Paula Rego was born in Lisbon in 1935 and trained at the Slade School of Fine Art in London in the 1950s. As Rego herself explained in 1965, she is inspired by 'caricature, items from newspapers, sights in the street, proverbs, nursery rhymes, children's games and songs, nightmares, desires, terrors'. Twenty-five years later she revisited the English nursery rhymes of her childhood with a series of etchings made in honour of her infant granddaughter. Three Blind Mice is from that series, which was exhibited at the Marlborough Graphics Gallery in London in 1989.

Public access description
Paula Rego. 'Three Blind Mice', 1989

Physical description
Illustration in monochrome of nursery rhyme, Three Blind Mice

Dimensions
Height: 21.1 cm platemark, Width: 22.6 cm platemark, Height: 52.5 cm sheet, Width: 37.9 cm sheet

Museum number
E.285-1990

Historical context note
http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/rego_transcript.shtml

Transcript of interview by John Tusa on BBC Radio 3

There's no problem with being a successful woman on the British art scene today. 40 years ago it was far more difficult for women artists to get noticed, ask Paula Rego. Born in Lisbon in 1935, she came to London in the early 1950s and soon after began studying at the Slade School of Art. There she met Victor Willing, a fellow student who later became her husband and the love of her life. Living variously in Portugal and England they raised three children together and painted separately. Things changed in 1966. First her father died, then Victor Willing was diagnosed with early signs of Multiple Sclerosis, and then his father died. Back in Portugal Victor ran the Rego family business, Paula continued to paint relying heavily on her husband's advice. This phase of their lives ended with the downfall of the Salazar regime and the seizure of their business. Paula Rego returned to London with her husband and children, and both of them resumed their painting. It was to be another 10 years though, after Vic Willing's death, before Paula Rego began to get the acknowledgement she deserved. Unusually among 20th century artists she glories in being a narrative painter and a figurative one. Some of her series of paintings, Dog Woman, the Red Monkey series, have created unforgettable images that no one else could have painted. The constants in her work are the female form, the Portuguese woman, stocky, muscular, that she was brought up with and toys and animals often in disturbingly humanoid forms. And time and again there are references to childhood experiences but always seen through a subversive remembered eye.

Paula Rego, what were your relationships like with the different members of your family? Well, what sort of relationship did you have with the members of your family? What was the kind of family background that you grew up in?

A very... a bit strict, with few rules. I was an only child, and I stayed a lot in my room, but I loved my father, and my mother as well. My grandmother and grandfather had... I was very, very spoilt and very well looked after.

And there was a lot of story telling in the house, wasn't there; or you had stories told to you.

Yeah, I had... my aunt Lugera, she spent all afternoon telling me stories. She used to come and stay with us sometimes; and she told the stories I wanted to hear. I'd give her the subjects and the subject matter; and then she'd go on and on and on, for a day sometimes... two days. And I also had my mother's old nanny, who used to come and stay with us; and she sat by my bed, because I was afraid of the dark, so she would sit there till I fell asleep. And during that time she would tell me stories from her native... from her... from the village she came from, about animals and, you know, magic animals, all that.
When your aunt told you stories that you wanted to hear, can you remember the sort of subjects that you suggested to her?

Well, it was always about the king who had a daughter, and then she... terrible things happened to her, and she had to, oh, tribulations - going out into the world, leaving her home and travelling, and coming across all sorts of evil things, and then she would be saved in the end and marry the prince... the usual kind of fairy-tales. It was a fairy-tale I wanted to hear.

Can you remember feeling reassured about them?

Oh, I thrilled to them, thrilled to them; but I was also a little frightened at times, which is part of it - you should be; that was part of it, mm.

You also liked going to the cinema; I think you were taken to see a lot of Disney films... Snow White, Pinocchio, Fantasia... Snow White, Pinocchio... what sort of images do you remember from those films which stirred you at the time?

In Snow White the stepmother was very frightening, and every child I've known has been really afraid when the stepmother changes into the witch in the mirror. That was terrifying. But otherwise it was a world of mystery and enchantment. It was just like the real world.

And then when did you start drawing? When did they suddenly realise that you were spending a lot of your time drawing and that you were rather good at it?

Well, I always drew, I mean, ever since I was really small, as children do, you know - they just scribble away; and I did that; I loved drawing, I loved drawing, you see, because drawing is incantatory, and it also brings you peace, because you rock backwards and forward when you're drawing, and you... you see, it's... there's something sexual about drawing, and there's a great deal of comfort in it as well; and not just that but I could do pictures of people and so on. I started very young; I must have been about... I think five, I remember, or even less.

