

The Body has more elbows

The title of the new exhibition at the Casa das Histórias Paula Rego was inspired by a phrase mentioned in conversation by the artist, discussing the difficult task of working with a model and how through representing the body, and its dominating and energising presence in the composition, the stories begin to take shape.

“This [painting in the early 1980s] was so easy to do! And so quick. It was like squeezing your head and everything came out. I held the paintbrush, started at one point, and went ahead, until the bottom. Now it's more difficult, working with a model. *The body has more elbows.*”

From an anatomic point of view, situated between the upper arm and forearm, the *Elbow* joins different bones of the human body. It allows bending, straightening and turning. Outward movement allows us to attack. Inward movement allows us to hold. To hug. To support. The Portuguese expression to be jealous, *dor de cotovelo*, literally a pain in the elbow, uses physical circumstances to represent a psychological state – jealousy, envy, spite. Elbow pain is acute, sharp. “Jealousy makes the elbows hurt”, says the Brazilian musician Caetano Veloso. But in Portuguese, you can also *talk through your elbows*, when speaking becomes as compulsive as arm gestures.

We all have, with some exceptions, two elbows; however, that extensive reference, implying many of them, confronts us suddenly with the varied facets of human nature and its physical form. It gives us the idea of a very specific way of looking, and processing what our eyes see, making the point of the pencil and the act of crossing out a wave sensitive to the variations of the surface of the body, and the deepest expression of Being.

This *body-elbow* which is drawn is sinuous, not two-dimensional, and creates shadows in the figure and muscles. It is expressive. Palpable. It has an outline. It creates tension even when it is relaxing. It is mass, density, weight. The body seen by Paula Rego makes us uneasy because the body is restless, direct, and even when it is posed, it breathes. It challenges us. It has points. It has moods. And the fixed drawing, “digs in behind the bones”, as the painter Arpad Szenes used to say. It makes the visible visible but it also shows what can't be seen. The title adds meaning to his (in)visibility. Nude or dressed, the body becomes an action figure, between different physical, emotional, fictional realities. The composition work leads Paula Rego to say, unsettlingly, “Everything which I paint has to be literal. I can't make anything up”¹.

The precision which arises from her need to master the technique and the motif carries with it an ontological feeling, with drawing becoming a process of knowledge. To be able to produce what we want, we must see, draw a lot, train our hand. Repeat, draw over, and assume mistakes

1 John Tusa Interview, Rádio 3-BBC. In http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/regos_transcript.shtml, consulted in June 2011

that are included in a story where the pencil puts together the final image. Or put everything aside and start again, always with the support of models with whom the artist has a strong relationship. Lila Nunes works with Paula Rego for more than 30 years, and it is her body which appears in most drawings. If this frequent closeness suggests alterity, the artist through her model, it makes the possible interpretations of her work even more ambiguous and unsettling, allowing the composition process to be dynamic and carried out in partnership.

Slowly, the image takes shape. The most essential part is to have even the vaguest idea of what is desired. Having a phrase which leads the way, or simply something which one wants to say in a certain way. One suggestion is quickly noted and found again in a constant state of metamorphosis, throughout the work. Paula Rego has given many interviews in which she talks about this process. In 1988, a few years after working systematically with models, she explained: "Drawing goes directly from the mind to the hand. The first idea is like this: it comes and is immediately drawn. But afterwards, once the image is fixed, to paint I need more information. To know how the folds are and all those things.... I put Lila in the costume I need and I copy her. I make drawings of her hands and face to know what the shadows are like."²

The body rises as a singular entity, cut up by the demands of the drawing and to better master the motif. In successive exercises, the artist's attention was focused on the face, hands, feet, arms, making certain parts stand out from the paper and sometimes using them in different compositions, this time as part of the body as a whole. One of the first paintings in which she used a model was done in 1954, while the artist was at the Slade school and learned the rules of academic drawing, the effort of concentration to observe and register, taking the model's measurements, the preoccupation with proportion. It is still this memory which runs through the drawings, especially from the 1990s onwards, often done using a grid to transfer the image to another surface and another size.

