

Everyday Stories. Paula Rego, the 70s

Curatorship: Catarina Alfaro

5 November 2022 to 21 May 2023



Paula Rego, *The Stepmother*, c. 1970

In 1969 and 1970 Paula Rego begins an illustration process around her memories of childhood and family, with their underlying psychological analyses of the relations of “domination” being expressed in a number of ways. They are the “everyday stories”, as the artist calls them, registered in a series of drawings in Indian ink. They are set in a defined area, Estoril, which is narrowed down to the domestic space in which the most formative experiences of early life take place: birth, play with other children, tantrums, family visits and relationships, and in which the dominance of the paternal figure in patriarchal Portuguese society is, in a number of works, brought to the fore. These everyday instances are, however, filtered by an oneiric configuration which is frequently eroticised and connects to psychoanalysis, at times close to a surrealist aesthetic. Political events are also brought under Rego’s critical and occasionally caricaturing gaze, with drawings such as *The Candidate*, *Simulacrum* and *The Race to the Polls*, October 1969, depicting the atmosphere which reigned during the National Assembly elections of October 1969, the first such elections to have occurred during the period known as the Marcelist Spring (Room 1).

Following the Revolution of the 25th April 1974, and the end of the dictatorship in Portugal, Paula Rego’s family encountered serious financial difficulties as a result of the bankruptcy of the business inherited from her father and which, since 1966, had been managed by her husband, Victor Willing, whose illness was getting increasingly worse. Though the period following the Revolution was a very difficult one, her work would continue to be shown in national and international exhibitions, as a notable example of the quality and originality of contemporary Portuguese art. During this period, the artist found, in the family estate in Ericeira, and in the work on the land which she regularly undertook there, a sense of calm which

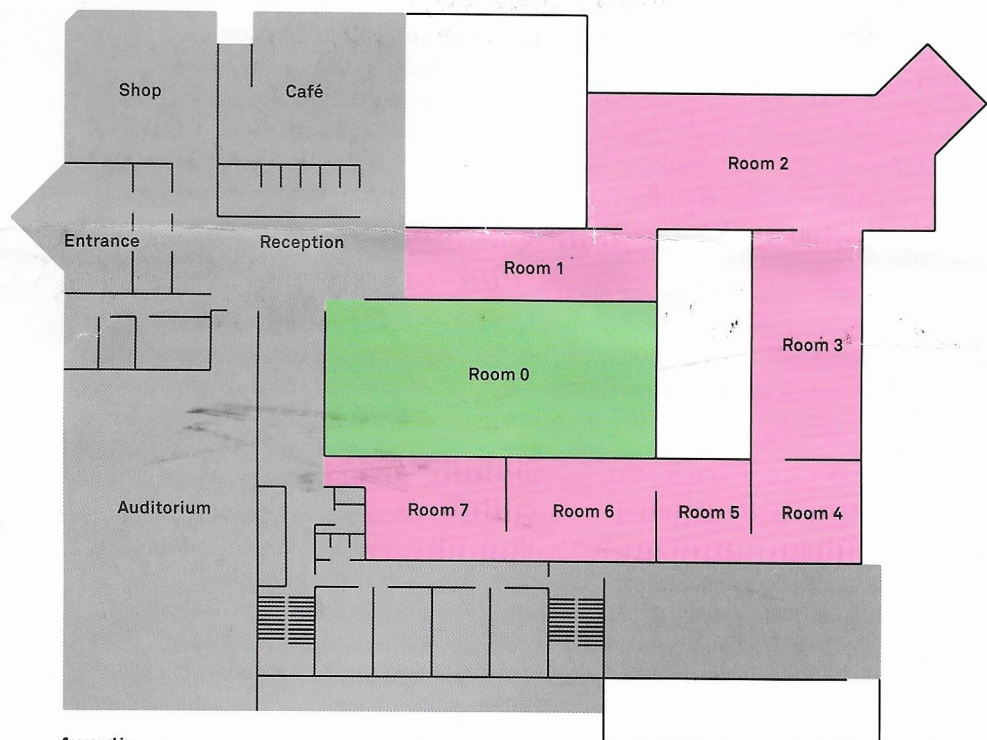
proved very valuable in terms of her creativity. Nevertheless, a number of accounts refer to her dissatisfaction with the artistic and cultural reality of a country which ignored more experimental practices, and therefore neglected to give any press coverage to her new solo exhibition at the Galeria da Emenda in 1974. From a technical perspective, and despite Paula Rego continuing to develop her "collage-painting" (though with different characteristics to those of the works produced in the early 60s), significant changes are introduced in her painting from the end of this decade. From 1966 onwards, she will choose to use acrylic paint as standard, something which guarantees her a swifter working process and also, more than anything, allows her to explore a more diverse and vivid palette of colours, which also featured in the latest trends in London fashion and the images coming from pop culture and psychedelia. Her canvases come to have lilac, pink, yellow, orange or green backgrounds, from which figures and other pen-drawn or acrylic-painted elements stand out, with well-defined edges, cut out and stuck down, methodically introduced in a complex compositional scheme. As a result, the pictorial surface ends up fuller, without shadow or perspective – an effect of the colour saturation which comes about from using strong and contrasting tones with which shapes and backgrounds become defined. Her painting adopts certain features which move it towards the language of pop art, namely the colour palette used and the recovery and creation of multiple and quite varied figurative elements. However, the different stylistic origins and their belonging to very diverse narrative contexts distance Paula Rego's work from the premises of pop art. The referential multiplicity of her work from the 70s also results from a sense of appropriation which is integral to Rego's artistic identity. The books she has read, the stories she heard in her childhood, the news in newspapers, the films she saw in the cinema and the exhibitions visited during her stays in London are key for the construction of her own autonomous, figurative language. It is precisely through the diversity of the sources from which she drew her inspiration – taken from her everyday life and via which she builds a figurative territory which is wholly unique and personal – that Rego asserts her independence from the artistic movements of her time, with a specificity which would continue to characterise her work to the end of her career.

