

An Art Restorer With a History of Her Own

Profile: Lisa Rosen

By MARTIN EDLUND | February 24, 2005

ART RESTORATION IS, FOR THE MOST PART, QUIET, contemplative work. Removing varnish. Patching holes. Researching ancient methods and materials. That sort of thing. There's little glitz or glamour.

But when Lisa Rosen began getting press requests last year after restoring the Stations of the Cross murals at St. Ignatius Loyola, the spectacular Catholic church on Park Avenue at 83rd Street, she found herself in a familiar spot.

In the early 1980s, Ms. Rosen was an "it" girl and everything that vague appellation implies. She was a jet-setting fashion model for the likes of Chanel and Dior. She was a core member of the downtown art-and-music scene that grew up around the Mudd Club, which produced Jean-Michel Basquiat, John Lurie, Debi Mazar, and Jim Jarmusch, among others. She was one of those mysterious creatures who, through some alchemy of charm, will, and chance, comes to symbolize all that is cutting-edge and hip.

When I visited her recently at the enormous townhouse she rents in Brooklyn Heights, Ms. Rosen informed me that my timing was good: She has just decided to talk again about her "dubious past."

In part, this is because her past is once again in public view. Ms. Rosen appears in episodes of Glen O'Brien's "TV Party" variety show on display at the "East Village, USA" exhibit now at the New Museum, and she is part of the ensemble cast of "Downtown 81," the long-delayed cult film starring Jean-Michel Basquiat that serves as a kind of video family tree of the bygone art scene.

In photos from that period, Ms. Rosen looks like a new-wave Liza Minelli: jagged hair, pale complexion, expressive mouth. She appears equally comfortable in couture and the grubby "Willy Mays" sweatshirt painted for her by Basquiat (which she keeps in a drawer).

Now 43, she's still handsome and confident. On the day we met, she was wearing a rust-colored jacket, matching knee-high boots, and white pants slightly smudged from work. When she left the room to retrieve something, I found myself primping my hair in a giant antique mirror on the wall of her studio.

Her experience as an "it" girl was, in actuality, just a long diversion from her interest in art restoration, which began when, at age 13, she visited a friend in California whose sister was working in the laboratory at the Getty Museum. She spent the next summer cleaning shards of Etruscan pottery in the basement of a Danish art museum with a toothbrush, and, at 17, she was admitted to New York University with the intention of studying history and applied arts.

That lasted only a semester. The siren song of the Mudd Club was too alluring. "The thing about the Mudd Club was that you walked in, and you wanted to know everybody in the place," she says. "They all looked fascinating, completely fascinating." She dropped out of NYU and enrolled full-time in the club's social scene.

Ms. Rosen describes this entire episode in her life as a dizzying vortex of fascinating, famous, and fabulous people and places. Her recollections unspool in lengthy narratives that sound like vivid, name-dropping dreams.

"I took a month off from the Mudd Club and was lent a one-way plane ticket to Paris by Patricia Field. She had a shop on 8th Street then, but now she's very well-known as the clothing designer who creates the clothes for 'Sex and the City.' I was gonna meet my girlfriend to go to an art opening where there would be food, so we could actually eat that night, and I picked her up and she was having her photo done by Pierre and Gilles - art photographers, they're quite famous now - and the editor of Marie Claire was there, and she asked me had I ever modeled, and I said 'No.' She asked if I had any photos of myself and I said 'No.' She asked if I could come to the office tomorrow and I said 'Okay.' She was really nice. She took a Polaroid, and that was that, and I left.

"A few days later, the House of Chanel called. They had seen my Polaroid and they asked if I was available to do a publicity shot next week. I remember I had to put my hand over the receiver because I gasped, and I said, 'Yes, sure,' and I did that shot. With that shot, they asked if I had ever done a fashion show, and I said 'No.' They said, 'There are 12 girls going to Cannes next week, and I'd love for you to do it.' I didn't have a French Social Security number and I didn't have an agency, so they said, 'Which agency would you like?' - and that was another 'Could you wait one minute?' and I ran to the phone, 'What's a good agency?' - and I was accepted to an agency. As soon as I was with an agency and was with Chanel, I got everybody. I did shows for Dior, Jean Paul Gaultier, Kansai Yamamoto, blah, blah, blah."

Retrieving a folding table from the closet, Ms. Rosen produces her modeling book. Her catchall "blah, blah, blah" encompasses the biggest designers and photographers in fashion. Flipping through the pages: There's a still from a Chanel perfume ad directed by Richard Avedon and choreographed by Twyla Tharp; pictures of her wearing inflatable pants by Issey Miyake ("two very small Japanese women on either side pumped it with air, blowing into either side"); a picture of her outfitted in an ensemble of tea-strainer earrings and tomato-sauce-can bangles by Jean Paul Gaultier; a photo by Mario Testino ("You'll find he's like God now"); John Galliano; Italian Vogue; Marie Claire; a John Cale record cover; Betsey Johnson.

After six years, at age 25, Ms. Rosen dropped out of fashion as abruptly and nonchalantly as she'd entered it. Visiting Rome on a two-week vacation, she thought she might like to live there. "I mentioned it to somebody and they said, 'I've got an apartment there you can borrow,' and I packed my bags. Mario Stefano, the famous painter, asked me what I wanted to do in Rome, and I said, 'I always wanted to be a restorer,' and he said, 'Why didn't you say so?' and he makes a phone call and I had an appointment the next day to meet Cecilia Bernardini. She was at that point doing the Trajan Column, and I started the next day as an apprentice."

Ms. Rosen began at the bottom, doing the dirty work - carrying water buckets, climbing scaffolding - all the while learning the craft. In 1992, she branched out on her own.

In Europe, her clientele consisted mostly of royals. "The families still have things intact," she says. "You go from prince and princess to the count and countess and so on."

She restored damaged art and sculpture at La Reggia di Caserta near Naples, a royal hunting lodge that had served as headquarters for American forces during World War II. ("The boys used to play tennis against the frescos; they would drive jeeps through the halls.") She did a six year stint with Prince Prospero and the Colonna Family, during which she discovered an enormous Paris Bordone painting that had gone unidentified in the family collection. She helped repair the work of Carlo Maderno in the Cardinals Corridor at the Vatican for the 2000 Jubilee Celebration.

Since moving back to New York in 1999, galleries, museums, and churches make up the mainstay of her work.

Like a highbrow version of a diet brochure, Ms. Rosen's restoration portfolio contains numerous before and after process shots. The restorations are remarkable. When she restored a test patch on the mosaics at St. Ignatius Loyola, visitors mistook it for a brilliant ray of light coming in through the windows. Having completed the mosaics, she says she's now "dying to do the statuary."

These would hardly seem like thrills when compared to the stuff of her former life. But thrills are where you find them, and for Ms. Rosen, nothing compares to the excitement of seeing a work restored to its original vibrancy. "It's instant gratification. It's there right in front of you," she says. "You're the first one to see it, and it doesn't get better than that."