

Paula Rego: my beautiful dark twisted fantasies

Dame Paula Rego has spent a lifetime painting the grotesque, fantastic figures that live in her head. Her own upbringing and sex life were no less bizarre, discovers Christina Patterson

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Paula Rego in her north London studio, with the creatures that live in her head and feature in her work (Laura Pannack)

Paula Rego has a picture of Benedict Cumberbatch on her wall. It looks like some thing torn out of a magazine. When I ask her why it's there, she looks surprised. "Because I like him!" she says, as if she's explaining something to a small child. "My granddaughter made me a model of him. Sometimes I take it to bed."

If you find it surprising that a 79-year-old grande dame of British art should take a Benedict Cumberbatch model to bed, you probably don't know Paula Rego's work. You probably don't, for example, know that her pictures, which are full of big, squat women, and strange creatures, and small figures who might or might not be children, often have a lone male figure who looks so passive he may as well be a doll. The men, who are sometimes small and sometimes big, are often lying on women's laps, curled up like a baby. This is not a woman whose imagination runs along traditional

lines.

This is also clear from her studio. From outside it looks like the kind of place you might expect to find the rotting remains of a chopped-up corpse. When you go in, through a door covered in graffiti, you do find skeletons, and naked bodies, and monkeys, and rats, and skulls, and masks, and tiny figures on chairs with wigs, that look like Psycho's mum. You find a cat clawing at a mannequin's breast, a giant Jesus nailed to a cross, and a horse sitting at a table. You find, in other words, in this studio in Kentish Town that used to be a picture-framing workshop, life-sized versions of the figures that live in Paula Rego's head.

She has been bringing the figures in her head to life, in pastel and paint since she was four. As a child in Portugal, she copied her mother, who had been to art school and used to do the exercises from a magazine called *The Easy Way to Draw*. When a teacher told her to draw a cup and saucer, then said she would never have the talent to be an artist, she refused to let the teacher near her again. At 18, she went to the Slade. At 27, she was showing her work as part of The London Group, with Frank Auerbach and David Hockney. At 30, she had her first solo exhibition in Lisbon, and became an overnight star. She was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 1989 and made a Dame of the British Empire in 2010. You might say she's as near as we'll get to a female Lucian Freud.

I don't know if Lucian Freud started off interviews with a noise that sounds like the cry for help of a strangled cat. For some reason, at least today, Paula Rego does.

"I can't sing today," she says, as if this is going to be a very big problem. Does she, I ask, sometimes? "No," she says, as if the idea is ridiculous. "I never sing. My father said I've got a horrible voice."

I wondered how long it would be till she mentioned her father. Rego talks about him a lot. She's chic — she's always chic — in designer knitwear and "statement" jewellery, and she looks less frail than when I saw her last. But she does look her age. She moves slowly and carefully, as if constantly trying to kiss the site, you agree to the use of cookies. You can change this and find out more by following this link. Accept Cookies 1, which she sometimes is. It's when she smiles, flashing a jumble of teeth, and when she laughs, often when you don't expect it, that you're thinking of a child.

"My father was always very encouraging about my art," she explains, over a cup of mint tea. "He wasn't encouraging about other things. He said to me, 'You've got to get out of here.' That was Portugal. It's not a place for women." On this, her father was probably right.

Rego was born in Lisbon during the dictatorship of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, which ran from 1932 to 1968. It was a time of great poverty and violence, and for women things were even worse than for men. "A lot of women came to the house," she adds, "because they had this system where poor people would come and ask for money, and they would give bread or money once a week."

Rego's parents were well off. Her father worked as an engineer for Marconi and later took over his father's business, printing tickets for trains. Rego

“I remember when I was in bed, and not very well, my mother used to come and rub me”

mentions maids, private tutors and holiday homes in the way you do when you grow up thinking that these things are your right.

When she was still a baby, her parents went to live in Chelmsford for a year, leaving her to be shuttled between a grandmother and an aunt. It was these two women who told her the folk tales that became so central to her work, and when her parents came back, it was a shock. “I missed my grandmother,” she says, as if the memory is still strong, “and my grandfather. But my father I always loved.” What about her mother? Rego takes a sip of her tea.

“My mother,” she says, “was more difficult. She insisted on having my bow tied up and everything absolutely proper. I had to behave very well with the visitors and say hello.” For a moment, I’m not sure if she’s joking, but she isn’t. Sure, it can be a strain for a child to be polite, but we’re not exactly talking A Child Called “It”.

In that moment, I understand more about one of the tensions in her work, the struggle between being yourself — your secret, solid, sexual self — and the pressure to be correct. Rego’s women are earthy and strangely proud. They sit or squat with unsmiling faces, with sturdy legs wide apart. The art critic Robert Hughes has said that Rego is “the best painter of women’s experience alive”. Germaine Greer, who posed for a portrait Rego painted that is now in the National Gallery, has said: “It’s not often given to women to recognise themselves in painting, still less to see their private world, their dreams, the insides of their heads projected on such a scale and so immodestly, with such depth and colour.” Certainly, it’s hard to think of women — apart, perhaps from one or two of Lucian Freud’s women — who are so solidly, uncompromisingly, real.