Just create for me a picture of what you were like. You say it was incantatory and all that. Create for me the picture of what you were like as a young girl in the business of being at home and physically drawing.

I'd sit on the floor; I'd have a piece of paper, and coloured pencils, but actually the colours never mattered a lot, it was just the point of the pencil... and that when the point of the pencil scratched on the paper, it was utterly thrilling; and then I'd make a noise, I'd go uuunnnnnnnnnnnnnn. That's how it was incantatory, you see, the uuunnnnnnn. And I went into a kind of... a sort of... not a dream, but somewhere else. And I became completely absorbed in what I was doing. I'd sit on the floor and draw hour after hour.

And when did it become clear... when did you teachers say to you and to your parents, look, Paula isn't just an averagely talented girl who spends a lot of her time drawing, she can really draw?

Well, I couldn't draw at all till much, much later...

Yes, so when was that?

Well, I think... well, when I went to St Julian's English school, they encouraged me there, because they believed in drawing but not... my teacher at home, my Portuguese teacher, she used to tell me I couldn't draw at all; she's say... because we had to do cups, you see, and she... and I couldn't get one side of the cup like the other one, and she said, look at this person, she can't draw, and she wants to be an artist - I already wanted to be an artist you know I was only 9; and she used to, you know, sort of give me a shove. But in the English school they encouraged me, yeah.

And then your English teachers - and they were two English people - really encourage you, and did they say to you, if you work you'll get into the Slade, or...?

No.

No?

Not at all. They were so clever that one punishment I had from the headmaster was to do a huge mural. That was the punishment, because I used to skip school sometimes, you know; and he said, as a punishment you've got... and so I was on my knees doing this huge thing on paper, then they hung it up on the wall. So you see, they were clever, yeah [laughs slightly].

And all this time, because clearly the input you were getting visually was very, very strong - you were getting all this input of stories, the oral part... were you also reading? Have you also been a great reader?

Oh, yeah. I read a lot, and then when I was about 13, 14, I loved poetry; I wrote stories myself, you see, and illustrated them; so yes...

What sort of stories?

...I read...I read...oh, about runaway children [laughs], curiously enough; I don't know why. yes.

Yes, I suppose every child wants to run away whether they have a happy home or not; in a way, the more happy the home you have, the more you dream of the supposed liberation of running away, don't you?

Yeah, I don't know. I just thought it was an adventure, you know; but I never got very far. I mean, even if I did run away I never got very far.
Oh, so you did actually try?

Well, I once dressed up as somebody really poor and went out begging; but you see, I didn't get very far because I was too ashamed, and I came back home [laughs].

Ashamed of what?

Ashamed of pretending, ashamed of being found out, ashamed... you know. So I came back home quickly. So I didn't venture very far.

Let's talk about another aspect of the atmosphere of your younger years; these were the years of the Salazar dictatorship. What sort of impression do you retain, or do you have now, of the sort of impact that the dictatorship had on people?

Well, you couldn't speak your mind; everything was said... nobody even spoke about things, actually. They stopped knowing what to say. People who got arrested presumably talked to their friends, but there was just a general feeling of... that you couldn't talk about things. And they couldn't create things either?

No. They talked about football; that stood in for everything else. How do you mean they couldn't create things?

Well, if people can't talk about things then doesn't that limit the extent to which they can be creative, that art can be created? Doesn't the oppression extend to the creative world as well?

Well, there's always secrecy and subversion, which is very powerful, that; but even that didn't seem to go very far, really. It was always in certain limitations. And the ignorance... I mean, one of the first things that Salazar did was to shut all the teacher training colleges, so there weren't any proper teachers. People had very, very short training, and schools were appalling, really.

And what about the other kind of oppression which you have mentioned, and that is the social oppression that society placed on all women on Portugal ? Tell me about that.

I mean, nobody had the vote, really. Not just women; nobody really voted. But women hadn't... had no right to get a passport, for instance, without their father's permission or their husband's permission. For a long time they couldn't have a bank account of their own. So you know, you couldn't leave the country without permission or...you see. There was, there was divorce and that, but there weren't lots of other things. And you know, I mean, women were supposed to be servants, really.

But upper-class women, middle-class women; what was expected of them?

Middle-class women were supposed to be play canasta and have tea and manicures and things; that's a form of prison as well; and they had to conform within their own very narrow worlds.

And working-class women; what was expected of them?

Working-class women worked like donkeys. They had to look after their children, their husbands; there had to be thousands of children because there wasn't any form of birth control, which was forbidden; abortion was forbidden; everything was forbidden. So they had to... they were... they had very difficult lives.

