



Paula Rego

Re-Remembrance Through

Words by
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Paula Rego ran at the Tate Britain
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Art

Paula Rego is an artist obsessed with stories. Born under Salazar's Estado Novo dictatorship in 1930s Portugal, her anti-fascist parents sent her to finishing school in southern England. Flitting back and forth, her liberal mindset encouraged her to settle in London from 1972, where she still practices today.

Rego's biography is destined for the archives. Her art, like her upbringing, is inherently political, reflecting the role of the artist as a social historian. But beyond mere documentation, Rego is more interested in re-remembering – or repainting – traditional narratives. Her artworks thus constitute complex alternative histories. Engaging with them enables us to challenge and expand how we remember significant events.

Take *The First Mass in Brazil* (1993), Rego's revision of South American colonial encounters. She borrows or perhaps reclaims, the title from the artist Vítor Meirelles. Prior to Rego, his painting constituted the dominant account of the Portuguese imperial landing in Brazil in 1500 – a glowing depiction of European expansionism.

Rego's painting fills in the wilful gaps. Overlooked in both artistic and historical accounts, women's suffering takes centre stage. Icons of imperialism like the gobbling turkey jut out of place, reflecting how visuals were artificially imposed to curate a sense of shared identity and collective memory.

Indigenous peoples are painted in, and in realistic, not idealised form. Their histories, however, still do not directly take centre stage, as our eye is drawn to the suffering of the painting's central white woman.

Still, Rego's work seeks to memorialise suffering in other and more subtle shades. Lolling orchids, the flower of the femme fatale, loom in the background, subtly foreshadowing the deaths of many women that followed.

Importantly, there's nothing singular – nor idealised or stereotypical – about Rego's evocations of womanhood. She explores the ambiguity of femininity, drawing upon blunt, physical personal experiences to address the political abuse of power, and abstract forms to mimic the parodic Portuguese dictatorship. *The First Mass* is but

Paula Rego, *The First Mass in Brazil*, Acrylic on Canvas, 1994



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Paula Rego, Baa Baa Black Sheep, Etching with Aquatint on Paper, 1989

one of many efforts to reinsert those women forgotten in historical accounts, consolidating the artist as an activist of gender memory.

Overwhelming in size and impact, *The First Mass* sits alongside miniature etchings in Tate Britain's Paula Rego, the artist's most extensive retrospective to date. With careful curation, the exhibition draws faint lines between seemingly disconnected media and memories of Rego's practice.

Connecting her works is Rego's characteristic collage of fine art, pop culture, and Portuguese tradition. This mirrors the artist's pluralistic understanding of personal experiences, particularly womanhood, as she draws from different sources to reinforce and expand her memory of the past.

Often overlooked, fiction flows throughout her work as an undercurrent influence. Examining the role of literature together with visual art helps us to understand how fantasy can be effectively used to interpret and memorialise lived realities more widely.

Rego often re-remembers and subverts the stories from her childhood in Britain and Portugal. Most exciting are those works where these influences collide, as the viewer ponders which parts are half-remembered, and which are purposefully forgotten.

Her infamous *Nursery Rhyme* series (1989) delves into the dark side of children's literature with startling realism. Such simple monochromes come weighted

with more meaning and impact than even her most abstract works; the depressive *Baa Baa Black Sheep* or the distorted scale reflecting gender imbalance in *Polly Put The Kettle On*.

Parcelled neatly in their frames, their torn paper edges seem ripped out of the storybooks. Her works are persuasive and purposeful – and presented as fact. But even the starkest stories should be contextualised within the artist's wider pool of experience.

These illustrations draw from Doré's illustrations for Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, an illustrated poem repeated to the child Rego by

Paula Rego, *Three Little Devils Wrapped in White*





Paula Rego, The Vivian Girls as Windmills, Acrylic on Canvas, 1984



Paula Rego, Angel, Pastel on Paper, 1998

Art functions much like any historical source - and no single work, no matter how challenging or literal, can offer a complete picture.

her father. They also echo her gouaches of popular Portuguese fairy tales (1974-1975), clearly influenced by British illustrator Arthur Rackham, but also perhaps the flat forms of the post-Impressionism movement.

Looking at these works in parallel reminds us of art's seductive capacity, that seeing is believing. As much as Rego's artworks retell silenced histories, they also reinforce new standards and silences. This is a welcome reminder that art functions much like any historical source – and no single work, no matter how challenging or literal, can offer a complete picture.

From minute monochrome, Rego offers equally shocking grand colours and murals. The *Vivian Girls as Windmills* (1984) reimagines the titular characters of Henry Darper's epic manuscript in an explosion of colour. Still children, they're transformed into towering forces of nature, the literal windmills of womanhood in motion.

