

Frieze

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The Power and Pain of Paula Rego's Women

The painter's largest retrospective to date, at Tate Britain, cements her place as one of Britain's most inventive and compelling living artists

BY [KATHERINE ANGEL](#) IN [FEATURES](#), [PROFILES](#) | 24 AUG 21



In *The Family*, a work in acrylics that Paula Rego completed in 1988 – the year her husband, Victor Willing, died from multiple sclerosis – a mother undresses a father in a bedroom. She gazes out at us with a peaceable, open expression, her arm partially obscuring her husband's face. Her daughter helps, one hand gripping the fabric of her father's suit, her groin pressed against his, pinning him to the bed. Another girl stands by the window, her hands clasped in a kind of prayer; her shadow falls across the floor.

I find this picture – 'picture' being Rego's favoured word for her works – terrifying. Like many of her images, it vibrates with indeterminacy and is paradigmatically uncanny – 'that class of the frightening', as Sigmund Freud wrote in his eponymous 1919 essay, 'which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar'. The uncanny is something that is 'secretly familiar': something which has undergone repression and then returned from it. It is what we already know but refuse to recognize.



Paula Rego, 2021. Courtesy: the artist and Victoria Miro;
photograph: © Nick Willing

One aspect of this uncanniness in Rego's work lies in the unsettling of identities, not least through the role of Lila Nunes, who came to live with the family as an au pair in 1985, later helping with Willing's care as his health deteriorated. Rego and Nunes have been in an ongoing – partly non-verbal, unconscious – collaboration for decades. Together they create the 'dollies' – sculptural, toy-like, soft figures that are variously rabbits, skeletons, dolls or something much more ambiguous – which have populated Rego's later works. Nunes herself is a recurring figure in Rego's pictures, embodying various personae in her narrative

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scenes. In *Secrets & Stories*, the 2017 documentary about Rego made by her son, Nick Willing, Nunes describes the process as Rego 'using me as her'. 'I've never felt like your mother was really painting me,' she explains. 'It's someone else she sees through me – either herself or another person.'

Doubling and mirroring occur throughout Rego's work. In her 1999 pastel *The Betrothal*, part of a triptych made in homage to William Hogarth's 'Marriage à la Mode' (c.1743), two mothers arrange a marriage between their children. The composition is a more elaborate echo of *The Family*. The two women sit askance in a complicated relationship to one another. The daughter, in a frilly white dress, slumps in a chair, looking straight at us, resting one of her bare feet (which have slightly claw-like toes) on a dog, to whom her loyalty is perhaps bound. A suited boy – her presumed match – clings, crouching, to his mother. And, amongst a range of other figures, we see, in a mirror, the reflection of a man.



Paula Rego, *Under Milk Wood*, 1954, oil on canvas, 1.1 × 1.1 m. Courtesy: © Paula Rego and UCL Art Museum, University College London/Bridgeman Images

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This man – the father, the patriarch? – is both looking at us and, simultaneously, observing the scene we observe, in which the women of the family tie a daughter to a son. (The picture's composition also echoes Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* [1656], another family portrait full of mirrors, openings and images within images, where the seat of authority observes from just off stage.) His pose is one of relaxed nonchalance, in contrast to another figure who sits just behind the principal characters – an older woman, open-mouthed, head flung back, as if she sees something shocking in the distance. Does she know what lies ahead?

In *Convulsion* (2000), a middle-aged woman, miniaturized on a large armchair, recoils from an older woman who writhes on the ground in a nightie, gripping onto the chair, as if needing to be rescued, which her daughter refuses. Again, a mirror shows us another viewer: a young girl, looking cautiously out, clutching a large-faced, cartoonish doll. These figures are a kind of nightmarish apparition: it's as though we are looking into a mirror and seeing someone else's face stare back. Do they embody what might inhabit us? Are they an echo of what might be really going on in the picture, a palimpsest of what the picture is refusing to acknowledge? 'It's very difficult to see what's there,' Rego has said of drawing from life. 'You have to look so carefully.'



