

FORMS OF ENCHANTMENT



MARINA WARNER

FORMS OF ENCHANTMENT

Writings on Art & Artists



 **Thames & Hudson**

To Beatrice, with love & gratitude

CONTENTS

Endpapers: Al and Al, *Studio Beehive*, 2013

Title page: *Curiosity*, 1709, from Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*

Frontispiece: Paula Rego, *War*, 2003

First published in the United Kingdom in 2018
by Thames & Hudson Ltd, 181a High Holborn,
London WC1V 7QX

Form of Enchantment: Writings on Art & Artists
© 2018 Thames & Hudson Ltd, London

Text © 2018 Marina Warner

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication
may be reproduced or transmitted in any form
or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including
photocopy, recording or any other information storage
and retrieval system, without prior permission in
writing from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

ISBN 978-0-500-02146-0

Printed in China by RR Donnelley

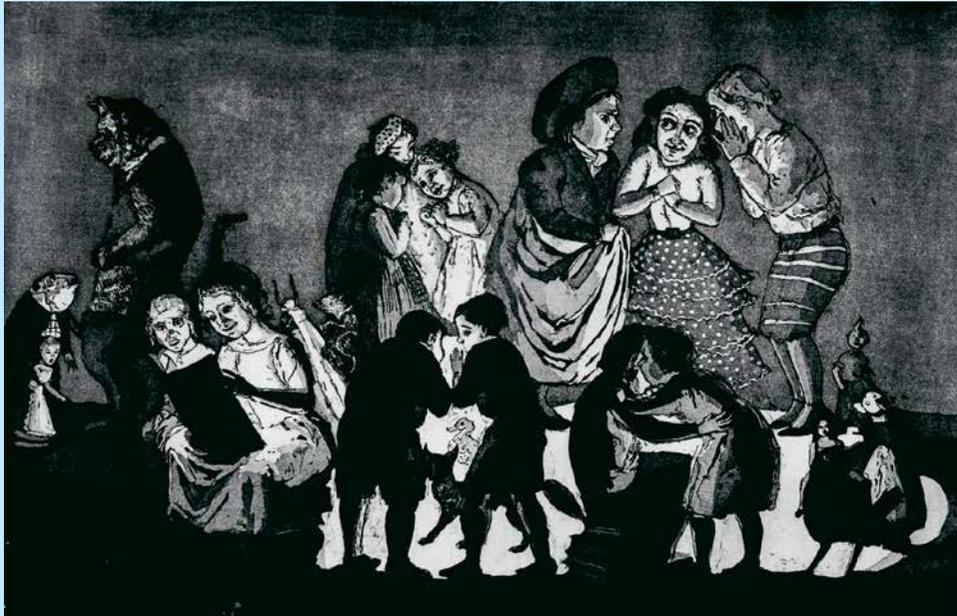
To find out about all our publications,
please visit www.thamesandhudson.com.
There you can subscribe to our e-newsletter,
browse or download our current catalogue,
and buy any titles that are in print.

Preface	6
1. PLAYING IN THE DARK	16
Paula Rego: Giving Fear a Face	18
Henry Fuseli: In the Passionate Playground	26
Janine Antoni: Hide & Seek	39
Richard Wentworth: Things That Talk	47
Kiki Smith: Self-Portrait as a Beast in Eden	60
2. BODIES OF SENSE	76
Hans Baldung Grien: The Fatal Bite	79
Louise Bourgeois: Cut & Stitch	95
Zarina Bhimji: Sheddings	104
Helen Chadwick: The Wound of Difference	111
Tacita Dean: Footage	124
3. SPECTRAL TECHNOLOGIES	138
Joan Jonas: Future Ghosts	141
Sigmar Polke: Stone Alchemy	152
AL and AL: Visions of the Honeycomb	160
Jumana Emil Abboud: Dreaming the Territory	173
Christian Thompson: Magical Aesthetics	183
4. ICONOCLASHES	194
Hieronymus Bosch: Trumpery, or, The Followers of the Haywain	198
Damien Hirst: To Hell with Death	210
Felicity Powell: Marks of Shame, Signs of Grace	220
Frans Masereel: Naked in The City	225
Cristina Iglesias: Where Three Waters Meet	235
Julie Mehretu: The Third Space	249
Notes	262
Further Reading	275
List of Sources	277
Picture Credits	279
Acknowledgments	280
Index	281

