**Paula Rego – *Obedience and Defiance***

**Modern 2, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh**

Curated by former Whitechapel Gallery Director Catherine Lampert, this expansive exhibition has been touted as the first ever retrospective of Paula Rego’s work to be held in Scotland. It’s not - the first was curated by Pat Fisher at Talbot Rice Gallery in 2005, an exhibition of over 200 works on paper. This one, *Obedience and Defiance*, showcases over 80 major works, including a number on loan from private collections (thus rarely seen in public).

Organised as a touring exhibition with MK Gallery, Milton Keynes and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, the Scottish iteration is hosted within the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art’s Modern 2. Designed by Scottish Enlightenment architect Thomas Hamilton in the early 1830s as the Dean Orphanage, the building’s Neo-Classical features are curiously subsumed into a Neo-Baroque design reminiscent of those by Eighteenth century architect and dramatist John Vanburgh, known for his elaborate and disorientating architectural games. Commissioned as a healthier replacement for the earlier city-centre orphanage (whose children kept dying of fever due to its proximity to a slaughterhouse), this gloomy history makes Modern 2 an apposite venue for an exhibition of Rego’s works, which have so consistently returned to themes of childhood, trauma and fantasy over almost sixty years.

In this exhibition, there are countless examples of these repeated concerns, wherein ‘childish things are not always so childish’[[1]](#endnote-1) including an etching, *Ecstasy*, from *The Children’s Crusade* (1996-98), *See-Saw, Margery Daw* (1994) from *Nursery Rhymes* (1989 – 1994), *Jane and Helen* (2001), a study for one of the *Jane Eyre* series of lithographs (2002), and a raft of purposefully troubling pictures populated by young girls, toys and animals, such as *The Bride* (1985), influenced by the ‘Vivian Girls’ from Outsider artist Henry Darger’s (1892-1973) sprawling illustrated novel. That Modern 2 is also home to the National Galleries of Scotland’s extensive Dada and Surrealist collections is also fitting, given the artist’s Surrealist affinities.

In spite of the breadth and range of style and form across work from the 1960s to the present, there is nevertheless a unity of intent in the selection. The overarching curatorial approach positions Rego as a storyteller (of course) but one whose subjects have been concertedly political. The artist’s depiction and condemnation of abuses of power, conflict and inequality range from anti-Salazar ‘protest’ paintings from the start of Rego’s career, such as *The Imposter* (1964), *Manifesto for a Lost Cause* (1965), *The Exile* (1963) or *Salazar Vomiting the Homeland* (1960), produced António de Oliveira Salazar’s long fascist regime in Portugal, to more veiled, autobiographical analyses of power within intimate, personal and familial relationships, such the Hogarthian triptych *The Betrothal*, *Lessons* and *The Shipwreck*, after *Marriage à la Mode* (1999) or *Snow White and her Stepmother* (1995), all pastels on paper.

As anyone familiar with Rego’s imagery will know, the works based on existing literary sources are never simply illustrative. Like fairy and folktales themselves, her pictures are frequently allegorical, speaking an ambiguous kind of truth to power. An enduring theme throughout the artist’s career has been her attention to complex gender relationships. As Marina Warner has noted, ‘Rego’s work excites contradictory and powerful feelings in [her] audience, because, while openly challenging conventional misogyny in the very act of speaking and making images, they also refuse the wholesome of pretty picture of female gender (nurturing, caring) and deal plainly with erotic dominance as a source of pleasure for men – and for women’.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Amongst other factors – the resurgence of interest in narrative, for example, or the presence of large, figurative paintings in major survey shows and biennales – Rego’s sophisticated, complex interrogation of gender politics in particular demonstrate her continued relevance in the context of contemporary art and culture. In the late 1990s and 2000s, she created a large body of prints and drawings denouncing practices including female genital mutiliation, honour killing and sex trafficking, the most explicitly political examples of Rego’s activism. Within these, a number of works depict the violence and harm women do to one another in both psychological and physical terms. In the *Female Genital Mutiliation* series (2008-9), intended to support the public campaign against the practice in the UK, the collusion of women in abuses of power is nightmarishly depicted in figures of both ‘cutters’ and mothers. In etching and aquatints such as *Circumcision* (2009), *Night Bride* (2009) and *Mother Loves You* (2009) Rego invokes Goya’s *Disasters of War* series (1810-20), heaping horror upon horror until the final image, *Escape* (2009). In the *Snow White* series (1995), Rego addresses competition and sexual jealousy between women, acknowledging uncomfortable truths about the ways in which women are complicit in maintaining patriarchal structures. In 1987’s *The Maids*, Rego imagines a scene from Jean Genet’s 1947 play, in which two sisters conspire to murder their mistress. The painting bears a striking similarity to work of the same period by the late Scottish painter, Steven Campbell, who also returned repeatedly to literary sources and noir subject matter.