Was it a huge relief when you came to London , to the Slade, at the age of 17; was just getting out into a free society a very important part of that experience?

Well, I tell you, when I flew over London and I saw the lights, I thought this was a fairground; I thought, wow, this is really it. And as I landed it was just marvellous, although... because London was still very bleak after the war, and because it was 1951 when I first came here, you see, it was bombed a lot you see.

And rationing.

And there was still rationing, and there was powdered eggs, which were disgusting. In fact even that seemed marvellous. There was lots of ice-cream, and I could eat as much ice-cream as I wanted. I could eat... I could go to the movies as often as I wanted, which I did.

And what did you learn from the Slade? What did they do to you? Did they help you start to become the artist you finally became?

I learnt... I learnt not very much there. I learnt from the people I met there. But it was very restricted at the Slade because... you see, you have to... you had to do this...Coldstream was really rather a good professor, a very good professor, I think, actually, and he recognised that I had to use things from my head, I couldn't just draw like measuring everything over and over again, 'cause I got desperately, desperately bored: so he said... oh, he liked what I did, he encouraged me always. You know, and we had tutors like... Lowry came to see me, for instance. Lowry was despised, he was considered not good at all; and he came to see me, and we got on really well. He liked what I did, understood; I've always liked what he did. And they had odd people, oddballs like that in the Slade; in fact the Slade was full of oddballs, all different kinds. Some measured everything very carefully, some did pseudo-naive pictures, some did portraits of their mothers and so on... but it was full of oddballs. So what did I learn? Well, I don't know... always do something that you know about; that's what they told me. Because I was... when I first went there I did like Roman bur... Rome burning, and the slaves escaping, and you know, melodramatic stuff like David. And they said, this is all very well, Paula - that was... William Towns was my tutor... nice man - but you know, you should really do something you know.
about, not all this stuff. So I tried to.

And then what sort of things were you painting? Were you going back to the folk stories, were you going back to...

No.

...so what sort of things did you feel you knew about and that you could paint about?

Well, I did... well, I did several pictures from my head, but mostly I took refuge in the print room where you could really not have to do art in there.

And what did you do there? Just look at prints?

No, you'd do etchings. You didn't have to do art there.

Excuse me, aren't etchings art?

Yes, but you see, you don't.... not sort of art like [laughs], like with a big A, you know, doing "art". It's just, you do what you want to do, which I did.

Now, I suppose the most important thing at the Slade was that you met your husband, Vic Willing, an artist, a very good artist, later. And was he the most important influence on your life as a painter?

Yes, without doubt. The most... the biggest influence, possibly the only influence. I mean, not copying-wise; I didn't want to do pictures like him because we're such different people, but the things he told me I still remember, you see.

Like?

Well, what... I asked him, what's tonalities? He said, look, half-close your eyes and some things you see darker than others. That's tonalities. That I learned from him. You see, I'd never learned that at the Slade. I didn't know what it was. It was so complicated. He taught me that. He said, be true to yourself; you're your own best friend. He said that to me. And he told me to draw. He said, just draw and draw. When I was stuck, you know; after leaving the Slade I was stuck. And he said, just draw and draw. And I did; I just drew and drew, what came in my head.

So he really accepted you as what you were and what you were going to be; there was no attempt to be a sort of Svengali and say, I will help this unformed creative person become something marvellous?

A Euston Road painter? Not at all. He once put a bowl in front of me, a blue bowl with some oranges in, when I was stuck again, and he said, well, if you don't know what to do, paint that. And you know, horror, horror, you see, I couldn't. There's no faces there, no faces. And so he said, you see, you can't do that. Go and do some more drawing, so I... yeah.

Mm. And you can't do landscape either?

Not much. I try to.

Is it the same thing, that there are no faces there?

No faces... well, there's so much spread around that you know, the moment that you concentrate and try to observe a bit, you're onto the next bit but you... then you've missed out things. I can't do it. I have no overall feeling for landscape, really.

Now, at a fairly early stage in your marriage, I think about 6 or 7 years after you were married, Vic was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, which he then had for 22 years.

That's right, yes, he did.

Agonising for him to experience...

Well, not at first, but it was, it was crippling later, but at first it was not... we didn't even know what it was... never heard of it, you see. So years passed by without knowing what was going to happen, which was just as well.

When did the illness become acute? How many years of really acute suffering was there for him and you?

Well, it got bad in the late seventies, early seventies; and in the eighties it was pretty bad, yeah.

But even then, when he was very ill, he was making suggestions to you about paintings, and if we think of that extraordinary series of paintings called Girl With A Dog, where girls look after a dog, they dress it, they shave it, they feed it, and so on and so forth, he suggested that idea to you?