Circulation Route

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Ground floor

Paula Rego and Salette Tavares:
Mapping Feminine Creativity in the 70s

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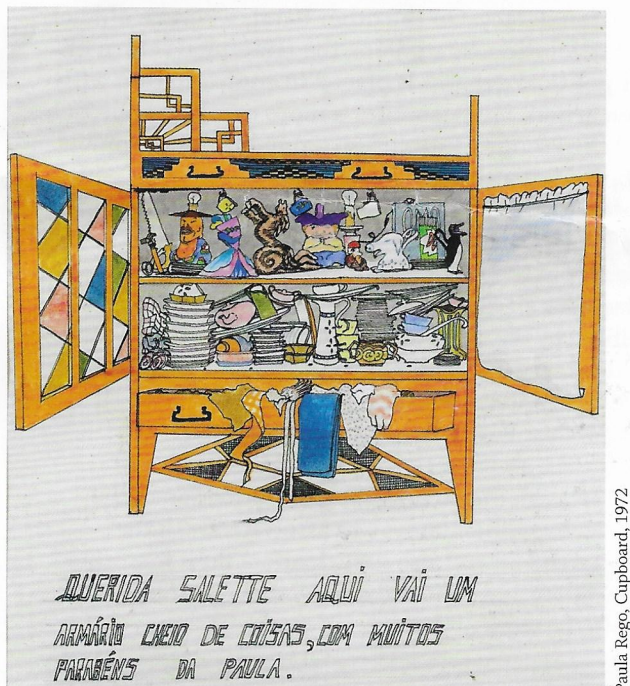


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Paula Rego and Salette Tavares: Mapping Feminine Creativity in the 70s

Curatorship: Catarina Alfaro and Leonor de Oliveira
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Paula Rego, Cupboard, 1972

Paula Rego (1935-2022) and Salette Tavares (1922-1994) met in around 1964 and in addition to being friends in their private lives, they were also close colleagues in the art world. Another detail shared between them has come to be added to this commemoration of their friendship and their artistic collaboration in the present year of 2022, however, and it casts a shadow over this little celebration: the centenary anniversary of the birth of Salette Tavares coincides with the year of the death of Paula Rego. This exhibition commemorates their relationship and reveals the distinct yet overlapping paths that they carved out in the Portuguese context during the 1970s, and especially after the Revolution of 25 April 1974.

The focal figures of this exhibition had very different lived experiences of the events that followed the fall of the dictatorship in Portugal. Paula Rego lived through this period with a certain pessimism. Not only did she face financial difficulties and a creative block that had started to make itself felt at the beginning of the decade, but also she quickly became disenchanted with the direction that the country was taking, as it seemed to be heading towards another type of dictatorship: there was even talk immediately after the revolution of the promotion of an official form of art. Salette Tavares, for her part, devoted herself to art criticism in the 1970s and in 1974 she became the president of the Portuguese section of the International Association of Art Critics (PS/AICA) – a role that she held until 1977. She was very active in the years following the revolution, and she was a fierce champion of the role of art and culture, and also of interventions by the PS/AICA to support both the move away from the conservative and colonialist ideology of the New State dictatorship and the consolidation of the process of democratisation.

