

Paula Rego

FAMILY SAYINGS

Heir to Goya's expressionism and Hogarth's mordant wit, the work of Paula Rego (Lisbon, 1935) has, over more than half a century, built an enduring fable on human nature. The artist's paintings and drawings explore in detail how women organise spaces of historical disobedience against the cultural imaginaries imposed by the patriarchy.



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The Pillowman, 2004

The work of Paula Rego (Lisbon, 1935) could be read as a great fable on human behaviour. Thus, the connections between dominion and dependency, anger in response to social injustices, the persecution of irreverent bodies and sexuality constrained by conservative moral standards are subjects that reappear cyclically in her paintings and imbue them with a certain existential character. In addition, Rego's works establish an acerbic dialogue with history and the immediate present; they dispute the cultural legacy of the patriarchy; and they speak out against the aggressions perpetrated by the hierarchies of power. Over the course of her career lasting more than half a century, she has—through metaphors and broadsides, and by combining literary tales and personal experiences—created an energetic and anti-normative imaginary peopled with beings that leap from stupor to indiscipline, from coldness to violence.

Rego's artistic evolution is a veritable melting pot of disparities and reformulations. Her early pieces use an abstract language akin to that of Vieira da Silva and Dubuffet, while her later work, close to the School of London—Bacon, Freud, Kossoff, Auerbach and Andrews, among others—should be seen as heir to the expressionism of Goya and the sarcasm of Hogarth, as well as Daumier and Gutiérrez Solana, and in keeping with the unsettling atmospheres of Balthus and the refined obscenity of Klossowski.

Unlike earlier artists, however, Rego is not only more open to other sources outside of painting—for example, the theatre, opera, popular narratives and film—but has also engaged in a kind of far-reaching exploration of the way women have organised their spaces of historical dissidence.

Family Sayings, which takes its title from the novel of the same name by Natalia Ginzburg, is an exhibition that examines six decades of Paula Rego's work: a period that extends from her drawings of the 1950s to a number of recent projects and which includes her series on the subject of abortion, *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë, and *Misericordia*,

by Benito Pérez Galdós, as well as the pieces inspired by the plays of Martin McDonagh.

In the image and likeness of family microcosms, in which political and private tensions are reproduced and the processes of learning and cohesion alternate with disruptive gestures and individual rebellions, Rego's subjects point to a community shielded from the outside, in this case against the hypocrisy of bourgeois decorum, and in favour of irrepressible and excessive ways of life freed of all exemplarity.

Rooms 1 and 2

Women are central to Rego's work. Even so, the account she formulates about them unpicks certain Adamic or simplistic readings of the 'female universe'. It could even be said that one of the most distinctive hallmarks of Rego's oeuvre is its correction of the paternalism that has served as the basis for interpreting depictions of women in art, not just the contempt for women in the context of an aesthetic narrative driven and written by men, but especially the iconographic sidelining of women, that passive role to which women seem to have been consigned by the heteropatriarchal tradition. As a result, contrary to the trope of women as the symbol of fragility, as a muse or object of photogenic contemplation, the women who appear in Rego's work express their disobedient character in an abrasive manner, organise their discontent or pleasure, make their voices heard and take control of the action, and they do so while ignoring male judgement, rejecting the accepted ideal of beauty and discriminating decency, both of which are associated, respectively, with the archetype of the young body and with the myth of the procreative mother or the solicitous wife.

Room 3

From Hannah Arendt to Alexandre Kojève or Georges Bataille, from Isabelle Stengers to Umberto Eco and, more

recently, from Donna Haraway to Peter Sloterdijk and Giorgio Agamben, much of the thinking on the issue of human nature has had to address the question of the animal, in other words, the relationships forged by men and women with this beast that constitutes them and which, to paraphrase Jacques Derrida, they are (more to follow).

This section of the exhibition looks at the 'zoology' that exudes from Rego's works, in which the opposition between humanity and animality is abandoned and a transmutation between genders and species is instead sought: birds-cum-women and women-cum-birds, the artist herself portrayed as a painting ape, in keeping with the iconography of Chardin, Teniers and Goya, among numerous others; crows and rabbits conversing together, pigs lulled to sleep by teenagers, and cats that have lost their age-old composure. As happens in mythological fables, the order that governs reality is overturned, the world is reversed and unexpected possibilities arise, other knowledge that till then was of lesser importance or forbidden emerges.

Room 4

Traditional children's stories have also been resignified by Rego. Snow White, Peter Pan and, in this case, Little Red Riding Hood are used by the artist to explore seemingly secondary characters, ambiguous psychological situations, and physical spaces charged with violence or stripped of their original and idyllic simplicity. Rego transforms the edifying morals of these stories through narrative twists that restore a tragic, ridiculous or open dimension to less soothing interpretations. The religious bigotry of these parables, which encapsulate some of the main values of the sanctimonious bourgeois mindset, the reductionism and superiority that form the basis on which children's and particularly girls' behaviour is judged, as well as the persecution and subsequent punishment of any abandonment of the pre-established roles, are questioned in Rego's work, which alters the plots of all these tales and their predictable happy endings.

