

Paula Rego⁽¹⁾

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Before Paula Rego died, she had already changed the aesthetics of contemporary art in this country and farther afield; her death leaves the horizons she opened clear and free for others to explore. A storyteller in pictures, she defied the condescension in which illustrative work and literary reference were held; as a woman artist she did not equivocate about the intimacies of women's lives, for good and ill, and alongside another fearless psychological explorer, Louise Bourgeois, she helped to revolutionise attitudes to women artists and the representation of women's concerns, fantasies, drives and lives, both as subjects and as makers. Similarly, she valued the consciousness of children and saw making art as a form of play, essential to survival. Supremely skilled at drawing on paper and plate, she turned the traditional discipline of working from the live model into an inward journey.

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The vigour of her hand and brilliance of her technique meant she could realise singular, wondrous, and disturbing scenes with unflinching honesty as they arose in her mind's eye; these images are ambivalent, often perverse, mischievous, with undercurrents of danger. Over her long career – more than sixty years of creativity, she generated hundreds of entirely original scenarios that are often baffling yet go straight through to the nervous system of the viewer, as Francis Bacon (whom she admired), wished to do. She called her style 'beautiful grotesque', a phrase that catches the contradictions in her images, but does not convey the strength and strangeness of the bodies she painted, the turbulent force of her compositions and the sympathy she shows in her depiction of emotions and ordeals. She was close to both to Surrealism and to Art Brut in spirit, often gleeful at delinquency and yet sensitive to the presence of the sacred, but her methods differ, for her array of traditional skills served remarkable powers of visualisation and dramatization. If Paula liked a story – from an old tale, a poem, or a novel – its elements crystallised in a flash into images: she enjoyed being read poetry and fiction, knew a great many poems by heart, and returned to favourites again and again. This happened, for instance, in 2002, when she painted large scenes taken from *The Crime of Father Amaro*, the ferocious anti-clerical novel by Eça de Queirós, and when, the following year, she read *Jane Eyre* and later listened to it read to her, and produced her fierce sequence of large format prints. These scenes are hardly illustrations of the novel, but rather variations ranging into fantasy far beyond the verbal account. The literary sources that inspired her included English Nursery Rhymes, which she first heard at school in Portugal and rediscovered when her grandchildren were born and the long narrative poem *The Pendle Witches*, by Blake Morrison, a terrifying story of persecution and murder, which was published in a limited edition with her unsparing illustrations.

Her faculties were dry touchpaper and caught fire with a promptness and dynamism that could not be believed; that energy of eye and mind radiated from her person, too. She wore richly coloured, flamboyant clothes and had a huge smile, wicked and conspiratorial, a grin that was enhanced by expressive crooked teeth (her childhood predated the era of braces). What is still surprising is that this most original and peculiar creative spirit inspired in so many viewers recognition of her vision, that the experiences she depicted, once made visible by her, struck home for so many, and led to

profound fellow feeling and admiration, bordering on adulation. The outpouring of tributes and affection has been tumultuous. In Portugal, where she was born in 1935, a National Day of Mourning was declared.

She was acclaimed in her native Iberia, with a retrospective in 2004 at the Museo Serralves in Porto, and another, two years later, at the Reina Sofia in Madrid. However, in the UK, recognition of her work was slow in coming. The first revelatory display of her work took place at the Serpentine Gallery in 1988, when the late Alastair Warman was director and championed Rego (and other women artists). Rego was in her fifties.

Rego's first full retrospective only took place at Tate Britain in 2021, when she was 86. There had been other major shows: at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in 1998, and in 2018, just before the pandemic, Catherine Lampert curated a fine exhibition in Milton Keynes and then at the Edinburgh Museum of Modern Art. In Portugal she was uniquely honoured in A Casa das Histórias, the House of Stories, in Cascais, near Lisbon, an imaginative architectural building dedicated to her work which opened in 2009. She chose the name herself and donated to the museum a full range of her graphic art.