The move to a larger studio in 1993, where the artist could concentrate on objects brought from Portugal and create scenes, helped to consolidate a process of changes which could be seen in her work from the late 1980s, when the easel replaced the floor as support for the work, and the focus changed direction and began to use the presence of a model. Figuration was then used fully as the base for her research because she is, above all, interested in human beings: "I use figuration because it's the only way that I can put the mood across, through figures, because I like drawing people, I'm very interested in people, I like people above everything else. It's curious the cruelty and all those things, you know, fascinating things that people are".³ This is why the artist's vision always comes from people, and never objects. Objects have no face, she says. Because a body is needed to draw. A dense body, a body made of flesh and muscles.

² Alexandre Melo Interview, "O mundo mágico de Paula Rego" in *Compreender Paula Rego 25 Perspectivas*, Porto, Público /Fundação de Serralves, p.57.

³ In http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/regu_transcript.shtml

Gilles Deleuze wrote of Francis Bacon's paintings that: "the body is the Figure, or rather the material of the Figure".⁴ We find in Paula Rego's Figure the same ability to represent the intense power of a body, its physical mass in tension, twisted (mostly) the wrong way, but it always has a face. It needs a face. Eyes, nose, mouth. It expresses itself through its features.

In the series of drawings and etchings carried out after the first referendum on the legalisation of abortion, in 1997, the figures are this material body: flesh, muscle, energy. But unlike Bacon's figures, there is also an outline, definition of shapes. And pain, and solitary despair and, in some of them, a special look, inviting the viewer into the situation shown. Confronting them their choices. Since they are not revolting bodies, they are tumultuous, they directly involve those who look at them in the first negative result of the referendum: "I felt indignant, why can't people go and vote, it's such an important thing, causes so much suffering. So I did a series of pictures of very young girls having illegal abortions, in their bedrooms, very on their own".⁵ Dressed in school uniform, they refer to situations in which pregnancy occurs during adolescence, breaking rules or discipline. Despite the theme, they are not obscene, no blood is seen, only a clinical truth.

Because the body is also an expression of moods, it is bonded with feelings and desires reflecting *Love, Disdain, Shame or Sloth*, by the posture assumed. In a sequence drawn in graphite on paper at the beginning of the year 2000, Paula Rego challenges us with this presence. Us and the Other and, as in many drawings from the *Abortion* series, objects which can only be partly seen, merely help to convey a narrative which concentrates above all on the figure of the woman in question. In contrast to this tension, sometimes, the body undoes the pose when it seems to contradict with the props around it.

There are fewer works by Paula Rego in which the male body takes on a structuring position in the composition. Often it is shown as fragile, dependent, indolent, in a state of evasion. At the end of the 1980s, while the artist was carrying out *The Dance*, her husband Victor Willing, also a painter, suggested the presence of masculine elements around the women who danced in the moonlight, to avoid the risk of becoming boring. The picture hangs around the figure of a man who, at the front, looks directly at the viewer.

In the series of drawings carried out years later on the Eça de Queiroz novel *The Crime of Father Amaro*, the male figure is fundamental both to the narrative and the painting. Anthony Rudolph, a model and great friend with whom the artist has worked since this time, appears in many compositions.

In one of the drawings, the priest and protagonist of the story curls up among women, and peers at the viewer in something between childlike lethargy and the provocation of some wrongdoing. "It was a painting I did that... when I met Tony Rudolf, and he... he wanted to sit for me, he was

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, in <http://books.google.com>, consulted June 2011.

⁵In http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/regos_transcript.shtml

actually very glad to sit for me. It's unusual that men like to sit for you. They get so bored. But he did. I dressed him up, because in the story, he's a priest... he's a... before he becomes a priest, he is... has got no mother, he's brought up by a Madrinha, a godmother or something. He has no vocation whatsoever, and he's taken to the godmother's house and there he's very, very happy, amongst the servants, who made a fuss of him. They used to dress him up as a girl, and they used to... but he was very little, and they used to dress him up as a girl, and they used to pamper him, and make him laugh, and so I thought: it's a very, very good idea. I'll get this man, and I'll dress him up like a girl, except of course he's not a girl, is he? Because he's a man. He's not even like a woman. He's a real man. And I put this skirt on him, this... this tartan skirt on him. And he's sort of cozying up against Lila, feeling really comfortable, and very smug, and he is... he just sort of goes on like that till the end of his days, you know, leaning on... on these women, and making mischief really"⁶.