Room 5

The abuse of power and tyranny in its broadest sense—psychological, political, physical, etc.—as well as the consequences that derive from them in the form of ill-treatment, estrangement or subjugation, occupy a highly significant place in Rego's pictorial grammar.

Far from piousness, but at the same time demonstrating unconditional solidarity with those who suffer unwanted oppression, Rego's subjects are both masters and slaves, they practise sadism and they suffer it. Rather than a nihilist stance, however, this two-way cruelty points once again to a certain short-circuit in relation to the assigning of behaviour linked to gender and financial and social background.

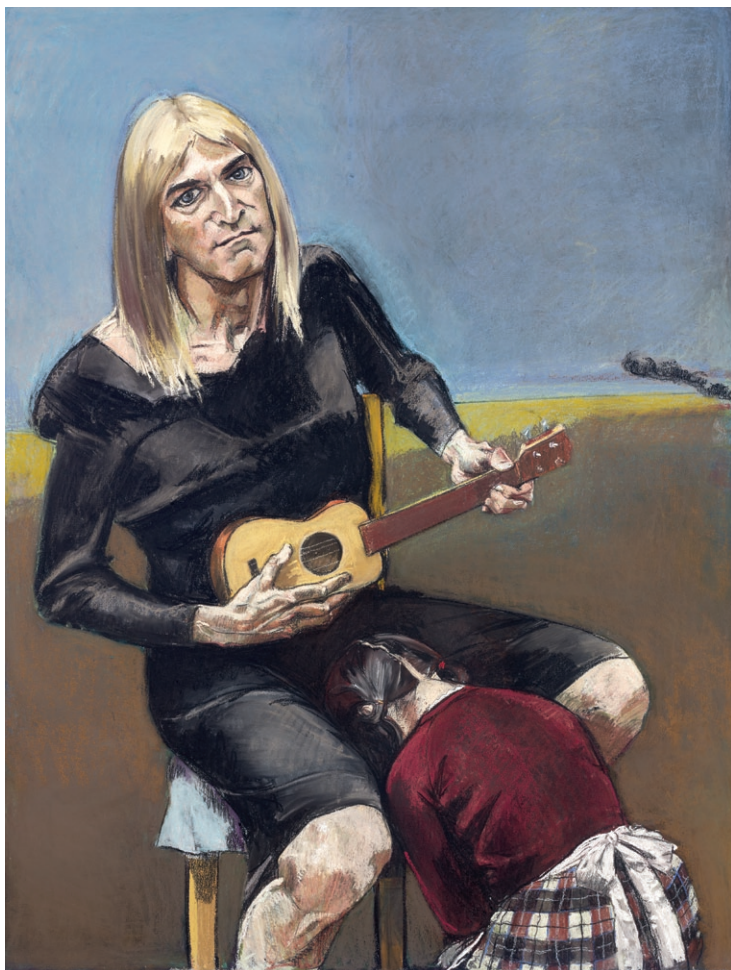
The mark left by the Catholic education in countries such as Portugal and Spain and on generations like the artist's own, the burden of fatality understood as an immutable paradigm, honour and sacrifice as uncompromising values, not public constructs, find themselves ideologically rewritten in Rego's work and are vehicles that exorcise the individual and collective memory.

Room 6

Cousin Bazilio (1878), the novel by Eça de Queirós, provides Rego with an opportunity to return to this Portuguese writer, one of her preferred literary references. As she did in the 1990s with *The Sin of Father Amaro* (1875), the artist freely recreates the plot in seven paintings which, in the manner of a film sequence, single out key episodes in the original narrative, a story of adultery between two cousins. Thus, *Dream of Paradise* alludes to the apartment rented by Bazilio for his trysts with his cousin Luisa, which both of them call 'paradise', whereas in *Grief*, we see Jorge, Luisa's husband, dejected and suffering obvious anguish, holding a letter from Bazilio in which he blames the young woman for her marital betrayal.



Abortion series, Untitled no. 4, 1998



Olga, 2003



The Old Republic, 2005



Therapy, 2011

Exhibited with these works is a lithograph entitled *La Celestina*, a reference to another literary text that Rego has delved into in numerous projects. Here we see once again a version of Fernando de Rojas's book that diverges widely from the original, beginning with the asynchronicities in the two characters' clothing and also in the space they both occupy, a minimalist room that seems to be a postmodern no-place.