Sex is there, everywhere. What, I ask, did she know about sex when she was young? Rego looks surprised again.



An infant Paula with her parents. “My father I always loved,” she says. “My mother was more difficult”



sitting for him in his studio. She got pregnant, in fact, “several times”. How many? “Nine.” And she had abortions? “Yes.” What, *nine* abortions? “Yes. It was awful,” she admits. “Theresa Black, my room mate, helped me a lot. Not only did she do all the cooking, because I did none,” and she gives a funny, helpless laugh, “but when I had an abortion, she would help me and empty lots of blood and stuff.”

This is all beginning to sound a bit more like The Texas Chainsaw Massacre than postwar Bohemia at its peak. Still, at least Rego was learning about art. Lowry gave her a tutorial and wanted to buy a picture, but she “kept postponing” it because she “got pregnant” again. She still doesn’t know if the “doctors” Vic sent round to do the abortions had any medical training. Trying to sound calm, I ask if Vic ever thought of, you know, contraception?

Rego’s face lights up, as it always does at the sound of his name. “I didn’t want to spoil his sexual pleasure,” she explains, as if this was an obvious point. “It was more important to me that he’d be happy.”

This, by the way, is the woman whose paintings about abortion changed the law in Portugal, and whose pictures of female genital mutilation created an international stir. I’m dying to ask about her feminism, but it seems only polite to finish the history first. When Rego got pregnant for the 10th

“I was told *nothing*,” she says, in the tone of a child who has been cheated. “But when I was in bed, and not very well, my mother used to come and rub me. It was,” she adds matter-of-factly, “like a form of masturbation.” Now it’s my turn to be surprised. What, I ask, suddenly feeling coy, “down there”?

Rego nods. Was that common in Portugal? “I’ve no idea,” she says. “I never spoke to anyone about it.”

She had her first boyfriend, she says, when she was 14. “We didn’t do any screwing. He kissed me under the water, under the sea. I dived in, he dived after me, and I was so thrilled.”

She didn’t have much in the way of sexual excitement at the finishing school in Sevenoaks her father sent her to when she was 16. It was still a time of rationing, and she was, she says, hungry “all the time”. She got so fat, on other people’s leftovers, that her fellow pupils called her Sancho Panza (*panza* means paunch). “I’d come back from church eating a family block of ice cream,” she says. “That made me happy.”

So when, I ask, did she first have sex? There’s a long silence, and I wonder for a moment if Rego thinks I’ve gone too far.

“Well,” she says, “it was my husband.” She’s talking about Vic Willing, the artist she met at the Slade, and married. “We were at a party. I fancied another bloke who was there and I went after him. I was very naughty,” she adds. “He was in bed with another girl, so I was very miffed and I walked downstairs to go home. And I heard a voice, ‘Come in here!’ It was Vic. I went in, and the first thing he said to me was, ‘Take down your knickers.’”

Gosh. And people worry about the lack of romance *now*? How did she respond? “I took down my knickers,” she says, as if I’d asked a stupid question. “He took me to his friend’s bed, which was a right mess afterwards, I can tell you. There was blood everywhere. He didn’t say anything. I just got up and went away.”

I want to ask if she was tempted to hit him, but instead ask how she felt. “I think,” she says, looking thoughtful, “I felt I was in love with him.”

The story has often been told of how, on the day Rego discovered she was pregnant, Vic told her he was going back to his ballerina wife. What I hadn’t realised was that wasn’t the first time she had been pregnant. She got pregnant, she says, “quite soon” after she started

time, she tells me, she decided that nine abortions were enough. As soon as Vic told her he was going back to his wife, her father drove down from Portugal to pick her up. He bought her clothes, took her out for meals, and played opera in the car all the way back. The next year, Vic came out to join them. So, I say, desperately wanting a sliver of romance, had he finally left his wife? No, says Rego. "She'd gone off with another boyfriend." It all sounds, I tell her, very Fitzrovia — all these rickety, intertwined lives. "Absolutely!" says Rego, looking delighted. "When we went back to London, we'd go and drink at the Colony Room. The woman who used to run it would say, 'Hello, C***y!' when I walked in."

If Rego was drinking too much, as her father told her on his deathbed, she was also producing some extremely unusual art. Francis Bacon liked her work and took some of it home. "He gave it back after a bit," she says, "but he did take it home."

After the birth of her second daughter, Victoria, in 1959, she started doing more painting. After the birth of her son, Nicholas, in 1961, she started working in collage and had pictures accepted for an exhibition in Lisbon. She and Vic were now living in a house her father had bought them, dividing their time between Portugal and Camden Town. When money was tight, the Gulbenkian Foundation helped out. "I said, 'I don't know what it is I want a grant for,'" says Rego. The man said, 'Just go away and do what you want.'"