No, he did not.

Where did the idea come from?
A friend of mine, Colette, she said you should... I should do something about Vic, but it wasn't from him. He just gave me the idea from the Monkey Beating his Unfaithful Wife, that was his... it wasn't, but his idea was the monkey, the bear and the one-eared dog, because he had such toys as a child, and he gave me that idea. But after that he didn't give me any more ideas. After that he'd no more.

Yes, as you've raised that, let's just talk about the Red Monkey series. So he gave you the idea that there were these three characters, and then all the individual groups that you created in successive paintings, they were your ideas rather than stories which he told you?

No more stories that he told me, no more. That was the end.

So the monkey having its tail but off by the wife, and either vomiting or spitting out wine, that was entirely something which you brought to that series of pictures?

Yeah, it was. The animals were his, but what happened to them was mine. What I made them do was my idea. Well, my idea is what really happened to them.

What really happened to them?

What really happened to them in life. So the story came... the animals... the story took hold of the animals, you see, and they just acted it out for me.

Roughly how long did each one of those paintings take to do? And were you painting them all separately?

No, they were done on the floor, those pictures, because then I began to draw on the floor, like I did as a child. That was very important. And they... those pictures took no time at all. I would do one a day, you see.

And you painted them in sequence?

I painted them in sequence, one after the other, yeah.

And you knew when you had come to the end of the series, when, as it were, those characters had stopped telling you a story?

Yes. You can only do four. Any more is self-indulgence, and also it goes off. The first one, you're grasping for what you want. The second one, you get it. The third one, you get it very, very well. The fourth one is decadent already. You start again.

And then you have to find another theme?

Exactly.

So then there was this series, Girl With A Dog, which this friend suggested as a way of coming to terms with Vic's illness?

Well, I think it was, because, you see, there is not... I mean, it was just that... yes.

Did you by then feel the need to paint something about this awful situation which you were both in?

Yes. I didn't know how. You see, it was so embarrassing, because it's such a personal thing, and you can't really do it directly - you don't know how. And so you have to find a way round it, a story; but you don't... it doesn't work like "Now I'm going to do something about this situation." An idea comes to you, and you do the first one, and then after you've done it you realise what it is that you've done. Do you see? And what it is... you begin to see... the picture begins to tell you what has happened, and what has happened is, you've opened a whole corridor into the darkness; and then you follow it. And then as you go into this dark corridor it begins to light up, and you see things, you see. But it's an adventure, and sometimes a dangerous one, and painful too. And riskier and then you're ashamed, ashamed, you see. But I think that that's how it started, and then that... you see, then the dog... the girls and the dogs led to more religious pictures, and the pictures became really religious pictures.

Can I just hold you for a moment on the Girl With A Dog series; what did Vic think of them, because now like it or not, they are seen as being your reaction to his...

Oh, he liked them.

He liked them?

Oh, yeah, he liked all this stuff, yeah.

He didn't mind being portrayed as...?

Well, he didn't know. I mean, you know, he, he liked it, yeah, he liked the pictures.

Hm.

Yeah.
And were they in the end a help to you in the experience of dealing with a sick and ultimately dying husband?

Not at all. They weren't any help whatsoever. The only thing was that I did some... I did pictures that meant a lot to me, that's all. But that's quite good. If you do pictures that mean a lot to you, that's terribly good really.

You mentioned danger in the process of discovery. How? What sort of danger?

Well, as a thrill that you might go over the edge into some area which is fraught with danger and risk of total embarrassment, doing something that is going to reveal unspeakable things... I don't quite know what, but that's the risk of it, really.

Let's just talk about the business of painting a little bit more. Vic, it's said, placed the brush on the canvas with precision with fastidiousness, and he called you "a monkey with a typewriter", in the sense that you splashed and splashed, and sooner or later something wonderful would come out. Was that ever a fair description of how you painted?

He said I was like a monkey with a typewriter because I did many drawings... I didn't splash around trying to see a face in the clouds like some people do, because that is just silly - you have to have an idea, you see, and then you put it down. But the idea goes wrong many times, and you do that many, many different ways until one is better than the others.

But at what stage did that stop? I mean, you turned... you'd been through surrealism, you'd been through collage... so first of all, tell me how important was the moment when you decided, or were told, that collage was not helping you and that you should go for straight, figurative painting?