Paula Rego, *Red Monkey Offers Bear a Poisoned Dove*, 1981, 65 × 105 cm. Courtesy: © Paula Rego

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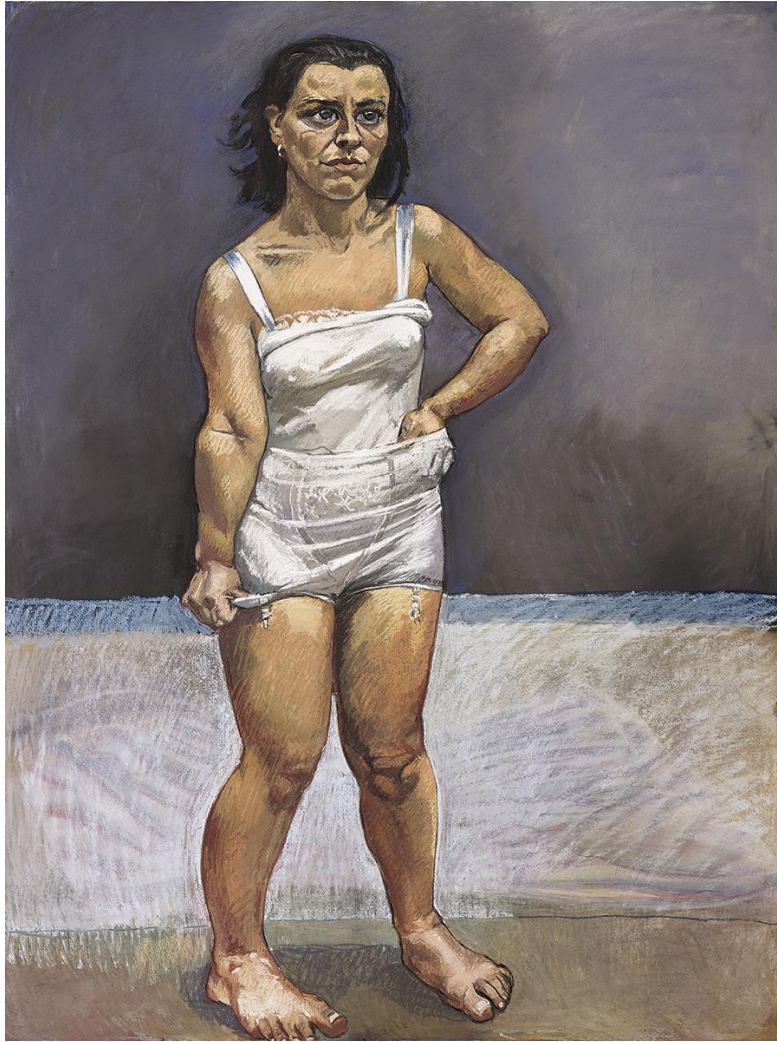
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Rego was born in 1935 in Lisbon – under the Estado Novo, António de Oliveira Salazar's brutal dictatorship characterized by secrecy, surveillance, censorship and patriarchal violence. (The artist calls it a 'deadly, killer society for women'.) Rego began painting and drawing young, encouraged by her father – an anti-clerical, anti-fascist and anglophile electronics engineer – who sent her to school in Britain aged 16 to escape the regime. She studied painting at the Slade School of Fine Art in London from 1952 to 1956, where she won the Summer Competition with her oil painting *Under Milk Wood* (1954). Frustrated by the Slade's ethos of painting from sculpture, however, Rego, who preferred to draw from life, increasingly began to draw on the floor or on a table. Her paintings of the early 1960s, which often touch on the dictatorship's brutality, hover between figurative and abstract. A mixture of collage and oil painting, these works draw on cubism, dada and surrealism, with nods to Max Ernst and Joan Miró, and reflect an electrifying encounter with Jean Dubuffet's art brut.

Rego was productive and gained recognition throughout the 1960s and '70s. During the 1980s, however, her work was injected with a new urgency. Rego has described the period from 1966 – the year of her father's death and of Willing's diagnosis with multiple sclerosis – to the late '70s as one of treading water. The work went 'downhill [...] something got stuck, I couldn't move on'. But 'things got better', she maintained, once her personal life came back into the pictures. She is not wrong. This was the decade in which the iconic contours of Rego's work emerged with force. Cartoon-like works on paper from the early 1980s – featuring the characters of a bear, a red monkey and a rabbit – introduce the motifs of cruelty, jealousy and humiliation. A 1986 series in which girls feed, nurse, shave and tend to dogs places centre stage the destabilizing sexuality of young women. *Girl Lifting Her Skirt to a Dog* (1986), for instance, features a stern-faced girl raising her stripy dress to reveal herself to a bemused animal. The starkly delineated, almost chiaroscuro acrylics of the late 1980s – seen in works such as *The Family*, *The Dance* (1988) and *The Maids* (1987) – establish the home as a place of terrifying depths and violence.