Rooms 7 and 8

Martin McDonagh, the Anglo-Irish playwright and film director, regarded as one of the chief exponents today of the Theatre of Cruelty—nowadays, and particularly in Britain, termed in-er-face theatre—has written a number of pieces that have inspired works by Paula Rego. The author and artist share the same interest in grotesque stories that explore private and social conflicts, harsh or absurd allegories in which black humour acquires a singular importance.

Taking as its starting point McDonagh's play *The Pillowman*, which had its first theatre performance in 2003, Rego's work of the same title blends elements from the artist's life, including her relationship with her father, and descriptions of the tale told in the play, in which an author is arrested because his writings contain disturbing connections with various crimes and child abuse. As occurs in other triptychs by Rego, the overall work is turned into an account consisting of separate episodes, narrative frames that are 'flashes' of the original plot.

Shakespeare's Room, which also has a story by McDonagh, alludes to the infinite monkey theorem, which has entered popular culture, according to which a monkey provided with a typewriter would eventually, given enough time, end up writing a piece by Shakespeare.

Scarecrow is a work that pays tribute to Gutiérrez Solana and uses a certain tale by McDonagh in which a pig saves a scarecrow from death, whereas the scarecrow refuses to help the animal when it is about to be slaughtered.

Room 9

Even though she has lived in London since the 1950s, Rego has recreated the political history of Portugal through a number of works. Some of her paintings from the early 1960s—influenced, according to the artist, by Dubuffet and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934)—are an anti-authoritarian and anti-war entreaty that mocks Salazar's dictatorship and opposes the Portuguese colonial war against the liberation armies of Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique (1961-1974).

Manuel II, the last king of Portugal, features in a series of six paintings in which Rego's memories are interspersed with an account of the monarch's life.

Lastly, *The Old Republic* is an ironic version of the official portrait of Jorge Sampaio, the president of Portugal between 1996 and 2006, which the artist also painted.

Rooms 10 and 11

The series on *Jane Eyre* (1847) is one of the most telling examples of the extent to which drawing is of crucial importance in Rego's oeuvre and also of the significance of literature in her artistic practice. It is a collection of works with a scathing dramatic charge; a group of pieces that negotiates the customs and manners in Charlotte Brontë's novel and revives its political tension. The scenes resemble film shots, and the faces of the various subjects reveal a dark and disquieting expressionism, as if Goya's *Black Paintings* had been overlaid on a film directed by Murnau. Jumbled sequences and pared-down portraits, loud gesticulations and oceanic silences: the series reveals Rego's mastery in summing up in a fold of fabric or a discomfited face the entire intransigence of certain closed settings.

Room 12

In 1998, a referendum was held on decriminalising abortion in Portugal. It was not a binding plebiscite, as only 31% of the electorate turned out to vote. The following year,

Rego presented an exhibition at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon that included *Untitled*, a series of paintings, drawings and prints that starkly and with ideological tension exposed the consequences of backstreet abortions. Since then, the artist has added considerably to her body of work on this subject, which has come to constitute a kind of separate chapter in her career.

The women who appear in Rego's work occupy spaces of a suffocating bareness and alternate distress with anger. Many of them look, part defiantly, part accusingly, into the spectator's eyes, like the woman in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1881-1882) by Édouard Manet. Others recline on chairs or beds, or on the floor, in foetal positions of pain and defencelessness. Rego even shows them with the equipment used to carry out abortions: unhygienic bowls, dirty forceps and used towels. The moment depicted is always after or prior to the interruption of the women's pregnancy, between the decision-making and the consequences, never during the furtive surgical operation. It is telling that an artist like Rego, in whose paintings large numbers of people crowd together, opted to show subjects on their own in her works on abortion; a moving abandonment but above all a political and social rejection.

Rooms 13 and 14

Whether it be because of laws or a lack of civil liberties, perpetrated by corrective therapies or multiple aggressions such as genital mutilation or abuse, women's bodies have been historically persecuted by a sexist system that has fiercely and brutally attacked any gender difference opposed to the prevailing heteropatriarchy. Rego has vigorously denounced this state of structural violence against women, in which, paradoxically, women are in some instances also the enforcement arm.

The works presented here show a complete spiral of pain: the protagonists are damaged individuals whose revenge is to inflict yet more damage on their weaker sisters.

Room 15

The Children's Crusade is a legend based on facts dating from the early 13th century. It tells how a boy claimed to have been visited by Christ, who ordered him to recover Jerusalem for Christianity. On his way to the Holy Land, the boy recruited thousands of children. On their arrival in Alexandria, however, those who had survived the journey were sold into slavery.

Rego takes as her starting point the illustrations done by Sidney Nolan for *The Children's Crusade* (1973), a musical piece composed by Benjamin Britten based on Bertolt Brecht's ballad *Kinderkreuzzug* (1939). She analyses the story, which in Brecht's text is strongly anti-war, and focuses her attention on the children's mystical visions, but above all on their ability to organise themselves and the methods they employed to do so.

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