Well, my friend Joao, he said, what are you cutting up this stuff for? Because what I used to do is do a lot of material... I could not get ready-made collage that would... was enough, specific enough - newspapers are too vague. So I used to do drawings of monkeys, of people, of whatever, and then I used to cut them up and reassemble them to make a collage, to make a picture, so that it would undergo a whole process of transformation, which I thought was necessary for art, you see. What happened was that that in itself became totally academic, and the method of doing took over; so it became a method. Now, a method is no good; method stinks. So when he said, why are you cutting up, why don't you just leave the drawings as they are? I said, do you think I could? And... yeah! And that was fantastic, because it simplified my life a great deal.

And that in fact was when the Red Monkey series... that was 1981...

1980, even 1979 I began, because I did things before the Red Monkey.

Now, the journey, though, from the way the Red Monkey series looks, which is acrylic on paper, isn't it, and quite light and almost... not... almost sketched; but the journey from that to your later works - big figures, very often big blocks of colour, lined in, or delineated in a very, very bold way... all right, there's a journey over 20 years so it is quite a large one... but do you now feel... no [corrects himself]... how conscious was the movement from that earlier style to the style that you have now?

Well, you go from one thing to the next; you never know where it's going to lead you. It's not... you just don't know. I could have gone a different way. It's just so happened that because of the pictures after the girls and dogs that were... they were like religious pictures, actually; there's the sort of Deposition, there's the Raising of Lazarus, all those things... have got something [?]; and that just took me on to the next one and the next one, really.

And are you... do you now think that you are painting better than you were 20 years ago, or is it just that you have a way of expressing what you want to express which is appropriate to the things that you want to express now?

Well, Vic used to say you never get any better, you just get better at it; and I think that's probably true. And I know that I'm better at drawing now, that because I practice so much more in a conscious way, but whether I'm better at it... you know, one's as good as one is.

Do you still paint on the floor?

No... because you see, I now use models, people I work from, and I can't see them if I'm on the floor, so I have to have an easel, and they're there, and then I copy them.

And wasn't the fact that you had to... that you decided to stop smoking after Vic's death... wasn't that an important element as well in changing how you painted?

It was, because you see, when I... in order to hold a drawing-board you can't have a cigarette in your hand as well; so I held the drawing-board much more and began to draw from looking at things, or people really.

You've said... you say you work with models, and you've said, "Everything I paint has to be literal; I can't make anything up." It seems to me an extraordinary thing to say [PR laughs] given that your images have a quality of such, such imagination. They're anything but literal. It you try to interpret your pictures in a literal way, one is completely lost. Now... so it's a wonderfully paradoxical thing to say, but why do you say it?

Well, I mean, the... I dress up people who work with me... they're not models, they're my collaborators. I dress them up in the clothes I want, and we act out together things... what they're supposed to be acting, like stage actors; and then... "Now, that's just good, now stay like that." So that's why I call... that it's actually real, you know, it's from life. But it's made up in the sense that I make up the stories, and so on.
All of them. All of those. Before I have to have an idea about something I really want to do, which I usually get from doing a drawing from my head on a piece of paper, where you're actually bending over this piece of paper and things pour out of your head straight into it through your hand you draw with your hand. Then [ahem], if you like it, you try and set up a scene with chairs... sometimes I rent chairs and everything... stuffed animals... I rent plants... and set up a scene. And people come and act there, and then I copy them onto the canvas, you see. So it's all that process. And the story then changes as you go along. And it's the formal props...pictures are pictures, they're formal things, they have to be resolved as pictures, and sometimes it's very difficult to resolve them. But sometimes a formal thing will bring the story round in another way, so it's always a constant thing between the story and the formal...and the formality of the picture you see, and in the end I'm left with something.

At the point of completion though, you would... would you have to say to yourself, I must produce, I want to produce a painting, which is satisfactory in formal terms. If one is to say which is first and which is second, the formal correctness of the picture comes first.

The formal correctness...it is formally correct, but I don't mean by formally that it's... um, you know, it sometimes it's all off the edge or something, but if it's formally pleasing to me, then the story has to be right.

And then somebody says to you... because one thing that strikes me about the various things written about you is that you're very good or you're very generous with answering questions about what the story in a painting is, but is there only one version of the story?

Lot's of them, lots of different ones I very often don't remember. When I finish the picture I usually have a pretty pat explanation for it, so that's okay, that's usually a help, you know, to get people to look. But that's only a way into the picture because one hopes that once a person's looking into the picture, things... other things will come out that I'm not even aware of, you see, that's what the picture is, it's full of... of telling things that you're not aware of... I'm not aware of you see.

Yes but the narrative or the discovery of the narrative, therefore, is endless and you would expect every viewer to interpret it differently?

Yes I do.