She was a star in Portugal, from her first solo show in Lisbon, in 1965. It took longer to get recognition here. It was 1981 when she had her first solo exhibition in London, at the AIR gallery. The Red Monkey series she showed, full of monkeys, bears and dogs doing strange things, set the tone for a lot that would follow. (When her mother saw her picture Pregnant Rabbit Telling Her Parents, and was told the cabbage in it was her, she said: "Darling, you've made me look so young!"). Since then, Rego has focused more on humans than on animals, though animals still often crop up. In her new series, Stone Soup, based on a folk tale, and commissioned to illustrate a new version of the tale by her daughter, Cas Willing, there are giant birds, flying horses, a sad dog and an oversized frog. As in the illustrations she has done of nursery rhymes, and of books like Peter Pan and Jane Eyre, the sense throughout is of what Rego once called "the beautiful grotesque".



With her husband, Vic Willing, who she met at Slade art school in the 1950s. They were together until he died in 1988



women have a hard time compared to guys. Women are often very shy and don't say what they really think." Can you be a feminist and in thrall to male sexual power? Rego shrugs. "Well, I'm not a lesbian. I don't know. I like men."

Since Vic died, of MS in 1988, Rego has been on her own. She spends six days a week with her assistant, Lila, who has been helping her, and sitting for her, for nearly 30 years. Lila, who's in Spain finalising details for one of Rego's exhibitions, seems, I tell her, to have dedicated her life to her. Her reply is matter-of-fact:

"Yes." Does Lila have a partner? "No."

How does Rego feel about that? "Well," she says, "she helps me." And from Lila's point of view? Rego looks as though the thought has never struck her.

"I help her as much as I can. I told her to bring back an *espanolito* [a Spanish man] for herself, and one for me!"

She hands me print-outs of other pictures — already at the gallery, and which I go to see later — for her exhibition. They're a series of pastels called *The Relics*, based on stories by the great Portuguese writer Eca de Queiroz. There's an Our Lady of Sorrows, with a naked man curled up on the lap of a Madonna pierced by swords. There's a mournful woman being serenaded next to the severed heads of two sheep. The pictures are full of dark figures, bleeding Christs, angels, devils, and people praying. They are, in other words, full of the images that haunt Rego's dreams.

When her first show took place, in Lisbon in 1965, she said she "painted to give fear a human face". Does she still? "Yes." Does she ever remember a time when she didn't feel frightened? Rego laughs, but in the way you laugh when you don't think something's funny.

Not really. I was always nervous and scared."

Does she feel better once she's put the fear in the picture? Another laugh that isn't a laugh.

"It's always disappointing," she says, "because I never seem to do it properly."

She takes me through to the other half of her studio, and talks me through the pictures and models on the way. She's also working on a series about the last Portuguese king. For that, she says, she needs a box "of Portuguese earth". As she passes the figures set up for it, she picks up a giant felt rat. She hugs it, smiles sweetly, and puts it down gently.

Which artists, I ask her, once we're sitting down again, does she like most? Velasquez, she says, and Francisco de Zurbaran, Piero di Cosimo, the Pre-Raphaelites.

"I love the British illustrators," she adds, "like Beatrix Potter and Winnie the Pooh. Do you know the St Trinian's books? I love them!" Yes, I tell her, I do. And what, I ask, about 20th-century artists? She mentions Picasso, and her husband's work, and her son-in-law, Ron Mueck's. What about the YBAs? "I like Sarah Lucas," she says. Any others? "Tell me some." Damian Hirst? "It's all conceptual, like furnishing." Tracey Emin? "I was teaching her, and she said all we did was talk about men!" Has she done anything good? "She will. Not yet."

And so, finally, we get onto feminism. Is she, I ask, thinking of Vic and the abortions, and of the seductive male presence that throbs through her work, a feminist? Rego looks surprised. "Of course. I think most

Actually, I can see why you might want to dedicate yourself to Paula Rego. In spite of all the violence in her work, there seems to be something at the heart of her that's incredibly soft and sweet. She has the air of someone who has always been looked after and knows that, whatever happens, she always will be. She has had breast cancer — like, she says, “balls of glass” in her “tits” — and now has an intestinal condition called diverticulitis. But she still comes to her studio six days a week. “It’s the only thing I know how to do,” she says.

Paula Rego is more like a child than any functioning adult I’ve ever met. She also happens to be a leading artist. Does she feel like a grande dame of art? Rego looks around the studio, at the work, and the mannequins, and the animals, and the masks. Then she looks back at me.

“I’m not,” she says, for once quite sternly, “anything like it. I’m different.” You can say that again. Different, brilliant, a free spirit, a true original, a woman who uses fairy tales to tell the truth. “I’d like,” she says, “to be better. I’ve done as much as I can, but I’d like to be better.”

It makes me want to hug her, and perhaps even the rat.

Paula Rego's new exhibition opens at Marlborough Fine Art on September 30. Visit: marlboroughfineart.com. Paula Rego / Honore Daumiér: Scandal, Gossip and other Stories opens at the House of Illustration 14 November 2014. Visit: www.houseofillustration.org.uk