

Behind the artist, a work in progress; a woman shaping up in all her animality

Paula Rego

Posing for her photographs, the artist borrows plumage from the exotic collection that transforms her studio into a backstage costume department. But when she paints, even her little girls have murder in their eyes.

In Paula Rego's painting *The Policeman's Daughter* a resentful young woman cleans her father's jackboot with one hand shoved deep inside it. Up you, her resentful expression says. She is being both obedient and rebellious, and it is an autobiographical tale. As it happens, Rego loved her father, the liberal owner of a precision instruments factory, but like all Catholic girls in the Portugal of her childhood she was brought up to respect and obey men. The militaristic dictator Salazar stood in for her father as a male hate figure; she called an early painting *Salazar Vomiting the Republic*. Her husband, Victor Willing, was both lover and dictator.

She met Willing in 1956 while they were both studying at the Slade: he was already regarded as the best of his generation of painters in England (born 1928, seven years before Rego). What he told her to do she did, even if it meant repainting a picture. And when he took twenty two years over dying (in 1988 of multiple sclerosis), she took twenty two years to nurse him, painting infrequently, feeling unable to compete; resenting him, loving him, needing his criticism because he more than anyone knew what she was about, sometimes even before she did.

He was already married when she met him. When she became pregnant she went home to Portugal to have the child. She had already had one abortion, and when her father now said she could lose this child too, she refused. Later the topic became central to her painting when, inspired by the failure of a referendum in Portugal to legalise abortion, she created the powerful abortion paintings, a sequence of primal suffering and shocking animality. Rego's family lived in Estoril and her nursery from the age of five looked out across green trees and a little fort at the blue ocean, but she looked inwards, drawing on solitariness. In old age her childhood in Portugal becomes an ever more intense reality to her, but one which she handles best from London. Her studio moves around with her inside her head, and even in the big space [check where] that is her actual studio, sparsely furnished with a table bearing containers of gouache, a sofa for models, the odd canvas stacked against a wall, a trolley, she might as readily be discovered crouching on the bare floor painting as working at an easel.

Like Degas, Rego has taken to pastel, for its urgent physicality, for the speed with which passages of work can be reformulated. It's