You've also done a lot of illustrations, illustrations of Peter Pan, of Nursery Rhymes, of poems by... by Blake Morrison, where does this fit into your work, and is it illustration or is it something else?

It's something else, it's like working with stories as in the pictures really. But it... I... I bring them into my own experience, the things I read like the... the nursery rhymes I turn them... I mean the nursery rhymes, they just came to my mind actually, I used to read one at night and in the morning an image would turn up. So that's instinctive, that was not difficult, because nursery rhymes we don't know what they look like. But I mean Peter Pan was more difficult because Peter Pan is such a classic and so English, he's such a challenge for me. But again I did it with people I knew, I used people I knew, I, I, I, cast the parts around people, sometimes they would be miscast, which is quite a lot of fun. So it was game playing as well.

But the technique of doing the illustrations, was this very different, very difficult, did you find it a release?

It's sometimes difficult. Peter Pan was wonderful to do really. The Blake... Blakes things, Blake Morisons [unclear] I loved those poems, so... I'd already done one called Moth which was part of my Dog Woman series, and um... and then I met Blake afterwards and he gave me these poems to read and I thought they were wonderful, so I did those things.

What strikes me about the nursery rhymes is that you always manage to make even the innocent things disturbing. Children playing games, falling down slides and... and so on, and it's not that one could point to any image and say, that's clearly a child that's going to break its leg [unclear], there's something extreme in the... in, in the gestures. I mean are you surprised that people find them disturbing, or do you just say, find them whatever you want to find them?

I find... I don't... I... I don't... or some are on... are on purpose, they're sinister on purpose, like Little Miss Muffet, you know, and that fear. But the others I don't intend to be... to be, you know, too sinister or anything like that. I think sometimes it's technical, sometimes... at one time... for instance Baa, Baa Black Sheep and the sheep is so black, but stayed for quite a long time in the [unclear] came out all black. I thought crikey this is the devil, and that would be bad, but it's got a cute... he's quite nice, quite a friendly ram, and... but I don't think some of them are too sinister.

But do you mind when people say, oh I find your drawings so frightening?

I'm used to it. I mean think of Gustav Dore. Gustav Dore the great illustrator, marvellous illustrator. I was brought up on Dante's Inferno, you know, like my father used to me scare me with it, I mean those things are sinister, full of black and full of nauseous images, very 19th century nausea which is something that's always ticked my fancy.

You've never belonged to any school of painting, you've never belonged to any movement of painting, did you ever feel, in the years when you weren't recognised and you were looking after Vic, did you think, maybe I should belong to a particular school, or, if only I'd painted like X or Y I'd be taken more seriously?

Well I couldn't, I tried. Once somebody told me that I should do abstract pictures, and he told me how, and he said like this, you don't want this rubbish of stories, this is all an excuse, all you need is a canvas, a long canvas, not too big but long, and you need two brushes and five colours. Dip the brush in a colour and you spread it from left to right; you dip the brush in another colour and you spread it from right to left.
And when you've covered the canvas you've got a picture, that, he said to me, is a picture. I cried because I thought I preferred my stories, you see. I cried because he hadn't like my pictures. Nevertheless I went back to [unclear] for my summer holidays and I tried it, I did; left to right, right to left, and left to right, and of course it was entirely meaningless, it had no meaning at all. I was completely idiotic to try such a thing, and there you are, I could not do something else - then I did.

Well thank goodness you ignored him. But still what you were...what you were doing and what you were continuing to do is so wonderfully unfashionable; the narrative yes, the figuration. I mean for years and decades when nobody bothered to do figuration, do you get a quiet satisfaction of say personal vanity at saying, I stuck to these things which were unfashionable and they now recognise that the work I do is good in these fields? You must get a bit of satisfaction from that?

No. Not at all. I don't see things like that you see, I don't see like I've stuck it out all these years or something like that. I'm just afraid that I can't...you know I'm just...I'm just afraid I can't do it again or something, you know. It's not that at all. 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, and so I can't...and it's what interests me, but I don't think of... in terms of having stuck at it, but I had no choice really, I was lucky to be able to go on doing it you see.

Let's talk about some of the atmosphere of your paintings, it's been said that you paint - you may have said it yourself - that you paint to give terror a face. What is the terror?

Well [pause] well one's...when one's a child one's afraid of all sorts of things, and you...you're afraid of the dark, you're afraid of the devil, you're afraid of all sorts of things. I guess you go on being afraid of certain things - I don't know what they are.

