

## Seductive Subversion, Brooklyn Museum, New York

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The official history of Pop Art is the tale of men who prowled the domestic arena, staging their paintings in suburban kitchens, closets, bedrooms and bathrooms. Warhol's soup cans, Lichtenstein's romance comics, Oldenburg's lipsticks, Rosenquist's spaghetti and Jim Dine's bathrobe are icons of a movement that fetishised female equipment but spurned female company. Marilyn Monroe keeps cropping up in fluorescent splendour; so do big breasts and Cloroxed teeth. And yet no women have won permanent seats in the Pop pantheon. None.



Detail from 'Big Jim Colosimo' (c.1963), by Pauline Boty

All of which makes the Brooklyn Museum's new revisionist survey such an astonishing delight. **Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958-1968** unearths a secret history of talented ladies who toiled in the vineyards of Pop, gathered bushels of critical praise and were almost immediately forgotten. Warhol's famous epigram on fame certainly applied to them, even if his own 15 minutes have proved infinitely renewable.

The travelling exhibition, curated by Sid Sachs of the Museum of the Arts in Philadelphia, makes it stunningly clear that Pop's female contingent deserved better than four decades of shabby disregard. There's the brilliant Rosalyn Drexler, for example, whose cool, noirish collages savour the overlap of power and malevolence. She has had a cinematic life – she wrestled professionally (as Rosa Carlo, the Mexican Spitfire), novelised the movie *Rocky* (under the pseudonym Julia Sorel), and has written novels, plays and films – and her paintings feel like movie stills.

Femmes fatales and sharply dressed thugs strut across vast blank spaces, playing out scenes of cruelty and coercion. A man wearing a fedora glares out of "Home Movies" and aims a machine gun straight between our eyes. In the upper half of "Love and Violence" a suited tough guy cradles a woman's face in his hands, a gesture of tenderness or assault. We search the storyboards below for clues: is that the same man, wrestling a trench-coated goon for control of a pistol? Drexler's elusive parables share the pessimism of Warhol's roughly contemporaneous "Death and Disaster" series. But while Warhol has been posthumously promoted from celebrity to demigod, she has remained a minor polymath. "If you're alive," she once said, "things aren't going to be that good".

Across the Atlantic, the super-talented Pauline Boty also won a flicker of fame with her lush renderings of stars and gangsters. From a newspaper photo of one Big Jim Colosimo sitting in his attorney's grubby office, Boty produced a majestic portrait of low-life royalty. The white-suited mobster perches in a throne-like chair like a Velázquez potentate, isolated and monumentalised against an indigo background. His name is inscribed in imperial-sized letters of pastel pink.



Even as Warhol was busy silkscreening odes to Liz Taylor and Elvis, Boty was creating her own idiosyncratic homages to film stars. She, too, worshipped Marilyn Monroe, and she also had a weak spot for the French New Wave. "With Love to Jean-Paul Belmondo" (1962) (see detail of picture, left) magnifies the Gallic heartthrob's head to monstrous proportions. His face, half-hidden by sunglasses, looks sensual and oh-so-cool. But from his goofy straw hat blooms a scarlet shape – a mutant rose, a woman's private parts or a pulsing human brain.

Her renown peaked in the early 1960s, when she was featured, with Peter Blake, Derek Boshier, and Peter Phillips, in Ken Russell's film *Pop Goes the Easel*. An actress as well as a painter, she hobnobbed with Bob Dylan, sketched the Rolling Stones, and had just completed the set design for Kenneth Tynan's production of *Oh! Calcutta!* when she died of cancer at 28, in 1966. Within a few years, her paintings were gathering dust in an outhouse at her

Most of what's on display has enough self-evident power that the exhibition doesn't need to holler about injustice. Vitrines full of press releases and clippings record the fact that for a while the female pioneers received plenty of admiration – though not necessarily of the sort they craved. A Vogue profile of Pauline Boty was headlined “Living Doll”. Another magazine marvelled: “Actresses often have tiny brains. Painters often have large beards. Imagine a brainy actress who is also a painter and also a blond and you have PAULINE BOTY.”

Pop was a scene as well as a movement and its women knew how to leverage their sex appeal, which simultaneously boosted their reputations and made it easy to write them off. Niki de St Phalle posed for Vogue and Life. Evelyne Axell was an actress before taking her clothes off for a series of erotic self-portraits. Marisol's knockout looks attracted attention to her sculptures, and at the same time deflected it towards herself.

For the most part, these artists accepted the beauty bargain of those times, but Jann Haworth, an American who lived in London and studied at the Slade in 1961, resisted it. “The assumption was that, as one tutor put it, ‘the girls were there to keep the boys happy.’ He prefaced that by saying ‘it wasn't necessary for them to look at the portfolios of the female students ... they just needed to look at their photos.’” Haworth answered contempt with competitiveness. “I was determined to better them, and that's one of the reasons for the partly sarcastic choice of cloth, latex and sequins as media. It was a female language to which the male students didn't have access.” Defying the sexist culture there, she made the “partly sarcastic choice” of cloth, latex and sequins as media – “a female language to which the male students didn't have access”, she recalled. The result is a catalogue of hilariously grotesque, squishily soft sculptures like a life-sized doll in a French maid's uniform, bewigged with human hair.

Her diligence only helped for a while. In 1967, she and her husband, artist Peter Blake, collaborated on the cover of The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which included one of her stuffed old ladies and a Shirley Temple doll wearing a “Welcome The Rolling Stones” sweater. The couple won a Grammy Award for the design, but while Blake enjoyed permanent celebrity, she drifted into obscurity.

The exhibition feels like a companion piece to the television series *Mad Men*, which shows professional women in the early 1960s suffering a daily drizzle of humiliation. So perhaps Idelle Weber, another of the forgotten women of Pop, finds some bitter satisfaction in seeing the work she made then being imitated now for the sake of period authenticity. The TV series's credit sequence shows a silhouetted man in a suit plummeting past a modernist office building. It's an image of stylish despair, and also either a rip-off or a tribute to Weber's “Munchkins” triptych, where silhouetted men in suits ride escalators inside a modernist office building. Finally Pop culture is recognising Pop's women with sincerest flattery.

Until January 9 2010

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