1. PLAYING IN THE DARK

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigured so together,
More witnesseth than fancy's images,
And grows to something of great constancy¹

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*



Paula Rego, *Secrets and Stories*, 1989

Detractors often scorn art as child's play, and it is true that many artists play – in various senses of the word. Of course, they acquire skills and improvise with materials and methods far beyond children's reach; but many also choose to move to those inner fiery waves in the brain that generate and combine images and light up games of make-believe. Ancient and supposedly innocent childhood activities, from lullabies to fairy tales, are brimful with nightmares. As Theseus comments in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 'such tricks hath strong imagination.../how easy is a bush supposed a bear' (5.1.19–23). We are partly the heirs of the Romantics, who saw the child's state of mind as visionary and unfettered and longed to regain those powers of fantasy – as the hallucinatory paintings of the artist Henry Fuseli reveal (he is rumoured to have eaten strong meats at night to stimulate his dreams).

In modern times, the importance of imagination has received support from a less fevered angle. The paediatrician D.W. Winnicott, in his pioneering book *Playing and Reality* (1971), argued for the role of imagination in growing up sane and happy – or at least well-enough happy. He writes of play as an essential form of life practice, crucial to the developing child. In games of make-believe and let's pretend, with dolls or toy soldiers, castles and cars, animals that really exist as well as dragons and goblins, a child at play is building ways of orienting himself or herself. 'Playing is reality,' Winnicott declares.²

Artists do not usually acquiesce in putting away childish things. They peer into the dark and make images about what they find there: memory and imagination acting in concert. Artists are like birds sent out from the Ark to assess the state of the rising flood waters, and they return with messages about the continuing danger – or, sometimes, hope.

PAULA REGO

Giving Fear a Face



Baa, Baa, Black Sheep
1989

Paula Rego's first solo exhibition opened at London's Serpentine Gallery in 1988, when Alister Warman was the director. He was a consistent advocate of women artists – in those days, his interest and commitment were unusual. Rego was showing some small, freely painted drawings of scenes involving monkeys and dogs – the animals weren't entirely animal, nor were the children entirely childlike; but they all seemed to be at play. Similar, larger paintings, unfurling over the walls, were seething with vigorous gaggles of little girls, creatures and adults in conjunctions which implied that the artist was seeing through the appearance of things and the experience of living in the world, and moving into another zone of feeling and knowledge.

I first met Paula there – she was smiling and wearing a wonderful dress, full and richly coloured. Both the smile and the clothes are entirely typical. Her smile is like her work: it is exuberant and infectious, open and warm, but mysterious, too, and sometimes unsettling. The dress, the brilliance, the lavishness goes with the art as well; Paula Rego has the energy, the wildness and the discipline of a fierce Olympic athlete, and she transmutes all this furious power into a racing imagination that now, after several decades of inspired images, has swept into unexamined corners of experience, leaving thrilling and sometimes terrifying twisters of insight on the canvas.

As a child, she used to draw on the floor. She maintains that making images is a form of play in the strongest sense of the activity, as Winnicott conveys in *Playing and Reality*. In Paula's art, reality appears through her play on what she sees, what she imagines, what she concocts. Her studio is a theatre, where models take up roles, where masks, dummies, costumes, sets, props – mysterious, eerie, often perturbing – lie heaped around her; it is a scene of intensive play where the worlds that lie inside her are pressed out to take form and become manifest externally. Through assiduous, concentrated, prolonged acts of drawing and painting, they materialize on paper or canvas or sometimes in three-dimensional figures. The artist has commented that she 'paints to give fear a face', and her work looks deeply into the depths; but if she is giving fear a face she does so fearlessly, and the results have a raw honesty that can be shattering and sharply awakening to those of us who are admitted into these recesses. Singular and unflinching, Rego explores sexual fantasy and tension; the inner lives of women are her principal interest. If she were a medieval poet, you'd say she expressed the

sorrows of the daughters of Eve. She loves fairy tales and myths, old stories, ballads and folklore, and she sees, in this mostly anonymous literature, a vivid record of experience transmuted by imagination.