You've also said revenge

Women well I mean like in the Amara series, what happens to the girl who has an affair with the priest; she gets knocked up and then she has a baby and the baby is taken away from her and she dies. This is not...I wasn't aware of it, don't you see, it's not like I think, oh now I'm going to revenge her, I'm not aware of this. I then did an angel with a sword in one hand and a sponge in the other, my angel, and then I realised that I've done my angel because the angel was going to take revenge for this girl. And it's a protecting and vengeful angel, that's what...that's what I meant, but I wasn't...I didn't...I just realised after I've done this angel that that was what it was for, it had a business in life to do that, absolutely.

You work a lot with one particular model, Lila, how important is she, and why does she play such an important part, she's the one who just acts things out for you and appears in many, many paintings, what's the significance?

Well we work together and it's a collaboration. She's able to interpret somehow, to interpret what I want. She seem to...by now she seems to know what it is that I want and she falls into positions that I find just right. I work through her, she's like a medium for me. Through her I can tell a story, I can do a picture. I mean my Dog Woman we started...we really started...really started with my Dog Woman when I realised I had to have a model because I couldn't do it without the information that I needed from another human being to copy. And she put herself in that position and it was so marvellous. Then after that she was the next Dog Woman then she was the sleeping dog, then she was the bad dog, and then slowly we began to understand a language together and now she can interpret all sorts of things for me. It's always different.

Is there something particularly important to you in the fact that she's Portuguese, she has a completely Portuguese body, heavy, stocky, solid, does that actually trigger something in you that these are the physical shapes that you respond to?

Yes indeed. I mean I think it's also that she's - although much younger - she's also a bit like myself. So instead of doing myself I do her, which is much more fun. And we talk Portuguese together when we're working, we listen to Portuguese music, and we have an understanding. Yes she looks...she's stocky, although she's slim but she's short limbed.

And for a lot of these figures, I know I'm just looking at the Disney Fantasia series, the ostrich, they're both stocky, they're feminine, but because of their muscularity they're also male.

Yes, and they're getting on a bit. She loved doing those best of all you know, Lila. They wake up and they're longing for love and everything and there's nothing there. But she loved it, yes, there's masculine a bit, but then she's got very strong legs, sure.

And just thinking about the look in the eyes of so many of your women, it strikes me that the women know what's going on, and that even in painting where the overt situation is either threatening or potentially violent, and you look a the way the face is held, and you look at the look in the eye, and you think that the woman knows what is going on and she is ultimately in control.

Well I think that's partly wishful thinking.

My wishful thinking?

No, no, my wishful thinking. My wishful thinking is that should be so. But it should be so, it should be so, the women should always be in control.

But you fear it isn't?

But not always, no. [laughter].

It strikes me that there's...there's a tendency to interpret what you do, ie just in saying as some people do that you're a feminist painter. But
that something that Vic Willing wrote when what he saw was the ambivalence in your paintings. He wrote rebellion and domination, freedom and oppression, suffocation and escape, and that it seems to me that your paintings invite a superficial response that the painting is about this, and then the second look and the third look shows you that it's about something very different and sometimes...but contrary on the first thing one thought.

It's about both things sometimes. I know that it sounds odd but it's sometimes about both things, this thing and that thing which are opposites. They're opposites...opposites can come together in a picture, and that is very interesting you see, you can have both resentment and affection - which happens in life you know - completely, resentment and affection, and these things come together in a picture I think - I think they do, they can do. So a picture can contain may, many different kinds of feelings and attitudes and stuff, and even the way that you behave, it contains all this, a picture can contain all these contradictions - that's why it's a picture. Because oneself is full of contradictions. I mean one is total...a bag of contradictions from morning till night, and therefore it would not be truthful if you just selected one side - well you couldn't if you go into a picture, you go full...you know, whole hog, you know, and there it is - phwar.

Do you mind being called sometimes perhaps too possessively, do you mind being called a feminist painter?

Not at all, I'm very flattered to be called a feminist painter actually, it's very nice.

But you're more than that as well aren't you, that's just one label to stick on you?

Well I don't know what feminist painter means. I mean I... obviously if I have a standpoint it will be...it's from a woman's point of view on account of that's what I am, and so I can tell the story from what it was like being a little girl, for instance, you know. That's how, it's a story told by a woman.

When you did that series of paintings about abortion, were you aware or did you hope that you would have a social message particularly as the paintings were exhibited in Madrid, in Lisbon?

Yes, they were done for that, they were political. You see they are also political pictures because of the referendum nobody bothered to attend to vote to legalise abortion in Portugal, nobody bothered. So the rule...[stammers] went on being the same, and 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, just...which is what happened, and what's happened in Portugal, and happens everywhere else where it's forbidden.

