

Paula Rego: *Secrets of Faith*

Exhibition 23 April–21 May 2022

Victoria Miro Venice, Il Capricorno, San Marco 1994, 30124 Venice, Italy



Paula Rego
Agony in the Garden, 2002
Pastel on paper on aluminium
76 x 70 cm
29 7/8 x 27 1/2 in
© Paula Rego
Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

Victoria Miro is delighted to present *Secrets of Faith*, an exhibition in Venice by Paula Rego.

Completed in 2002, the works on view depict episodes from the life of the Virgin Mary – subjects familiar in Christian art radically retold by Rego that are among the most special to the artist. ‘Of all my pictures, these were the most fun to make,’ Rego has said, and their importance can be measured by the fact that many have remained in her own collection; for years she kept one work from the cycle, *Descent from the Cross*, on her bedroom wall.

During his presidency of Portugal, Jorge Sampaio (1939–2021), who Rego had known as a lawyer since the 1960s and who, during the Carnation Revolution of 1974, came up with the slogan ‘Always 25 April’, invited the artist to create a series for the chapel of the Palácio de Belém, the head of state’s official residence in Lisbon. In response, Rego made *Nossa Senhora*, tackling Mary’s story with a curiosity and passion that resulted far in excess of the eight works which were eventually installed in the chapel.

This exhibition features additional works from the cycle and a number of related watercolours that reveal Rego’s thought processes as she depicts Mary viewed from the lived experience of women – embracing the Virgin’s iconography while

unseating serene and ethereal depictions from art history, finding the most pertinent parts of the story and dramatising them in ways that speak beyond the traditional narrative. Rego's challenge in telling the story not just from the Virgin's perspective but from the position of an embodied female figure is one that drew on her knowledge of the Old Masters, Christian art and religious texts, as well as her own experience of flesh and faith. She deals with episodes of pain and pleasure, astonishment and fear, through the prism of her own, deeply personal life experiences – pregnancy at a young age, motherhood, the burden of grief. Of her belief in God, Rego has said, 'I think it is because I am Portuguese and because I love stories, and Christianity is a very good story.'

Rego's work, always defiantly unsentimental, here places centre stage the earthly body, subjected to forces that are viscerally felt. In *Annunciation* we see Mary, modelled by the artist's granddaughter, as a girl in school uniform, her head tilted back in a kind of rapture before the Angel who proffers a bunch of phallic calla lilies; an unmistakably physical interjection to the narrative of the immaculate conception. Mary remains a child, as does Christ, in a number of watercolours depicting the *Pietà*, their youth serving to heighten a sense of their vulnerability. In *Descent from the Cross*, a work that Rego connects most strongly to the death of her husband, Victor Willing, in 1988, the composition accentuates the weight of the body being taken down. In *Agony in the Garden*, while the angel is curled over in anguish, Mary, consumed by grief, turns away.

The feminism implicit in telling Mary's story in ways it hadn't been before is intertwined with Rego's relationship with faith and her formative experiences under the Salazar dictatorship in a deeply Catholic country where the most proscriptive aspects of religion were felt most acutely by women. While the story may be thousands of years old, these scenes of Mary's life are entirely of a piece with Rego's work and the wider forces of suffering and survival, agency and resolve addressed consistently throughout the seven decades of her career.

Paula Rego will participate in the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, titled *The Milk of Dreams*, curated by Cecilia Alemani, open to the public from 23 April– 27 November 2022.

About the artist

Born in 1935 in Lisbon, Portugal, Dame Paula Rego RA lives and works in London. The largest and most comprehensive retrospective of Rego's work to date commenced last year at Tate Britain (7 July–24 October 2021) travelling to Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Netherlands (27 November 2021–20 March 2022), followed by Museo Picasso Málaga, Spain (26 April–21 August 2022).

Other current and recent major solo exhibitions include Paula Rego: *Subversive Stories*, featuring prints from across her career, at Arnolfini, Bristol (5 February–29 May 2022); 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. Rego's work is in the collections of major museums including the British Museum, London, UK; National Gallery, London, UK; National Portrait Gallery, London, UK; Tate, UK and the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK.

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