Like many others, I first saw Paula's work at the Serpentine show: the show included large canvases inspired by the Vivian Girls, the courageous heroines of the Outsider artist Henry Darger's epic: skirmishing small figures, girls and animals, rhythmically wreathed together in rapid cursive paint marks. Smaller paintings of The Red Monkey series unfolded fierce scenes with children and animals, mischief and conflict in the home: 'It was as if a dog were to tell its own story,' Rego commented. That savage persona, 'Dog woman' was to resurface, more powerfully raging than ever, in the great sequence of depression pictures she made in the 90s. The Serpentine show also included The Dance, now in the Tate, and many other film noirish scenes of sexual tension, male authority, female power and powerlessness, as remembered from her childhood in Portugal and her own life in London. She said of herself 'I paint to give fear a face'.

Paula Rego was born in Lisbon, during the dictatorship of Salazar, and brought up in Ericeira on the Portuguese riviera; she was an only child in a large household of family members and servants. Her father was an electronics engineer, anti-clerical and dissident, and did not want his daughter to be taught by church or state in Portugal, so sent her to English schools, first in Portugal and later in Kent. Nevertheless, the Salazar regime haunts

her early work: *Interrogation* (1950) and *Salazar Vomiting the Homeland* (1960) and the frieze-like painting, when we had a house in the country, we'd throw marvellous parties and we'd go out and shoot black people (1961), unfold the nightmare of state violence. Her experience of oppression around her and the threat of danger stayed with her always: she remained alert to new forms of cruelty, legal and illegal. At home, her grandmother, aunt, and other members of the household formed Paula's imagination as they passed on gossip and stories, weird Portuguese fairy tales and gory accounts of saints' torments. This material directly enters her work (the series, *The Dame with the Goat's Foot* and *The Pig Prince*, for example) but folkloric motifs and structures recur over the many decades of her picture-making.

In 1952, she went to study at the Slade, where she met Vic Willing, a powerful, charismatic figure whom, in 1959, became her husband; they had three children: Caroline (Cassie), Vicky, and Nick. The couple went to live in Portugal during an early part of their marriage till 1963; the plan was that Willing would paint and also help with the family business there, but it did not prosper; Vic had also contracted multiple sclerosis. They returned to London; life was not easy, to say the least, and the toll of his illness sounds through Rego's magnificent, troubled work of this period (*The Family*). Vic Willing died aged 60 in 1988. It is not often noted that Rego's career, like Louise Bourgeois' and Ruth Asawa's, overturns the received idea that artistic genius and motherhood- and hardship – are incompatible.

Their youngest child, the filmmaker Nick Willing filmed interviews with his mother for the startling documentary he made in 2017. He called it *Secrets and Stories*, after one of Rego's chiaroscuro prints, a scene of women and children (and fairy-tale creatures) whispering and confiding together. The power of women's networks, operating beneath the machismo of patriarchs, appears with the force of lived experience in numerous works: the 1987 tableaux inspired by Jean Genet's play *The Maids* also brood on conspiracies between women. Rego recognised the ambivalence of such networks of informal power. She was beloved by feminists, and she never drew back from seeing how women's weak status leads them to work against their own interests. She could be wayward, too, and relished her independence: the illustrations to the story *O Vinho* (Melo & Rego, 2007) began as a commission to design artist's labels for a special vintage wine; she responded with scenes of mothers or nursemaids sozzling babies, men and women sprawling and

puking into basins, with splashes of burgundy watercolour to enhance the effect. Her art is as distant from politeness or promotion as it is possible to be; what she chooses to reveal belongs to the human comedy as she sees it, with eyes wide open. Not unexpectedly, the vintners were taken aback and the work was rejected.⁽²⁾

The unsparing series of backstreet abortion paintings she made in 1998 helped decide the second Portuguese referendum in 2007 to grant women the right to choose. In more recent years, her devastating images of female circumcision are deeply touched by horror and pity; they show ghoulish older women operating on girl children; and in *Human Cargo* (2007-8) and *Little Brides with Their Mother* (2009-10), she drew and painted women being trafficked, older women collaborating in the trade. This series again nods to Goya, especially his engraving of a young woman being pandered by, 'Maty God forgive her! Her own mother!' Paula was alive to the distortions produced by servitude and abjection, and exceptionally frank in seeing how women connived with one another to continue those states. She did not turn a blind eye and she confronted the most difficult areas of experience, actual and internal: 'Shame is something that interests me profoundly,' she said. 'It is exactly those areas of shame that I like to touch on. It makes you sometimes squirm, but why, what is shame? I think shame is one of the most interesting things we have.'