Where do you get the knowledge of that from?

Well when I was in Portugal, when I was there first with Vic, a lot of people - local women and girls - used to come and ask me for money so that they could have an abortion because they already had, you know, lots of kids and so on. And I mean, well of course one knew all about it, one saw it.

So on that occasion you're painting not just for yourself, not just to create a painting, but you were painting for a social purpose?

Yes, I was.

Apart from that, does the painting matter first and foremost because it matters to you, is that the only...is that the ultimate explanation for why you paint?

Well it has to matter to me. I've had to... I paint because I mean I...you know I just do one picture and then another one. And I got the habit thank goodness, it's got to...it's got to matter to me somehow yeah, sure.

But it doesn't have to matter in the end; it doesn't have to matter to anybody else. When people say what is the justification of having artists like...like yourself, would you claim any justification for it in broader terms...?

It's not up to me to claim such things, it's up to me to do them. It's up to other people to claim for me, I can't claim, you see, I have no potential, I don't know. But other people may claim if they think it's right. You know, I do them...

Are you now capable, or have you had to become capable of criticising your paintings in the way that Vic Willing used to?

I've had to. I've had to...to distance myself and be able to be quite, you know, yes I have had to. And I was very scared that when he died that I wasn't going to be able to. And in fact I have...I have...I don't know whether I've been able to, but I've done my best, I've done my best I think, yes. I don't know how brave I've been, but I hope so, yeah.

and do you find yourself saying, when you've got a puzzle, I wonder what Vic would think of this, what would Vic say?

Well I used to but I don't do that any... I now don't do that so much anymore because I've gone so far different from what I used to be when he was alive, that I have no point of reference anymore you see, I'm out in the sticks now. And he's there somewhere in the background, you see, I can't do that anymore, so I just have to trust myself.

You've been adopted, and...well you've lived in England for many, many years, you've been happily, proudly adopted by the English perhaps out greatest living woman painter, or one of our greatest living painters. How much are you English and how much are you Portuguese, or does it really not matter?
There's a part of me, the part that speaks in Portuguese brings memories back that I don't have if I speak in English. But as for poetry for instance, I understand the language in English rather than Portuguese.

Really?

Yes. In literature I get on better with the English...in English than I do in my own language. And to talk about pictures for instance, I find it immensely hard to talk about them in Portuguese, I cannot. So English is for the grown up more, the Portuguese is the child-like, which also comes into the grown up and is totally precious, because without that we cannot exist.

You've never lost touch with a sense of being the child?

No, you can't, you can't.

I mean some people would say - probably wrongly - that you have to cut that off, you know, a grown up is a grown up and you put childish things behind you, but you've insisted on keeping that connection?

Well you can't really get rid of it, it's not a thing, oh I'm now going to be a grown up, but it's that the child is concertina'd into you, and it pulls out at ever instance, even in the most posh places, or in the most awesome situations, this lilt comes out. And it's...it's the bit that saves you really, it's not a bad bit, it's not...it doesn't mean you're going to do something really rude, it means that you have more a sense of yourself. So yeah, that is in everybody, not just in me.

I think it's probably in you in a much more cute way - sorry you were going to say something.

Maybe, may...I don't know whether that's true, but I mean as for being...for being in England I love living in London, I love it, it's brought me freedom - it's brought me freedom.

And you wouldn't have had that freedom in Portugal?

Never.

Even when political freedom came to Portugal you wouldn't have had the equivalent creative freedom?

No. Too near, can't do it. I had to bring my stories out in order to be able to enact them in England. England is a free place, at least I've always felt that freedom. And also London is big, anonymous, and just marvellous there. And I don't say about the countryside because I've never lived there, I couldn't, but London I love.

(I think what I'm trying to get at is that) you don't feel that you are principally still quarrying a reservoir of intense impressions which were built up say in the first 20 years of your life?

16.

16, so you are still working with that reservoir of impressions?

The new images winkle out... Very often the new images, the new experiences find in the storage [?] they connect their somehow, and they winkle out something from there, you know. And then they do join up, and it...you see because...you see it connects with this reservoir, it gives it a reality bigger, a bigger reality than a new...it can't exist a new impression without attaching itself to something that's already there. How can it? You don't know what it is, you wouldn't recognise it if it wasn't part of the past experience.

And you're constantly being surprised by the things which are fished out of this reservoir of your first 16 years of impressions?

I hope so. I mean I'm sometimes really surprised, as you say, yes I am. And yeah...yeah. [little laugh] Keep on fishing.

Paula Rego, thank you very much.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O72164/three-blind-mice-print-rego-paula/