Vivian looks forward to the singular, vivid colours that dominate her later works, burnt orange oils and lurid yellow watercolours. But it also gives cause to re-remember her depictions of girls in other works. They often seem like stunted women, mature faces on children's bodies – women who grew up too fast. It's something that escapes her (few) depictions of young boys.

Rego exposes the chaotic sense of adventure central to stories like *Peter Pan*, *Pinnocchio*, and *Snow White*. But her literal approach to remembrance culminates in the harrowing *The Father Amaro* (1998), a career-defining series inspired by the Portuguese realist novel *The Crime of Father Amaro*.

Triptychs of Biblical proportions mock men's abuses of power through the Roman Catholic Church. Rego reveals the story's women as victims, but also accomplices in seeking to preserve social and religious norms. *Angel* (1998), perhaps the series' most famous portrait is fictional too, inspired by rather than taken from the text.

This figment of Rego's endless imagination is a testament to the role of an artist as an interpreter. Rego's works cause us to think more deeply about the interplay between artistic and literary narratives and narrators – as in illustration - to see how the same stories are differently interpreted in pen and paint.

Often, Rego used literature as a launchpad, like Dylan Thomas' Welsh fishing village swapped for a Portuguese kitchen in her story of *Under Milk Wood* (1954). It is the work for which she was awarded the Slade School of Fine Art prize as a student – her self-professed proudest achievement in an illustrious career.

Paula Rego, *Aida*, Acrylic on Paper, 1983



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Rego is certainly sincere and unpretentious, something reflected in her practice. Rego recognised the emotional intensity common throughout theatre and opera, fairytales and film. In her Desert Island Discs, the childhood Rego – and adult remembering – took equal pleasure in her thirty trips to her father's private opera box for Verdi's Rigoletto, as catching Disney flicks at the cinema with her grandmother. Cinema was 'clear, you could tell what they were doing', crossing over into her paintings with near cartoon characters leaping across the canvas in horizontal bands of comic strips.

There is much to engage with outside the Tate exhibition, some as close as the neighbouring galleries. Gothic works from Joyce Carol Oates to Thomas Hardy line Tate's bookshelves, calling upon her childhood memories and inspirations. But there are plenty more works that she interpreted - like her illustrations for Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre - and that her works later inspired.

Endless etching plates, studies, and sketch pads for her Nursery Rhymes series tantalise the viewer. Elsewhere, an early timeline shows the giant Vivian sprawling over Rego's studio floor, the artist dwarfed in its presence.

Curation is certainly another form of storytelling and memorialisation - one which forces the curator to consider what is included and excluded from their exhibition's narrative. For the Rego enthusiast, this record-breaking retrospective might seem surprisingly sparse.

Less information lines these walls than in the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art's recent Rego retrospective, Obedience and Defiance. This earlier exhibition also delved more deeply into both the Amaro and Girl and Dog series. But today, I recognise the common will of Rego's curators to commemorate her work in expanding the collective - and connected - political memories in Britain and Portugal.

Rego's deep relationship with memory forces us to rethink the idea of remembrance and storytelling through the perspective of visual art. Perhaps it is only by engaging with fiction and art that Paula Rego can grapple with her own complex experiences, memories, and realities – of womanhood, Portugal's turbulent politics, or her husband's ill health – and realise them in such powerful visual form.

Mirna Bamieh:

The Survival of Palestinian Food Culture



*Words and Interview by
Tia Ferhana*

In early May this year - or more precisely during the last week of Ramadan, we were disturbed by the images of Israeli forces violently attacking Palestinian worshippers in Masjid Al-Aqsa during Laylatul Qadr, one of the most sacred nights in the Islamic calendar. We also watched the resilience of Palestinians as they came together to protect the third holiest sites in Islam. Meanwhile, Gaza was once again targeted by Israeli air raids. Not to ignore the illegal Israeli settlements in Sheikh Jarrah and the demolition of Palestinian houses in Lifta and Silwan. As witnesses to this violence and oppression, Palestinians and non-Palestinians responded on social media to further spread awareness and shed light on the reality on the ground. Thousands marched on the streets in different cities around the world in solidarity with Palestinians. However, eventually, these noises got quieter. As many have conveniently moved on, Palestinians are still struggling for their rights and face oppression and violence daily with no end in sight.

As Indonesians, our media tend not to shy away from showing the violence that is happening in Gaza. As heartbroken as I was watching it on TV, sadly, I have become somewhat desensitised. This image is something that I have witnessed time and time again over the years. However, this time around, I was made to see another side of colonisation. A side

Menu of Dis/appearance dinner performance, part of Aesthetics of the Political symposium, Sound Image Culture, Brussels, 2020.
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