

Mouth Organ by Paula Rego (RA)

In 2003 Portuguese artist Paula Rego painted three studies of women playing musical instruments. *La Fete* shows a woman flanked by a pelican in a tuxedo and an insect-like imp in a tutu; *Olga* shows a broad-shouldered language tutor, modelled on a male friend of Rego's, who stares at the viewer and in whose skirt a child hides and - perhaps the least bizarre of the three - is *Mouth Organ*. Ostensibly feminine and unbothered by fantastical creatures, its subject is a small and solitary woman.

Rego began using pastel in 1994, moving away from acrylic. She studied at the Slade and remains one of the best remembered members of the second generation of anti-abstract London School artists. Her body of work is rich, diverse and disarming. She worked in multiple media for decades, creating an abundance of scenes of compact, industrious women engaging in all sorts of acts. Rego's principal concern is undoubtedly womanhood. Her women are muscular and although small in stature, rarely dainty. Decades of work that retreads the questions of femininity without giving in to repetition amounts to a library of stories of women.

The unsettling ambivalence of *Mouth Organ* is characteristic of Rego's work. It is this enigmatic obscurity that brings femininity and its negation into a profound and visual disagreement, and also brings Rego's vision - of women as terse, self-interested actors - into sharp disagreement with notions of conventional womanhood. This picture presents a slight yet durable woman who appears to refute femininity; jet black hair is scraped behind her head, revealing a widow's peak shining with brylcreem. Tension runs through her body and her calf muscles bulge in this masculine position. The juxtaposition of the woman's old-fashioned dress and her manly pose is arresting. This woman's stern face and her defensive positioning render her at once vulnerable and commanding. The instrument she holds to her mouth in small hands appears oversized. She seems uneasy. Her features are striking. Much like Rego's 1994 work *Dog Woman*, an unsettling image of a woman as 'other' and that which the artist herself is "most proud of", *Mouth Organ*'s figure deems the viewer harmless enough that she instead watches an unseen and potentially dangerous element. Her back is against a wall and - despite her restrictive, feminine dress - she frees herself from the encumbrances of grace in the interests of self-protection.

Speaking on *Desert Island Discs*, Rego described her own fear of the dark. "Fear is something you have all the time," Rego has stated.¹ Between the subject's flexed, open legs and the oversized instrument in her hands, the scene is tense and strange. It is unclear where the figure is, or what she is looking at. The picture's colours are drab and almost dirty. Curved lines that build the shading of the wall behind the figure mimic the billowing curtain and follow the curve of the woman's shin. Rego's curving application of colour potentially draws the viewer's eye to the 'V' of the woman's crotch, protected by the folds of her dress, which may be mimicked by the points of the figure's elbows and shoes. Behind her a red curtain moves gently in this fuss-less room, suggesting a breeze. The curtain behind the woman rises and the figure's raised leg creates more motion. Perhaps this is the moment before the subject's skirt flutters in the breeze as the curtain may.

Rego's dark interrogations of womanhood swirl with abjection and imagination to unsettling effect. On the continuum of Rego's work, from the dark concoction of the fantastic *War* (2003) which sees a figure haul their wounded comrade, each in rabbit masks with uncannily floppy

ears, across the battlefield beneath a dismal sky, to the 'family narrative' of *The Policeman's Daughter* (1987), *Mouth Organ* tends toward prosaic more than marvellous. The subject has sexuality but is fully clothed and, instead, attention is paid to fabric. In *Mouth Organ* the woman's legs are widely angled and indicative, the outline of the top of her thighs implied through meticulously drapery, and her crotch covered by it. Emboldened sexuality is evident but it is also concealed.

Girlish daintiness - small stature and flowing clothes - are presented by Rego and yet totally unrecognisable as signifiers of submission. Instead, *Mouth Organ's* inhabitant, uneasy and isolated, is an ambiguous, deceptively simple yet fraught, image of an emboldened woman who - like so many of Rego's protagonists - forces the viewer into self examination.

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