In the *Nursery Rhymes* prints she made in 1989 (see *Secrets and Stories*, p. 16), she pictures the enigmas of children's nonsense songs as part of a storytelling tradition, transmitted orally and confidentially from woman to woman, from women to children. These powerful, original illustrations catch the darkness and the comedy of the original nonsense verses, in which everyday banality meets mystery. *Mother Goose's Melody*, the first printed collection, appeared c. 1768; the name Mother Goose was borrowed from the French, specifically from Charles Perrault's 1697 collection of fairy tales, *Contes du temps passé, ou Contes de ma mère l'oye*. Mother Goose is Granny, Nan, nursemaid and governess, remembered from childhood. She can be comical – like a goose – and sinister, like a crone or a witch; she's a mother, who feeds her flock with stories and nonsense; she's female because speech is the realm of those who cannot read and write, like children and like peasants and women in the past. When Iona and Peter Opie collected skipping rhymes and other nonsense verse in playgrounds up and down England for their great work on children's play, *The Singing Game* (1985), they found that it is only little girls between the ages of four and fourteen who transmit skipping and hopscotch rhymes and invent new ones. Paula Rego has taken up their tradition and turned it into images.

At the age of ten, Paula Rego was sent to an English school in Lisbon, where she learned to recite the nonsense rhymes. Although her father was opposed to the Church and the school was secular, she was imprinted all the same, and in many ways, she has combined the cruel comedy of the verses with Catholic miracle stories, their goriness and excesses, colour, passion and matter-of-factness. In an interview for BBC Radio Four in 1988, she said, 'It goes with being punished for doing the wrong thing – not hit or anything like that, but experiencing a more subtle sort of forbidding. A mix up of all sorts of sentiments can follow: pain and pleasure get confused.'

When her first grandchild – a girl – was born, Rego rediscovered the nursery rhymes of her own childhood and began the series of etchings which she drew, as a child might, spontaneously on to the plate without preparatory planning of any kind.

The twin régimes of the Catholic church and Salazar's dictatorship during the artist's upbringing created a structure of sexual oppositions which emerge powerfully in the riddling pairs of her images: Miss Muffet and the spider, Baa Baa Black Sheep and the questioner, Polly and her officers' tea party, even Old King Cole and his fiddlers three. In the pictures, the uniforms of post-war Portugal return, costuming her soldier mannikins and imperturbable aproned Misses like national dolls. By remembering the separation of men and women's spheres in her birthplace, and the performances of machismo and womanhood demanded of the sexes, Rego has reinterpreted these familiar, innocent verses with a post-Freudian mordancy. The very meaninglessness of the rhymes gives them fluid and multiple meanings, which the artist has fixed in her work with a certain, unmistakable atmosphere: they have become a theatre where the child anticipates ambiguous dramas of sexual curiosity and conflict.

The nursery rhyme is a form of verse that's almost unknown in the rest of Europe, and the meanings of most have been forgotten, though the inspired sleuthing undertaken by folklorists such as the Opies has solved some enigmas. When we discover who 'Mary Mary quite contrary' might be (Mary Queen of Scots), or which King is in the counting house counting out his money, we realize that the spell of the rhyme lies elsewhere. The classic nursery rhyme's simplicity is funny ('The cow jumped over the moon') and can raise goosebumps (those 'three blind mice'). The very ordinariness of the verse attaches it to general experience, brings it into everyone's back garden, as it were, where it flips over into the oracular. To be uncanny – *unheimlich* – there has to be trust in the idea of home – *heimlich* – in the first place – but a home that's become odd, prickly with desire.

Rego has often returned for her subject matter to stories told her by her grandmother and aunt and the family's maid in Cascais, on the sea near Lisbon where she grew up. Her stern heroines – little girls with bows in their hair intent on their household tasks – recall female saints and martyrs as well as Julie and other heroines of the moral tales of the Comtesse de Ségur, which she was read when she was their age. She likes to step into that disturbing gap between the portrayal of the protagonist's perfections and the wicked feelings stirring inside the child reading about them. Rego's

little girls also owe something to the Surrealists' cult of the *femme-enfant*, to Max Ernst's heroine in his collage novel, *Histoire d'une petite fille qui voulut entrer au Carmel*, and to Balthus's spectacle of young girls' intimacies. She is supremely able to draw out perverse ambiguities in banal popular imagery: 'When you see Max Ernst's book on the little girl entering the convent,' she has said, '...it isn't so far away – the transformation isn't so great after all, is it? The same spooky feeling. It is sex, sex that comes into the Ernst images.'

