Paula Rego at the Tate: “I always want to turn things on their heads, to upset the established order”

Paul Mitchell
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Paula Rego *, Tate Britain, London until October 24, 2021 ; Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Netherlands, November 28, 2021–March 21, 2022*

Tate Britain has mounted the largest ever retrospective of the 86-year-old artist Paula Rego, who was born in Portugal but has lived in London for the last half century.

The exhibition’s curators say Rego has played “a key role in redefining figurative art in the UK and internationally”, describing her as “an uncompromising artist of extraordinary imaginative power.” The exhibition, they explain, “will tell the story of this artist’s extraordinary life, highlighting the personal nature of much of her work and the socio-political context in which it is rooted. It will also reveal the artist’s broad range of references, from comic strips to history painting.”

Over 100 of Rego’s works are exhibited, ranging from her early oil paintings through collage and acrylic to what she calls pastel paintings and her drawings either from real people or the life-sized dolls which fill her studio.

“My paintings tell stories; they do not illustrate stories… I always want to turn things on their heads, to upset the established order,” Rego told the *Guardian* in 2004.

She draws on her social commentating forebears—Goya, Hogarth, Courbet—and gruesome Portuguese folk tales to explore the contradictions of human existence. She evokes an atmosphere of suppressed violence and subversive humour, with love and sympathy for the underdog.

Rego was born in 1935 in Lisbon under the brutal dictatorship of António de Oliveira Salazar, with its right-wing creed of God, Homeland and Family. The regime’s most important function for Portugal’s ruling elite was to suppress the struggles of the working class that erupted following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and prevent opposition developing in the colonies.

Rego had a comfortable middle-class childhood, living between the family home near Lisbon and her grandparent’s farm in Ericeira. Her father, a wealthy factory owner supplying the former British telecommunications company Marconi, was a liberal, anti-clerical, anti-fascist opponent of the regime.

“To a great extent, I was protected because my father had an engineering company and we weren’t poor. The poor starved, particularly in the countryside. There were political prisoners who were tortured and imprisoned. You had to be careful what you said,” Rego explained in an interview with Juliet Rix in 2019.

“Portugal was a fascist society. No freedom of speech. An immensely repressive society. There were rebellions but most were put down ruthlessly,” Rego recalled in *Secrets & Stories*, a film by her son, Nick Willing, in 2017. She describes how civil guards shot 300 dockworkers during a strike with “no word in the papers.”

Rego is clearly aware of the class issues involved in the position of women in society. “Smart ladies in Estoril would play canasta and have cocktails. All this was going on with misery and unbelievable poverty,” she told interviewer Catherine Lampert in 2008.

“My mother is really a casualty of the society she lived in. A deadly killer society for women. I despised it. They encouraged women to do nothing. The less they did the more they were admired for it. That is women of a certain class. The poor women had to do bloody everything,” she says in *Secrets & Stories*.

Rego has always valued the co-operation of men. Her father was an “immensely kind and liberal man who tried to give me my freedom,” she told the *Guardian*. He sent her to a specialist English school near Lisbon between 1945 and 1951, where she produced the first painting in the exhibition *Interrogation* (1950).

It is a remarkably sophisticated image for a 15-year-old, depicting a distraught seated woman, flanked by two ghostly goons. Already, a brooding atmosphere is apparent.

Between 1952 and 1956 Rego studied at London’s Slade School of Art and won the coveted Summer Composition prize, an honour she still calls her proudest moment. In her painting *Under Milk Wood* she transposes Dylan Thomas’s fictitious village Llareggub to Portugal.

Rego, supported by her father, returned to Portugal after becoming pregnant and being jilted by Victor Willing, the Slade’s star pupil who was already married. “Going back was like going back to prison, to a bourgeois life I detested; I felt I was never going to escape. I wasn’t angry with Vic; I needed him,” she says. The couple married in 1959, living between Ericeira and London and went on to have two more children.

The exhibition has several examples of Rego’s intensely political and social surrealist-style 1960s works including *Salazar Vomiting the Homeland* (1960), which portrays the dictator as a bloated sac destroying Portugal. It was not exhibited in Portugal until 1972.

Rego’s 1961 painting, *When we had a house in the country we’d throw marvellous parties and then we’d go out and shoot black people*, lampoons the imperialist mentality of the ruling elite in Portugal’s African colonies and was also censored. The last nine words of the title were omitted when it was first exhibited.

Also on display are Rego’s dramatic collages of a Portuguese working class suffering from repression and poverty, including *Julieta* (1964), a reference to the wife of a technician who witnesses his electrocution while working unprotected on an electricity pylon, and *The Firemen of Alijo* (1966), so poor they had to stuff their clothes with straw in the winter. Rego also produced a collage, her only self-portrait, in the same style.

1966 was a dreadful year for Rego and Willing; both of their fathers died, and Willing was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. To keep the Rego family business, Willing stepped back from his own art career to

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manage it. But the company collapsed in 1974, the year that saw the Carnation Revolution and what Rego later described to *The Times* as "a welcome release from that dreadful fascist dictatorship" symbolised by her painting, *Military Manoeuvres* (1975). The farmhouse was sold to pay the debts, forcing the family to return penniless to London in 1976.

Rego says that a "general decline set in for years" between 1966 and 1979, exacerbated by bouts of depression and excessive drinking. As she sought a stimulus for her art, she rejected suggestions she abandon her figurative work and take up abstraction.

She recalls how one art critic came to her studio and declared, "This is a load of junk. Why do you say you need a story? ... you don't need a story for anything."

She replied, "Well what am I going to do then if I don't have a story? What am I going to paint?"

