

Paula Rego: *Letting Loose*

Exhibition 22 September–11 November 2023

16 Wharf Road, London N1 7RW



Paula Rego, *In and Out of The Sea AKA The Raft*, 1985
Acrylic on canvas
242 x 192 cm
95 1/4 x 75 5/8 in
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Victoria Miro is delighted to present *Letting Loose*, an exhibition of works by Paula Rego from the 1980s, a period of liberation and self-discovery that led to great breakthroughs for the artist and saw her first major exhibitions in the UK and the US.

‘These paintings, perhaps more than any others, helped her to understand herself and those close to her.’
– Nick Willing

For Paula Rego the 1980s was a decade of creative transformation. Moving away from a process of making collages – drawing and painting material that she would then cut up and arrange into sophisticated figurative puzzles – she began instead to engage with her childhood passion for painting as play. Working rapidly and fluidly, Rego embraced freedom as methodology, inventing a cast of humans, animals and hybrid creatures that, in turn, empowered her to tell her own story.

Just as collage had enabled Rego to deliver clandestine comments about society (and Portugal’s fascist regime in particular) her new, quickfire method of working, especially its use of anthropomorphism, aided the dramatisation of darker aspects of human nature without mannerism or sentimentality. Rego’s memories and experiences, aspects of loyalty, love, passion, obsession and jealousy, including the shifting dynamics that shaped her own marriage (her husband, the artist Victor Willing, was by the 1980s severely ill with multiple sclerosis) surface in works that helped her to identify her feelings for particular situations; feelings that, once established, might be transformed during the process of painting. As Rego remarked, ‘The reason I make pictures is to find things out.’

These thematic and pictorial shifts in direction gave rise to important bodies of work, including *Girl and Dog*, the *Opera* paintings and *The Vivian Girls*, in addition to paintings inspired by an impactful first visit to New York in 1983.

The series known informally as *Girl and Dog* is perhaps the most candid exploration of her feelings for Willing – including the complex emotions brought about by caring for him in ill health; representations of faith and devotion that also respond to Rego’s Catholic upbringing. *The Outsiders* exhibition, held at the Hayward Gallery in 1979, introduced Rego to Henry Darger’s chronicle *The Story of the Vivian Girls*, an encounter that was to prove as significant as that with the work of Dubuffet in late 1950s. Rego’s *Vivian Girls* differ from Darger’s in that, exploring her own inner world, they possess far greater agency in their battles, as well as a far greater capacity for revenge.

Completed in 1983, Rego’s *Opera* paintings tap into an earlier experience of visiting the Lisbon opera house with her father in the 1950s – and her excitement at the intrigue and scandal unfolding both onstage and off. The dramas of Verdi or Janáček mingle with those of Rego’s own life in frieze-like works; works she referred to as ‘the so-called operas’ because they were as much about her relationships as those enacted on stage. *Traviata* and *Falstaff* were among paintings included in the exhibition *Eight in the Eighties*, held in New York in 1983; their enthusiastic reception led to Rego being invited to contribute to a subsequent New York exhibition, titled *Marathon 83*. Rego’s first visit to the city inspired a number of paintings where her freewheeling figuration finds expression in the dramas and dangers that sit just beneath the surface of sophisticated urban life.

While this success was newfound it was hardly overnight. Rego, by this stage, was almost fifty; highly respected in Portugal since the 1960s, her first solo exhibition in London, held at the AIR Gallery, didn’t take place until the summer of 1981. Yet, the works on view here quickly established her as an important voice in contemporary art, culminating in a solo exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in 1988. Rego was appointed the first National Gallery Associate Artist in 1989, an accolade that signifies the extent of her rise during this transformational decade.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a new publication, featuring an essay by Cecilia Alemani.

About the artist

Dame Paula Rego RA was born in 1935 in Lisbon, Portugal. She died in London on 8 June 2022. The largest and most comprehensive retrospective of Rego’s work to date was held at Tate Britain in 2021 (7 July–24 October 2021) and travelled to Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Netherlands (27 November 2021–20 March 2022), and Museo Picasso Málaga, Spain (26 April–21 August 2022). Works by the artist featured in the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, *The Milk of Dreams*, curated by Cecilia Alemani (23 April–27 November 2022).

A presentation of *Crivelli’s Garden*, Rego’s monumental work commissioned as the first National Gallery Associate Artist and completed in 1991, is on view at the National Gallery, London, from 20 July–29 October 2023.

Other recent major solo exhibitions include Paula Rego: *The Story of Stories*, Pera Museum, Istanbul, Turkey (2022–2023); Paula Rego: *There and Back Again*, Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover, Germany (2022–2023); Paula

Rego: *Subversive Stories*, featuring prints from across her career, at Arnolfini, Bristol, UK (2022); Paula Rego: *Literary Inspirations* at Petersfield Museum, Hampshire, UK (2022); *Power Games*, Museum De Reede, Antwerp, Belgium (2021), and Paula Rego: *Obedience and Defiance*, curated by Catherine Lampert, which travelled from MK Gallery, Milton Keynes to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh in 2019–2020 and was on view at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin from September 2020–May 2021.

Earlier solo exhibitions include: Paula Rego – *The Scream of Imagination | In Keys*, organised by the Serralves Foundation, on view at MACNA – Museu de Arte Contemporânea Nadir Afonso, Chaves, Portugal (2020); *Giving Fear a Face*, CEART: Centro de Arte Tomás y Valiente, Madrid, Spain (2019); *The Cruel Stories of Paula Rego*, Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris, France (2018–2019) and *Folktales and Fairy Tales*, Casa das Histórias Paula Rego, Cascais, Portugal (2018). Exhibitions of her work have been held previously at venues including: Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Gas Natural Fenosa, La Coruña, Spain (2014); the Museum of Contemporary Art, Monterrey, Mexico; Pinacoteca de São Paulo, Brazil (2010–2011); École supérieure des beaux-arts, Nîmes, France (2008); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C., USA (2007–2008); Fundação das Descobertas, Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon, Portugal (1997); Tate Liverpool, UK (1996–1997); AIR Gallery, London, UK (1981). Recent international group exhibitions include *All Too Human: Bacon Freud and a Century of Painting*, Tate Britain, London, UK (2018); travelled to Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, Hungary; *Post-Pop, Outside the Commonplace*, Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon, Portugal (2018); *Macau Biennial*, Macau Museum of Art, Macau, China (2018); *Bacon, Freud and the School of London*, Museo Picasso, Malaga, Spain; travelled to ARoS, Aarhus, Denmark (2017–2018). Her work is in the collections of numerous museums including the British Museum, Tate, National Gallery and National Portrait Gallery, London, UK; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA, The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, USA; The Art Institute of Chicago, USA and the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, USA.

In 2010, Rego was made a Dame of the British Empire for services to the Arts in the Queen's Birthday Honours and was awarded the prestigious Grã-Cruz da Ordem de Sant'Iago da Espada from the President of Portugal in 2004. Rego has received several Honorary Doctorates from universities including the University of St. Andrews (1999), University of East Anglia (1999), Rhode Island School of Design (2000), The London Institute (2002), Oxford University (2005), Roehampton University (2005), Faculdade de Belas-Artes at the University of Lisbon (2011), and the University of Cambridge (2015).

Rego was the recipient of many awards such as the Honors Medal of the city of Lisbon, Portugal (2016), the Maria Isabel Barreno prize (2017), Portuguese Government's Medal of Cultural Merit (2019) and the Lifetime Achievement Award from Harper's Bazaar (2019).

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