Goya remained her most evident precursor; her dream realism, depicting the phantoms of her unconscious with a powerful figurative technique, echoes his *Caprichos* and *Disparates*; the painting *War* (2003), also bought by the Tate, was prompted by a newspaper photograph from the Iraq conflict; Rego substituted flayed rabbits and destroyed soft toys to horrifying effect that again echoes Goya's *Disasters of War*. She liked to learn from others: she was familiar with Hieronymus Bosch and other fantastic apocalyptic artists from the monumental *Temptation of St Anthony* in Lisbon and her work reflects other Portuguese masters, such as Nuno Gonçalves and Jorge Afonso, as revealed by the recent exhibition at the Louvre, *L'Age d'or de la Renaissance portugaise*. In 1990, a residency at the National Gallery in London in 1990, gave her access to

2. The images were later printed to illustrate, obliquely, friend João de Melo's melancholy tale, *O Vinho* (London: Enitharmon Editions, 2007).

long close looking at the Italian Old Masters; this intimacy profoundly influenced her sense of drama, scale, and teeming narrative composition. She always acknowledged forerunners with pleasure, conveying special appreciation for graphic artists: William Hogarth and his 'Modern Moral Subjects' shapes many works, not only *The Marriage à la Mode* triptych of 1999. She kept heaps of books around her in the studio for reference and admired the brilliance of cartoonists such as James Gillray and Thomas Rowlandson, and invoked illustrators beyond these shores – Gustave Doré, Max Klinger, Steinlen.

Her studio, in Kentish Town, was a prop room, a wardrobe, a rehearsal stage, a theatre – her playroom. When she was younger, she had worked on the floor; she said that art is a form of playing and 'playing is reality', as D. W. Winnicott declared. In 1988, when Lila Nunes came to help with her husband Vic Willing during his last illness, Rego found an alter ego: Nunes, who is Portuguese, resembles Paula in build and colouring and was able to tune in, almost uncannily, to the artist's needs; the partnership was exceptionally productive, ranging from complex compositions in which Nunes takes different roles, to the great solo studies of the *Possession* series (2004). Rego also drew on family and friends to enact her scenarios: her daughters, her grand-daughters, and her partner, the writer and publisher Anthony Rudolf, whom she met in 1995. Rudolf has said that he realised early on that if he wanted to have time with Paula, the only way was to sit for her. He appears in many roles, sometimes cross-dressed, at other times naked, for example as Gregor Samsa in the painting *Metamorphosis*, or the dead Christ in the mysteries of the life of the Virgin, which Rego painted for the President of Portugal in 2002 (she was steeped in Catholic lore, but her beliefs were highly personal). When no model fitted her vision, she made 'dollies', stuffed, bulbous puppets whom she did not disguise, and who like the sinister Pillowman, haunt her most troubling visions.

Paula Rego worked all the time; her health and her life depended on it, and when inspiration dried up, she was plunged into gloom. Some of her most sensitive and poignant drawings, a suite called *Misericordia*, were made in 2001; indirectly inspired by the magnificent novel of Benito Perez Galdos about beggars in Madrid, they show fragile, elderly patients being cared for, tenderly; the sick are small, like children again, while the carers loom, giants.

To meet in person, Paula Rego wasn't altogether like her paintings, at least not to a friend, which I feel so fortunate to have been. She was enigmatic, yes, and the stories she told were contradictory and asked for complicity rather than belief. Yet the darkness in the work didn't shadow her in person. She exuded – when she was well – a great hunger for life, for friendship, for loving and well as being loved. She was warm and full of laughter, curiosity, and generosity. A rare sensibility, a most potent imagination, a beguiling and uniquely lovable woman, a true original, a magnificent artist. Like so many others, I miss her very much; the world has been terribly diminished by her loss.

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