But she does not come as a voyeur to the scene, nor as a seducer. The artist Victor Willing, whom Paula Rego married in 1959, and who died in 1988, identified her characteristic themes as 'domination and rebellion, suffocation and escape', recognizable conditions of childhood, and especially of girlhood in 1950s Portugal. Rego has always identified with the least, not the mighty, has taken the child's-eye view and counted herself among the commonplace and the disregarded, by the side of the beast, not the beauty. She's commented on her approach: 'suddenly it's as if a dog were to tell its own story'. For she is speaking from the inside, telling tales she knows, from a place – a home base – generally overlooked: the female child's. She not only hears the 'dog', she turns into one. Nursery rhymes are populated with fabulous, talking creatures, with wooing frogs and talking horses, and children and animals have always liked one another, have even been confused by their elders, subjected alike to maltreatment on the one hand, petting and spoiling on the other. But Rego has also confronted, even celebrated, the powers emanating from this quarter: hers are not simplistic tales of victims and oppressors at all, but full of reversals and surprises. The universe of children is subject to adults' authority and brimful of the potency ascribed to instinct, to irrationality, to pre-social (anti-social?) behaviour. Her sympathy with *naïveté*, her love of its double character, its weakness and its force, has led her to supposed children's materials such as *Nursery Rhymes* and *Swan Lake* as sources for her imagery. In 1987, she made a picture of a young girl (*The Soldier's Daughter*) plucking a goose with concentrated energy, yet at the same time caught up in a dream; the intense, intimate pose recalls the embrace in *Baa Baa Black Sheep* (see p. 18).

In 2002, Paula Rego was commissioned by the President of Portugal to create a series of images from the Virgin Mary's life, and she moved

her into scenes of ordinary female experience, represented with realistic intensity – terrible suffering in childbirth, for example – and consequently scandalized and repulsed many viewers. Fairy tales, folk tales and saints' lives aren't only scripts of superstition and ignorance, and Paula Rego has drawn on them for their confrontation with abuses of power, their honesty about opportunism and injustice and rivalry. That is why thinkers like Walter Benjamin and Antonio Gramsci and writers like Italo Calvino and Pier Paolo Pasolini were attracted to the form. The unsparing painting simply called *War* (2003; see frontispiece), inspired by the carnage in Iraq, creates a Goya-like scene of disaster, casting cadaverous floppy pink bunnies and other soft toy-like creatures, disfigured and hybridized, as the heroes and victims: the substitution raises the scathing temperature of the image. In 2008–09, Rego made a series of aquatints on the subject of trafficking: little girls in the charge of their mothers, grandmothers or madams are lying listless, spectre-thin, chained, poppets horribly on display. She does not hold back, and she sees how women sometimes collude in their abuse. She is an artist-activist; but her consummate technical skills translate the power of her imagination, her generous rage and sympathy, so richly that her works, though they hit hard, surpass gritty agit-prop.

The mark of her hand is versatile and experimental, but in every mode she remains consummately skilled – she is one of the greatest living draughtsmen and nobody else since Goya has used the subtleties of aquatint more expressively. Indeed, the ghost of Goya haunts the grotesque and often savage quality of her scenes. She captures the dark *capriccio*-like themes of her chosen rhymes and communicates them with disturbing glee. She has also never distanced herself from illustration. She wants to retrieve what is usually considered a humble artistic category and pay tribute to precursors she admires greatly: the 18th-century cartoonists and illustrators James Gillray and Thomas Rowlandson, and Victorian artists such as Kate Greenaway, John Tenniel, the goblin painter Arthur Rackham and Beatrix Potter, who also loved animals and took their part against gardeners. Like them, Rego treats the fantastic realistically, dresses animals in human costume and introduces dream-like dislocations of scale.