In spite of the negative outlook that Paula Rego always maintained on the decade of the 1970s, the artist received the distinction of the Soquil Prize in 1971, which confirmed her importance on the Portuguese artistic scene at that time. Beyond this, her work achieved wide visibility in this period, through its circulation in several exhibitions both in Portugal and abroad. Even before she

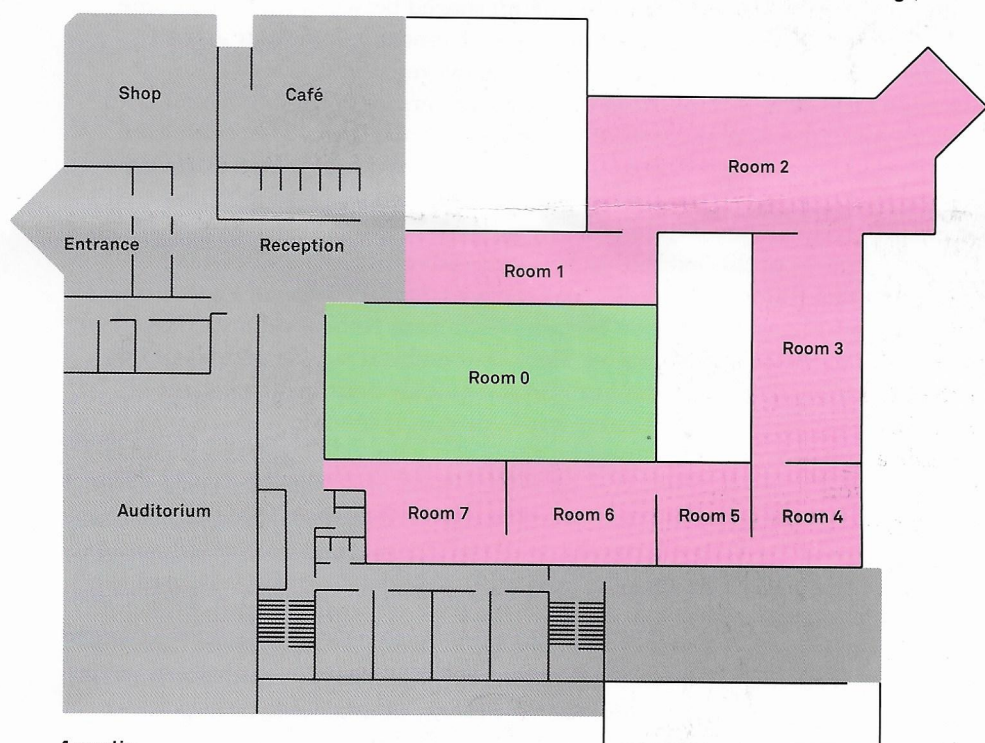
was recognised by the British artistic milieu, Paula Rego was already admired for her critical stance on contemporaneity, and, according to Salette Tavares, for her capacity to “grind”, through memory and her imagination, individual experiences (like childhood terrors) with the most diverse references (such as folk tales and sayings), thus creating a means of communication that goes beyond the subjective; that is to say, that also speaks of timeless, collective, lived experiences. Paula Rego and Salette Tavares are testament to the contribution of feminine creativity, not only in terms of a critical analysis of the post-revolutionary artistic scene in Portugal, but especially for the way in which they reveal the gestures and bodies, perspectives and experiences of women in this period. Today, we are able to interpret the full range of material and expressive formulations in the work of Portuguese women artists in that period as generative of a space of visibility for Portuguese women that made possible their inclusion in the narrative and in reflections on this historic moment of transition from dictatorship to democracy. On the other hand, when an official history based on the images of revolutionary soldiers, the triumphal return of political leaders from exile, or political debates is placed in confrontation with the work of Portuguese women artists, we encounter a more complex approach to the panorama that followed the 25 April Revolution – one in which women not only demanded their visibility, but also manifested their capacity for action with regard to the transformation of the country and their own destinies. Indeed, Paula Rego and Salette Tavares were agents in the cultural and artistic redefinition of the country throughout the 1970s. Paula Rego’s work in these years responded to the enthusiasm for an experimental form of art that would challenge the narratives crystallised by the dictatorship. In her role as an art critic and association leader, Salette Tavares was in a privileged position to introduce new readings of artistic practice and contribute to new artistic and cultural policies after the fall of the dictatorship. Furthermore, her texts highlighted the work of Portuguese women artists, and especially that of Paula Rego, and directly associated experimental art with the democratic transformation of the country: according to the art critic, experimental art was associated with the values of (creative/interpretative) freedom and also participation, for it implicated viewers in the construction of meaning and invited them to reflect on their own experiences and memories within the work of art.

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