

# Paula Rego: Master Storyteller

## By Genevieve Lewis

Holburne Future Collective Member

Both Paula Rego and Francisco Goya share similarities in their work; in their darkness but more importantly, in their desire to tell stories. They both criticise society, and where Goya condemns the brutality of war, Rego condemns the oppression of women. In these, the two Iberian artists draw upon personal experiences to make statements: Goya upon the Spanish war of independence, and Rego's youth in Catholic authoritarian Portugal.

In an interview with *The White Review* in 2021, months before her death, Rego states, "[You should never do art, it's obscene. You should do a picture, a story about something. Doing art is wrong.](#)". This is never more obvious than when visiting the exhibition filled with her Nursery Rhyme etchings, where each print depicts a twisted interpretation of the tales. The viewer is incapable of merely observing the work without seeking to unpack what they see, including the actions and intents of each character, along with the work's relationship with the neighbouring Goya print. The stories that Rego chooses to dwell on in this exhibition revolve around those of society, feminism, and ultimately, revenge.

In the [Guardian review](#) of our exhibition, Jonathan Jones criticises the use of the close juxtaposition between Rego and Goya's work, claiming that having the two artists so closely together leads to a comparison where Rego inevitably falls short, making her work "clunky" and overshadowed by Goya's "delicate immateriality".

I would argue that the exhibition is not intending to compare one or the other, but perhaps focuses on Rego and displays Goya as her inspiration and her influence. While Goya's work remains legendary, it shouldn't dismiss the important stories Rego tells through her own art.

### Society and feminism



Figure 1: *Ladybird, Ladybird*. Image Credit: Charles Nodrum Gallery

Rego's work repeatedly criticises the absurdity of social rules. A clear example of this is the print 'Ladybird, Ladybird' which mocks the way high society enjoys itself despite the ongoing disasters that surround it. This is illustrated through the overhead ladybird fleeing a burning building visible in the background. This continues to be prominent today, through the way Western society obsesses over itself while the world around it struggles. Rego claims "[grotesque is in the aspiration to be part of society.](#)" I cannot help but wonder how she would feel about her work being exhibited in the centre of Bath, a city historically obsessed with "society".

Figure 2: *Dance to your Daddy*. Image credit RAW Editions



The most prominent element of society that Rego condemns is the patriarchy. Born in Portugal under the dictatorship of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, where catholic authoritarianism left women suppressed, Rego spent her career rebelling against these ideals. She portrayed women as loud, solid figures that are [“real and tangible”](#), rather than delicate and beautiful, an topic exhausted by infatuated male artists over the centuries. This is clear throughout the exhibition, from the presentation of the various forms of femininity in her prints and even her sculptures, to her criticising women’s seeking male approval (such as in ‘Dance to your Daddy’). Rego draws attention to women’s power and in this case, their roles

within Nursery Rhymes.



*Figure 3: "Gluttony is certainly grotesque" but can it be beautiful?*

At first sight her portrayals can feel grotesque, yet slowly one can start to appreciate Rego’s rendering of the grotesque as, in her words, [“beautiful”](#). Beyond the exhibition at the Holburne, Rego champions abortion rights through her visceral pastel series created in response to Portugal’s abortion referendum. The drawings are deeply moving, creating a sense of anger and injustice while placing the women as subjects rather than victims, giving them agency and power when their state takes it away from

them. In this way, Rego uses her art not only to tell stories, but as revenge for wrongdoing; giving [“terror a face”](#).

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Genevieve Lewis graduated from UCL last year with a degree in anthropology. She is particularly passionate about the arts and the importance of creative expression, as well as about inclusivity towards new cultures. For the past few years, she has been working as an artist’s assistant, a role that has enabled her to get a view into the art world and one that has led her to find personal delight within it. When she’s not working or volunteering at the Holburne Museum, she is either visiting different galleries, at a life drawing class, or devouring a good book. As she looks ahead, Genevieve aims to pursue a career in the art or publishing industry, and is both curious about what’s next for HFC and ever open to any opportunities within the heritage sector.