In these drawings fundamental aspects of Paula Rego's work can be highlighted. From the outset, the use of literature as the base for illustration, creating a space of continuity, fertile for the technique and the imagination, delaying the uncomfortable feeling of finishing a piece. Afterwards, using pastels, a material which the artist has used since the theme series of the *Dog-Women* (1994), allowing her to draw with colour. And the absolute freedom of making drawing a world where anything is possible, even interfering in the story on which the piece is based.

Sometimes the motif for the drawing appears in a situation created between two figures: "Afterwards it is a question of correcting the composition. Emphasising more this feature or another. How the figures relate to one another in the composition. The distance between them is very important. The head, its position, all these details are very important. Because this is how one sees the relationship between them"⁷. And from this relationship isolated in space come, for example, the studies for Maria, from *Marta, Maria and Madalena* (1999) and for the series of etchings for *According to Hogarth* (2000).

In 1988 Victor Willing died, a victim of multiple sclerosis, an illness which had afflicted him for more than 20 years. His absence let a vacuum Paula Rego had to learn to deal with, since she had lost the privileged partner with whom she had discussed the work in process. In a kind of progressive farewell process, she crossed the pictorial space of her husband. Her figures are made simpler, denser, they take on greater volume, they start to have a scene. They are not very detailed but are able to place the plot in context. A change which, according to the artist, simply began to happen. Above all starting with the Girl with Dogs pictures: "The thing changes on its own. It isn't a question of wanting it. It happens. It starts to appear. It starts with the introduction of shadow. There's the shadow on one side, and light on the other, and this

⁶ In www.webofstories.com

⁷ In *Compreender Paula Rego 25 Perspectivas*, p.57

immediately creates volume. And when it creates volume, the figure has to settle, because otherwise it doesn't make sense. Once it is settled, it has to create a space.”⁸

The artist uses Indian ink for some studies for bigger paintings. In the fragile line she incorporates mistakes or blotches made by the pen and uses the monochrome mark to study areas of light and dark on the scenography. Her attention is focused on two figures, and the power relationships which are established between them. Someone dresses and someone else is dressed, someone gives food and another is fed. There is some kind of growing tension in later works, between love and cannibalism, submission and violence, a kind of loving anthropophagy in family relationships (*Mothers and Daughters, Fathers and Songs*) or in scenes of passion. There is, in the idea of giving oneself fully to someone, an almost religious aspect. An interest in the sacrificial side of men. Perhaps because drawing has, according to the artist, the ability to “reveal unspeakable things”⁹, as can be seen in works which deal with old age and a decaying body, an awareness of the end: “When you're very intense about something, and you want to put something across, which is quite personal, and quickly, in secret... a secret, you draw it... draw it. And I did a thing... thing called *Misericordia*, which is about an old lady being... having her bottom cleaned and being looked after and all that. And I did that, I came in here, I did that just... just as my mother was dying. It was about her.”¹⁰

The idea of abandonment and a lack of protection, of hardness and the awareness of growing up and the passing of time is a theme present in works such as *The Children's Crusade, Peter Pan* or more recently *Oratory*. It is this feeling which runs through the *Mercy* series, where the different situations are based on contrasts – protection and oppression, hosting and dependency – part of a space swathed in shadow and darkness. A state of fragility characterises the bodies, which have become a structureless mass, without muscles. Sheltered, washed, fed. Paula Rego creates paintings rich in contradictions, just like human beings themselves.

Paula Rego's stories are told on their own or as a set, marking time for interpretation, like the steps of a procession. In the series of drawings made for the chapel at the Palace of Belém, the artist created the *Life Cycle of the Virgin Mary*. She did several preparatory studies before the final drawings, done in pastel, and in them we can see the *Annunciation, Birth, Fleeing*, and *Pietá*. A mother and an angel cry over the death of a child. In the *Crime of Father Amaro* series, following the death of Amelia's child, the story continues differently in Paula Rego's vision, with the introduction of an avenging angel... However it is the viewer who interprets the image, because everyone sees what they want to. “However much I explain, I don't explain anything.

⁸ Idem, p.60.

⁹ In http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/regos_transcript.shtml

¹⁰ In www.webofstories.com (tradução livre da autora).

Afterwards the matter is closed and it's as if I had said nothing at all. The pictures speak for themselves, everyone makes their own story".¹¹

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¹¹ Bárbara Reis Entreviwe, "As histórias da princesa Paula" in *Publica*, nº 2478, 22 Dez.1996, p.25.