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Paula Rego, *Girdle*, 1995, pastel on paper on aluminium, 1.6 × 1.2 m.
Courtesy: © Paula Rego and Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto

Cruelty, sexuality, family drama, the power and murderousness of girls, the anger and determination of women: this is Rego's subject matter. And the more apparently naturalistic her work becomes – the more ostensibly legible the content – the more frightening it is; the less overtly grotesque, the more powerful the tinge of nightmarish hallucination. These are images from which one might wake in the dark, heart pounding, disconcerted by how an apparently simple scene – a girl cleaning a boot, figures dancing under moonlight – could feel so potent, as if it were trying to communicate something to us that we are trying to hide from ourselves.

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I have always associated Rego's work with lone women. Amongst her best-known images are the ten works in the series 'Untitled: The Abortion Pastels' (1998–99), made in response to a failed referendum on liberalizing Portugal's punitive restrictions on abortion after only 32 percent of voters turned out. (The works are credited with galvanizing support for a second referendum, in 2007, after which legislation was finally changed.) The women are always alone – in rooms, on beds, chairs, sofas, often surrounded by empty dark space, except for the occasional apparatus of the illegal, backstreet abortion. One woman on a bed, legs apart, looks sideways out at the viewer – in the place of the abortionist, perhaps, or a lover. The images play with the ambiguity between a woman readying herself for sex and steeling herself for a painful, dangerous operation. (The erotic and the violent are often mingled in Rego's work.) Another, a girl in school uniform, squats over a bucket, looking at us with matter-of-fact scepticism. Many of them lean onto beds, clutch pillows. Rego refers to them as 'the best thing I've ever done'.



Paula Rego, *The Dance*, 1988, acrylic on paper on canvas, 2.1 × 2.7 m. Courtesy: © Paula Rego and Tate

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The abortion works were made soon after Rego completed a series of pastels inspired by José Maria de Eça de Queirós's novel, *The Sin of Father Amaro* (1876). The book (a favourite of Rego's father) tells the story of a reluctant priest who impregnates a girl already betrothed to another man; she is sent away to have the child, but both she and the baby die. In *The Company of Women* (1997), Rego depicts Amaro, a blanket wrapped over him like a skirt, nestled into the bodies of the women taking care of him, looking out sullenly at the viewer. Narrative time is compressed and jumbled: this might be an evocation of Amaro as a child, dressed by the maids who looked after him; or it might be him as an adult, being indulged and indulging himself in a childish abrogation of responsibility, living a life whose consequences he doesn't have to bear. Although narrative, this picture, like so many of Rego's images, is not linear or chronological. Both scale and time warp in her work, with the child often present in some form or other.

This sequence ends with *Angel* (1998): Nunes, in vivid, rich skirts, wielding a sword in one hand and a sponge in the other (the instruments of Christ's passion). The angel looks at us with still, questioning satisfaction, a steely yet slightly amused vengeance in her eyes. The angel 'was going to punish everyone who'd done that', Rego says to her son in *Secrets & Stories*, explaining that the material had awakened 'all the pain and suffering from [her student years at] the Slade'. 'Everyone got knocked up' – there was no contraception – and 'men didn't care'. Someone would know someone who'd come to your house. 'Everybody did it,' she says, and tells the story of a man who tried to give his girlfriend an abortion himself: 'She turned up with a swollen belly full of water on the beach.'



