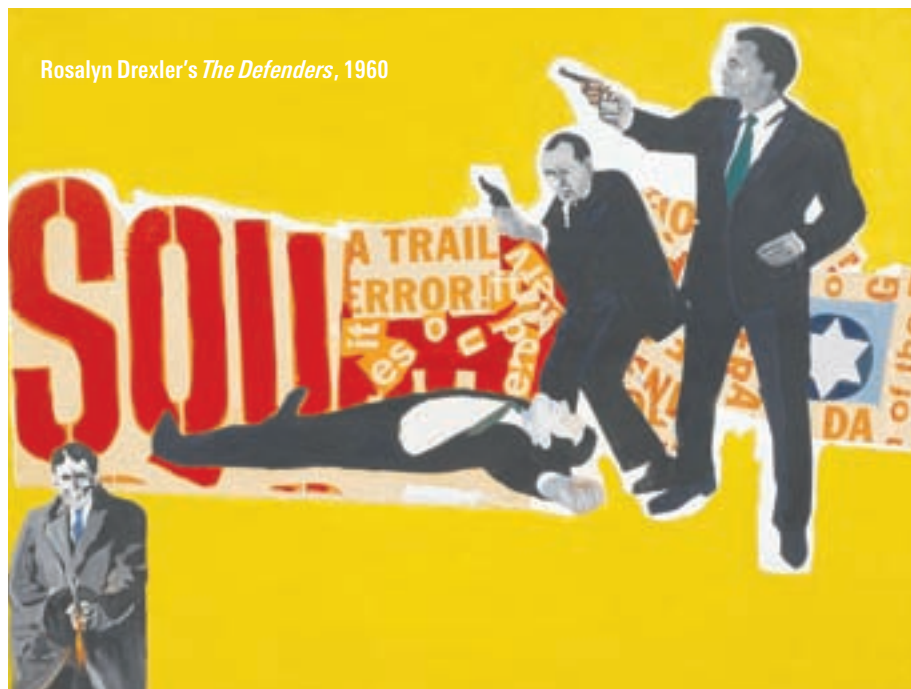
Drexler persevered, however, writing plays, contributing to an Emmy-winning Lily Tomlin special with Richard Pryor, and cranking out a dozen novels (from 1975's *Unwed Widow* to *Vulgar Lives*, published this month by Chiasmus Press), while showing her paintings only occasionally. But now is the time to acquaint yourself with them, because *Rosalyn Drexler: I Am the Beautiful Stranger—Paintings From the '60s* will feature some 40 works that feel fresher than many of the wares on offer in the art mall we call Chelsea.

Long before there was *People* magazine, Drexler executed the four-foot-high collage *Marilyn Pursued by Death* (1963), which imagines a nondescript bald man in hot pursuit while Hollywood's most tragic icon runs right at us. The viewer feels like a paparazzo blocking her way, lending a sense of human desperation absent from the equally powerful but colder gaze Warhol cast upon the doomed star. *Terry Gets a Light* (1967) slaps a coat of the era's hard-edged

Catching up with a Renaissance woman: painter/novelist/playwright/wrestler

abstraction atop breathless pop: The burgundy background, pale hands and knees—all are rendered in flat slabs of acrylic with sheets of black and brown paint veiling the faces of two young women leaning toward each other to share a match, their cigarettes providing zips of white amid a conspiratorial cloak of darkness. *Kiss Me Stupid* (1964) places a grappling couple executed in simple, graphic black and white outlines in the lower left quarter of a blank orange square. He grips her claw-like hand at the wrist, but there is no way of knowing if this is a struggle or embrace, rape or love. It's '50s noir in Summer of Love colors—nasty, yet fun and bracing. Or, as "Luv" Bouyant-Smith once put it, "A good punch in the nose validates one's position as an artist." Great thing is, with Drexler, you're never quite sure who's taking the hit.

→ **Rosalyn Drexler: I Am the Beautiful Stranger—Paintings From the '60s**, March 16 through April 21, 2007, at Pace Wildenstein, 545 West 22nd Street, 212-989-4258.



PaceWildenstein Gallery