



Paula Rego

1935 ————— 2022

by Olivia Gagan

'Art is the only place you can do what you like. That's freedom.'

Artist Paula Rego was born in Lisbon, Portugal in January, 1935. The daughter of an engineer father and an artist mother, Rego started drawing from an early age.

When Rego was little more than a baby, her parents left Portugal for the UK to work, leaving her in Portugal in the care of her grandmother. A childhood spent largely with her grandmother and her family's maid left Rego steeped in traditional local folklore, stories and images, which would eventually deeply influence her artistry as an adult.

At the age of 18, she left for art school in London. There, she met and fell in love with another student, Victor Willing. He was married, and his secret relationship with Rego meant she had several abortions as he refused to accept them having a child together. After another pregnancy, Rego decided to have the baby alone and moved back to Portugal. Willing joined her, divorcing his first wife and marrying Rego in 1959.

Rego's art was deeply feminist, exploring universal themes of sex, desire and death through a female lens—to disturbing, dreamlike results. Sex, death and magic are common themes, with cartoonish characters cast in subversive, strange roles. Her work reflected her deep knowledge and

understanding of myths and storytelling.

Drawing on religion, Portuguese fairy tales, ancient myths, and Disney princesses, her oils and pastels recast archetypal women—mothers, daughters, brides, virgins, lovers—in new roles. Rego's women snarl, bite and attack, expressing animalistic urges and impulses that are traditionally neutered or avoided in art.

Ageing and sexuality; infidelity; bodily pride and shame; family dynamics; lust: all were explored through her unique, unsettling lens. In one painting, Snow White is depicted after she has eaten the poisoned apple; she is shown as a middle-aged woman, writhing in pain—offering uncomfortable reflections on society's demands of youth and fertility in its idealised women.

Her work often took on contemporary social issues, such as human trafficking and female genital mutilation. A series of portraits of women experiencing the aftermath of illegal abortions was credited with positively influencing a 2007 referendum in Portugal legalising abortion. Rego also used her art to help process her own experiences, creating a series of paintings exploring her personal depressive episodes, which she credited, alongside therapy, with assisting her to

manage her mental health.

Their union was tempestuous, but after her husband Victor died of multiple sclerosis in 1988, Rego did not enter another serious relationship. Rego said: 'I had offers, but I never wanted to marry again. What's the point? I have my work, friends and family. I love Vic.'

Frequently dismissed—usually by men—in the earlier years of her career, over the years, Rego's art gained recognition and prominence. Her work is now displayed in museums and galleries throughout the world. She is recognised as a major influence on artists that came after her, particularly in her unflinching depictions of the body and of women's issues that have historically been swept under the carpet.

Rego worked throughout her eighties, stopping for soup with her model and assistant Lila Nunes at lunchtime and finishing each day with a glass of champagne. 'Making a painting can reveal things you keep secret from yourself,' she once said—a process at once cathartic and disturbing, and sometimes celebratory.

She died aged 87 in London, in June 2022.