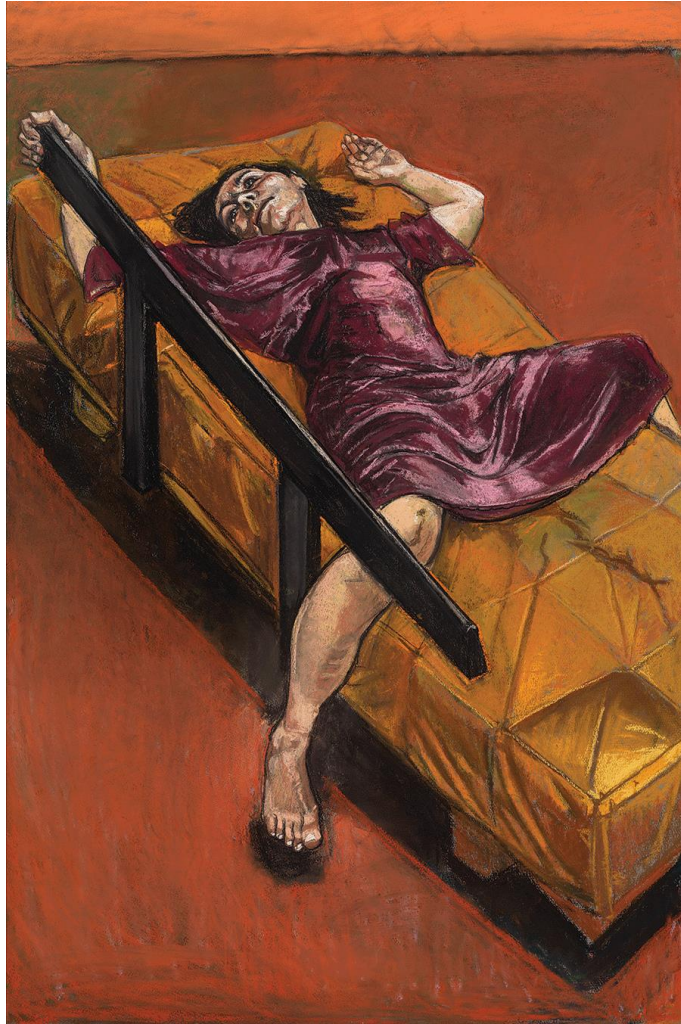
Paula Rego, *The Betrothal: Lessons: The Shipwreck*, after 'Marriage à la Mode' by Hogarth (detail), 1999, pastel on aluminium, triptych, 1.6 × 5 m.
Courtesy: © Paula Rego

Rego's paintings unflinchingly, mercilessly depict the pain and indifference women have historically experienced at the hands of men. At the back of *The Betrothal*, in what could be a doorway or yet another mirror or a painting, a clothed man watches a woman undress; she is peering into her knickers. This scene is echoed in *Snow White and Her Stepmother* (1995) – Rego frequently pays homage to beloved Disney films – in which the smartly dressed stepmother seems to be helping Snow White take her knickers off as she leans on her; both are grim-faced. Intimations of surveilled sexuality abound; some kind of humiliation or punishment lies ahead. *The Betrothal* also recalls *The Wedding Guest*: a pastel completed in 2000, in which a woman is half-dressed, dishevelled, standing by a sink, holding what might be her underwear. Rego links this painting to her first sexual encounter with Willing during her time at the Slade, a place where she says the men wanted to sleep with her, while she aspired to become like them. Willing, married at the time, took her into a room at a party and told her: 'Take down your knickers,' which she did. 'I was a virgin at the time, so you can imagine what a terrible mess [...] He didn't even put me in a taxi; he stayed tidying up.'

There is one series of solitary figures that, perhaps more than any other, captures the conflicting forces that characterize Rego's female protagonists: 'Dog Women' (1994), in which women variously crouch, cower, howl, sleep and are kicked ignominiously out of bed. These works speak of violence and aggression as well as abasement and submission. They are structured – as in 'Untitled: The Abortion Pastels', where the back-street abortionist hovers out of sight – by the spectre of a master, just beyond the frame. 'In my pictures, I could do anything,' Rego says in *Secrets & Stories*; they allow her 'to feel all sorts of forbidden things'. In her early collages, she enacted rage and revenge by cutting people up and scratching them out – a harsh physicality equalled by that of her later etching techniques. Even pastel – a medium perhaps more commonly associated with fragility – is amenable to, and indeed requires, a kind of pressure and firmness not enabled by acrylics and oils.

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Paula Rego, *Possession IV*, 2004, pastel on paper on aluminium, 1.5 × 1 m.
Courtesy: © Paula Rego and Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto

Rego's most enduring theme is women alone, dealing with their lot. Not even the Virgin Mary can escape it: depicted in the throes of labour in *Nativity* (2002), she writhes in pain, clutching her swollen belly, her head resting on the legs of an angel who serves as midwife in a kind of inverted pietà. Installed in the Belém Palace in Lisbon, seat of the Portuguese government, it serves as a wry reminder of the foundational story of the culture which Rego depicts: a woman's body, in suffering and exultation, whose pain is both her power and her curse.

This article first appeared in frieze issue 221 with the headline 'Paula Rego'.

Main image: Paula Rego, Love (detail), 1995, pastel on paper on aluminium, 1.2 × 1.6 m. Courtesy: © Paula Rego