"You paint a picture. You know what a picture is," he said. "You get a long canvas and you get five colours. You get one brush and you dip it and you drive it across the canvas from the left hand side and then you get another colour and you drive it across the canvas from the right hand side and when you've got the canvas full of lines of paint that's a picture."

"And I thought, 'Oh, is it?' And I went to Portugal and I tried it. Of course, it wasn't anything. It wasn't a picture at all. It wasn't about anything. He was wrong." (Interview with Ben Eastham and Helen Graham, *The White Review*, January 2011).

Eventually Rego rekindled her interest in folk art and began using cartoonish animal characters as human surrogates. "You can get away with so much more truth and cruelty if you dress people up as animals, but they're acting parts", she explained in the *Guardian*.

In the early 1980s, Rego explored the feelings of love, bitterness and frustration arising from Willing's degenerative illness and a tense relationship with her long-time lover, the author Rudi Nassauer. In one, a monkey (Willing) holds out a poisoned dove to a bear (Nassauer). In another, an unfaithful wife cuts off the tail of her vomiting monkey husband in front of the bear.

The cartoonish character of her compositions had virtually disappeared by the time Rego produced a series of extremely moving paintings as Willing approached death. Her figures became fuller and more naturalistic and are set in an atmosphere of mystery and foreboding.

The Dance (1988) has several characters dancing in the moonlight, a single woman (Rego), two identical men (Willing) with two different women and three other women—a grandmother, her daughter and granddaughter, symbols of the past, present and future. "I was not a good nurse," Rego says in her interview with the *White Review*. "I'm not good with illness. I don't like to think of him badly crippled, I like to think of him dancing. And talking about art. He was the best talker I've ever met. We'd talk about art together all the time."

In 1988 Willing died of his illness aged 60. In the 2017 film *Paula Rego, Secrets & Stories* made by her son Nick Willing, Rego reveals the enduring love the couple experienced and the way they encouraged each other by reading from a letter he had written her, headed "Adieu," whilst he was dying:

"Paula, I'm uncomfortable now all the time. Most of me is gone already. It only remains for me to dispose of the other little bit while I still can.

"I don't want to know what the bitter end is. This will be a lonely moment, I imagine.

"Sell my things slowly and wisely.

"I know you will paint even better. Trust yourself and you will be your own best friend.

"As well as sadness, you may also feel relief. Don't feel badly about that. Enjoy life, it's all there is. The kids are great.

"All my love, Vic."

In the same year, Rego had her first major retrospective in Lisbon and London and, in 1990, became the first artist in residence at the National Gallery where she created a series of paintings and prints based on nursery rhymes and satirical works of artists like the satirist William Hogarth. She transposed Hogarth's series of six paintings *Marriage A-la-Mode* (1743)—a morality tale of marrying for money—into a triptych about contemporary Portugal. A full explanation of their meaning can be found here.

The Tate exhibition also displays the huge and stunning 1993 watercolour inspired by Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, a rural love story which explores themes of forbidden sex, frustrated desire and the struggle between man and nature.

In 1998 Rego painted her uncompromising series of *Abortion* pictures after the failure of a referendum to legalise it in Portugal. She counts them among her best work, "because they are true, and they were effective in helping to change the law in Portugal [in 2007]."

More recently Rego has produced work on female genital mutilation, sex trafficking and war. In *War* (2003), Rego, moved by a news photograph of Iraqi refugees in Basra, depicted a blood-splattered rabbit holding its offspring, in the manner of Goya, to condemn the US-led invasion.

The Tate exhibition also displays several of Rego's series *Possession* (2004) in which her leading model since 1985, Lila Nunes, lies sprawled in various poses across a psychiatrist's couch, expressing Rego's lifelong struggle with depression and 40 years of therapy.

In numerous interviews Rego is asked the inevitable question, (which itself straitjackets women), "Are you a feminist?" Her replies include: "In the sense that I have defended women's right to safe abortions and made work about female genital mutilation. I make work from a woman's perspective, but that is because I am a woman. It would be hard to make work from a man's perspective."

And: "It is hard for me to tell… I was certainly aware that you had to be a man to be [considered] a 'proper' artist, but I felt like a man when I was working… painting pictures is the part of you that's a man. It has the push, the thrust." She explained, "The women are not always heroines. They are very often awkward and human, like everyone else."

Rego's measured replies form a stark contrast to the exhibition catalogue and its six essays, all written from a feminist perspective. We are told that Rego "takes us on a journey of revenge and self-empowerment" against the patriarchy, the "gender identity that men have forged for women" and the male gaze.

Curator Elena Crippa declares that Rego is part of "the collective female experience, one of connectedness across generations through everyday life objects and acts, the experience of acting as carers and the shared endurance of subordination across history."

In 33 pages of catalogue text there is virtually no discussion of the nature of the Portuguese dictatorship or the class differences that Rego identifies in the different lives and concerns of bourgeois and working class women. There is barely a word about the series of paintings that included *The Firemen of Alijo*.

The contention that women of all social classes should unite out of fear of male domination and subordinate themselves to bourgeois feminist politics arises at a time when class antagonisms among women are at their starkest in history.

The basic issue is the not the oppression of women by men, but the exploitation of workers, male and female, by the corporate and financial elite.

The fight to defend the social rights of working class men and women, the right to a job, to health care, to a pension, to an education, is inseparable from a fight against social inequality, war and the capitalist system. The particular issues facing working class women, including the right to an abortion and opposition to all forms of discrimination, can be addressed only through the mobilization of the entire working class and

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the fight for socialism. Rego's work, because it grapples so forcefully with the social reality of class oppression, points in this direction.

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5. The Betrothal: Lessons: The Shipwreck, after 'Marriage a la Mode' by Hogarth (1999), Tate Collection © Paula Rego

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