Her appreciation of graphic artists – Max Klinger, Gustave Doré and [Théophile] Steinlen – has been part of her independent-mindedness.

Her work has changed, retroactively, our way of thinking about art and figuration, and British art in particular. But there is another aspect to the affinity she feels for these jobbing artists, these *feuilletonistes*: Rego's fierce delving into the dark places of the psyche unfolds in continuous engagement with ordinary things happening in the world. As in *O Vinho* (2007), the bittersweet, existential cry of the writer João de Melo, her subjects are humans on the edge. It is one of her most remarkable achievements that she conveys a unique subjectivity – the puzzling images are hers and only hers – but at the same time she acts as an unflinching chronicler of our times, compiling, like some angel of destiny, a record of horror and pity. The many works – paintings and prints – which depict clandestine abortion, or the more recent series that imagines devastating scenes of female circumcision and the trafficking of women and children, are unsparingly open-eyed about human beings' treatment of other human beings. The pictures in *O Vinho*, a text she translated with Anthony Rudolf, depicts nursemaids sozzling the babies in their care, women vomiting and bingeing and men passed out in pools of spilt wine and vomit. Later, the narrator declares that he 'loves life at least to the extent of defending its greater vices.' The patrons who had commissioned wine labels from her were dismayed and her work was rejected.

However, being an artist, not a caricaturist, Rego infuses these ferocious stories of human frailty and excess with a whole range of feelings – and wraps us, as we try to take them in, in puzzlement and anguish, horrid laughter and appalled pity. 'Shame is something that interests me profoundly,' she once told me. 'It is exactly those areas of shame that I like to touch on. It makes you sometimes squirm, but why, what is shame? I think shame is one of the most interesting things we have got.'

Even as I try to give words to what I experience looking at Rego's works, I falter – they resist explication. They are above all mysterious in what they face, in what they say. One aspect of the images she made for *Jane Eyre* (2001–02), which picks up most feelingly from the heroine's character in Charlotte Brontë's novel, strikes me now as central: Jane Eyre is lonely. She is a little girl who is orphaned and alone among people who are cold and bullying and cruel, and she grows up to be a solitary figure, isolated by poverty and class as well as temperament – indeed,

the happy ending is not only about romance but also about friendship and equality and escape from servitude.

Rego's *Jane Eyre* series picks out Jane on her own several times, as the artist takes possession of the whole sheet of paper, so that even when Jane is wretched with misery her strength of character comes through. The solitariness of Jane is comparatively unusual in the broader perspective of Rego's work, as she tends to render clusters of people in dramatic interaction, but it illuminates how profoundly this artist engages with passionate and dynamic relations between people – and people with animals and things. In one of the most celebrated images from the series, in which Jane is billing with the huge pelican in her lap, the lonely heroine has conjured a fabulous creature to engage with, a fantastic variation on Leda and the Swan or even a sly parody of the Catholic symbol of Christ as a pelican feeding her young. The great bird is a phantasm of erotic imagination – and indeed many of the *dramatis personae* in Rego's work are figments, materialized in oil pastel or other media.

Her playing, scene-setting, mime and dramatizations – all that imaginative make-believe that happens in the studio – has made Paula Rego a most powerful storyteller, who deploys a large cast of characters. The models for this theatre of her inner world return again and again: her children have grown up in different roles over the course of her career and her grandchildren have followed them. She works in a family setting in the widest sense: helpers, including Lila Nunes and Anna, as well as her partners and friends, all take up parts in Paula's mystery plays (The writer and translator Anthony Rudolf has modelled in female roles as well as for Mr Rochester in the *Jane Eyre* series.) In this respect also she has struck out on her own path, against fashion, against the arbiters of the canon. She has put figurative, fabulist, allegorical art back at the centre of valued image-making. Her predecessors are the great narrative painters – proto-cinematic, graphic novelists *avant la lettre* – from Giotto to Guercino. In spite of art's muteness, her paintings and prints and drawings seem to speak; yet it is not easy to know what they are saying. We hear her pictures through muffled ears and that intensifies their compelling quality. In 2009, her home town, Cascais, opened a museum of Paula Rego's work. She gave it its name, La Casa das Historias – the House of Stories – and she has filled it with heroines after her fashion.