

Media release

Basel, September 26, 2024

Paula Rego
Power Games

September 28, 2024–February 2, 2025, Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau

Curator: Eva Reifert

The Portuguese-British artist Paula Rego (1935–2022) has emerged as one of the most singular figurative painters of recent decades. An activist, feminist, and creator of sumptuous and unsettling images, she has exerted a palpable influence in the art scenes of her native Portugal and the United Kingdom, where she chose to make her home. When she died in 2022, she left a sizable oeuvre that reflects her interest in investigating “power games and hierarchies”—avowedly one of her favorite subjects.

The extensive monographic exhibition *Paula Rego. Power Games* at the Kunstmuseum Basel singles out this central interest of the artist in the dynamics of power as its leitmotif. It is the first museum exhibition devoted to Rego’s work in the German-speaking countries and the first major monographic show since her death. Presenting around 120 paintings and pastels as well as several figures (‘bonecos’) and documents, the visually stunning exhibition invites visitors to explore Rego’s unforgettable universe and will help broad audiences gain a better understanding of this eminent artist’s work.

Divided into thematic sections, the show brings together key works from several decades, including ones in which Rego grapples with the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal. Other central motifs are related to her involvement in activism against the restrictive abortion legislation in her native country and against British participation in the Iraq War. Throughout her oeuvre, Rego interrogates wonted hierarchies and depicts women in diverse roles. The exhibition showcases both the spectacular pastels in large formats for which the artist draws on sources of inspiration ranging from literary narratives to Disney films, and examples of her technically brilliant work as a maker of fine art prints.

Biographical note

Paula Rego was born in Lisbon on January 26, 1935. The situation in Portugal, where António de Oliveira Salazar ruled as dictator, led her mother and father—a staunch anti-fascist—to leave the country in 1936 and stay in England for almost a year and a half. Paula Rego lived with her grandparents during this period. Her mother, an artist, inspired her to take up painting and drawing at an early age. She first attended an English school in Portugal; her parents' support then enabled her to escape Salazar's repressive regime by completing her education in the United Kingdom. In 1952, she enrolled at the renowned Slade School of Fine Art in London to study painting. There she met Victor (Vic) Willing, her future husband; they would have three children. From the mid-1950s until 1972, the family lived between Portugal and the United Kingdom, spending large parts of the year in Rego's native country.

After initial successes in the early 1960s, Rego was invited to send work to numerous international exhibitions, museums began acquiring her art for their collections, and she had solo exhibitions and won prizes, awards, and accolades. At the 2022 Venice Biennale, an entire room in the international pavilion was dedicated to her art. Paula Rego died in London on June 8, 2022.

The exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Basel

The exhibition takes the central interest expressed by the artist seriously: hence its title, *Power Games*. The thematic rather than chronological arrangement lets it turn a spotlight on themes that Rego repeatedly revisited, sometimes over the course of decades. The first part features works that scrutinize family ties and dependencies as well as the power dynamics between man and woman; state violence and mechanisms of repression play a recurring role, in part in light of the dictatorship that ruled the artist's native Portugal until the 1970s. The second part of the exhibition gathers Rego's unconventional heroines: female figures from popular culture and literature who shatter the bounds of the roles imposed on them, but also women who have obtained illegal abortions or are crushed by the weight of social and personal challenges. The presentation concludes with *Angel* (1998), the artist's most famous work and an embodiment of intrepid fortitude.

Powerful visual narratives from the collective unconscious of our time

Rego insistently charts the extremes of human experience. The bodies she depicts, especially the women's bodies, stand vividly before us; we can sense the constraints to which they are subject, but also see them in moments of transgression and release. The attitudes and poses in which she casts her women protagonists attest to the inward and

outward tensions under which they labor. In the seven works of the *Possession* series (2004), a nightmarish depression seems to bear down on the body, rendering it utterly passive. In the *Abortion* series (1998–99), by contrast, the artist voices her protest against the restrictive laws of Portugal, where women continued to be forced to resort to often life-threatening illegal procedures after a referendum proposing to lift the ban on abortions had failed. The powerful impact of these images cannot leave the beholder cold, and they helped shift public opinion in time for a second vote in 2007.

Rego's somber imagination with its distinctly sinister edge lends her art its particular fascination. It is tangible in the works from the 1960s that take on the dark era of Salazar's dictatorial rule over Portugal, but also in *War*, created in 2003 as huge crowds rallied in opposition to the United Kingdom's participation in the Iraq War. For inspiration, the artist frequently drew on literary texts, fairy tales, or, in other instances, animated films known to audiences all over the world. These sources, too, offered her ways to engage with motifs from the collective unconscious—imaginaries and ideas that are present in the human psyche but largely inaccessible to many people in their waking hours. The power of Rego's works and their often-immediate impact spring in part from this intuitive knowledge that the beholder, too, can tap into.

Juliette Israel's precise scenography translates the theme of light and shadow, derived from Rego's probing study of Jung's theory of archetypes, into contrasts and gradual transitions between bright and dark passages. The project is supported by the Victoria Miro Gallery and the artist's son, Nick Willing, who moreover generously agreed to lend several key works for the exhibition. They are surrounded by works by Paula Rego from international private collections and museums including the Tate, London, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, and the Serralves Museum, Porto.

Catalogue

The catalogue accompanying the exhibition replicates its kaleidoscopic structure. The introductions to the various thematic foci and chapters frame a variety of perspectives on Rego's oeuvre: besides art-historical studies, they include reflections by renowned Swiss, German, Portuguese, British, and North American scholars with expertise in psychology, gender and literary studies, and sociology. Stories and literary traditions are a guiding influence in Rego's art, and so the catalogue also presents her work side by side with contributions from writers. Dulce Maria Cardoso considers what it means to call Portugal home; the work series on the consequences of restrictive abortion laws are flanked by excerpts from Annie Ernaux's autobiographical *L'événement (Happening)*; and Anne Weber gives the figure in *Angel* a voice and a mission.

With writings by Catarina Alfaro, Cornelia Brink, Christa Binswanger, Dulce Maria Cardoso, Ann Cvetkovich, Elena Crippa, Emília Ferreira, Dominique Grisard, Marion Keller, Marianne Meister, Vera Marstaller, Victoria Miro, Leonor de Oliveira, Judith Rauser, Eva Reifert, Noemi Scherrer, Franziska Schutzbach, Jasper Warzecha, Anne Weber, Nick Willing, and Andrea Zimmermann, and selection from Annie Ernaux's *L'événement* accompanying the *Abortion* series of pastels and prints.

Ed. by Eva Reifert, published by Hirmer Verlag, 232 pages, 180 ill.,
ISBN 978-3-7774-4309-6

The exhibition is supported by:

Victoria Miro

Foundation for the Kunstmuseum Basel

Imagery related to the exhibition

www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/en/media

Media contact

Karen N. Gerig, Tel. +41 61 206 62 80, karen.gerig@bs.ch

Olivier Joliat, Tel. +41 61 206 62 55, olivier.joliat@bs.ch