Rego’s *Abortion* series (1998-9), made in response to the failed Portuguese referendum on the legalisation of the procedure, has been credited with helping to change public opinion on the issue, leading to a liberalization of laws in 2007 (Portuguese newspapers published her images in the run-up to the second vote). The pastels and prints, though never graphic or explicit, are extremely disturbing. Images of young girls in school uniform or women in worker’s clothes are shown with buckets, crouching or curled up in pain. Rego’s ability to convey expression through her representation of the body and facial gesture is astonishing in these works. *Untitled No.1* and *Untitled No.4* (both 1998, pastel on paper) show the disproportionate effect of the criminalisation of abortion on poor women, focussing on the consequences of dangerous ‘backstreet’ abortions. In 2019, the artist became a vocal opponent of the USA’s anti-abortion drive, calling it ‘grotesque’.[[3]](#endnote-3) Given the ongoing, global attempts to police women’s bodies in this way, the resonance and relevance of her earlier works to the political climate of 2020 is frighteningly clear.

If this all sounds too gloomy, it is important to note that many of the works, even those dealing with dark or disquieting subject matter, are formally very beautiful, even pleasurable, to look at. Rego’s virtuoso draughtsmanship and painterly dexterity are part of the reason why she is able to elicit complex emotions on the part of viewers. She maintains the dignity of her models, subjects and sitters even in the most abject of settings – the very lack of blood and gore in the abortion and FGM works, for instance, forces the viewer to read distortions of gesture, tone and scale as indicators of psychological unease. At Modern 2, gallery-goers were hushed and reverent - selfie-culture and ‘quick-sweep’ engagement abandoned as Rego’s audience engaged in slow and careful looking, considering each work in turn. And amidst the array of different themes and subjects, there are moments of joy, hope, humour and absurdity. Almost always, though, Rego’s pictures are laced with surprise or ambiguity. It should be unsurprising, given the apparent contradictions within her work, that the granddaughter of a radical republican (reflected in her 1965 painting *Regicide*) is now a Dame. In *The Company of Women* (1997), based on an episode from on the nineteenth-century Portuguese novel *The Crime of Father Amaro*, shows an adult man as the child Amaro. In doing so, it recalls Clint Eastwood in the 1971 Southern Gothic film *The Beguiled* as much as its original literary source. And while Rego is famous for her mid-1990s ‘Dog Women’ paintings showing stocky, barefoot, strong-legged women in dog-like poses, cat ladies appear too, such as the ink and watercolour on paper *Mary Magdalene Overcome by Despair and Loneliness gets Drunk with the Cats* (1993). In *Joseph’s Dream* and *Painting Him Out* (both 1990), the artist reverses the traditional gender roles of active male artist and passive female muse or model.

Rego herself has long been a role model for younger artists. In Scotland, affinities can be drawn between her work and the feminist, and often fantastical figurative paintings and drawings of Moyna Flannigan, Lucy Stein or the late Pat Douthwaite. Even the hyper-saturated, kitschy dystopian dream-worlds of Rachel Maclean’s films share something of Rego’s satirical critique of systems of power in their frank feminism and narrative structure. Figurative painters such as Lisa Brice and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye echo Rego’s interest in the body and suggestive, allusive narrative. And like many of Rego’s works, Milly Thomson’s recent exhibition *The Moon, The Sea & The Matriarch*, shown at Timespan in Helmsdale last year, similarly celebrates ‘the pleasures, woes, cellulite, and desires of menopausal, older and middle aged women.’[[4]](#endnote-4) It may be the case that Rego’s kind of work was considered unfashionable for a time – her large, figurative paintings, the obsession with stories – but she has always had her followers. Now, at the end of her career, using painting as a political act, she seems more timely than ever.

1. Warner, Marina (1995), *From The Beast To The Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, (Vintage) p.311. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Warner, Marina (1995) *From The Beast To The Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, (Vintage) p.310. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Bakare, Lanre (2019) ‘Paula Rego calls US anti-abortion drive 'grotesque'’, *The Guardian*, 31 May 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/may/31/paula-rego-calls-us-anti-abortion-drive-grotesque> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://millythompson.co.uk/work/the-moon-the-sea-the-matriarch-2019/> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)