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Paula Rego remembered by Lila Nunes

📷 Paula Rego in her studio, 2018.
Photograph: Phil Fisk/The
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The Portuguese-British artist's assistant and muse remembers her wonderful sense of humour and their daily ritual of coffee, chat and opera

by Lila Nunes

I first met Paula Rego in 1985 – I came over from Portugal as an au pair to help with her husband [the artist Victor Willing] who had multiple sclerosis. Her children were grown up so I didn't have to look after them. It was a great time. I got on with Paula from the start. I first set eyes on her as she was about to

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head out to the theatre – she was very glamorous. She said “Hello” briefly and added that she was sorry to be leaving and told me she’d see me later that evening or the following day. I went out and, when I got back, Paula was having a glass of champagne with one of her daughters, Vicky, and they invited me to have one – of course, I had several – and it was a great night.

Paula had the gift of making people feel at ease. She was a good listener, interested in what you said, she took time with people, was non-judgmental. We always spoke Portuguese together. I’m not sure if she missed Portugal but we’d talk a lot about it: the way Portuguese people behaved, the politics, the guilt and shame attaching to Catholicism, and we’d talk about being a woman.

My duties were to help Vic with his paints and to transfer him from his bed to a wheelchair. Paula showed me how to stretch a canvas. We did not talk about how difficult this time was for her – she’d just get on with things. She’d make Vic his breakfast, leave for her studio and most days come back in time to make his dinner. I’m sure it was because I was part of the domestic scene that Paula and I got so close. Our conversations were mainly about work because it was through her work that everything came out. When Vic was alive, she used to bring work home, hang it on the wall and he would comment on it, give her advice. After he died, she always said she missed him and that it was very hard without him. She had to do it all by herself and that was very tough.

Other people’s awkwardness made her laugh, how people react - the comedy of body language

Thinking back, I believe she had been dealing with her depression for a long time. She learned that the way to deal with it was to keep working. One Sunday, she said: “Can I do a drawing of you?” I’d never modelled before. I didn’t think about it, I was just trying to help – it just happened. I remember Vicky saying: “I couldn’t believe it, I went to the house and there you were, like the most natural thing, posing for Paula...”

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Paula and I stayed in touch and, in 1994, she rang to ask: would I come to the studio? So, on my day off – I was working as a nurse – I came and that's when [the painting] *Dog Woman* started. Sometimes, Paula would tell me the story she was thinking about. At other times, she'd try a pose out to show what she was looking for. Once I'd got into position, she'd say: "Change that arm, change the neck." Sometimes she'd say: "Yes! That's it." She'd do lots of drawings to find what she was looking for... One of the hardest poses was in 1995 – the painting of a woman where it is not clear if she is pulling her knickers up or down. My whole body had to be stiff. It was very difficult – my knees going in – I had to be still for hours.

Paula liked routine. We tended to work from 10am to 7pm. First thing, we'd have coffee and talk, and that could be 10 minutes or two hours, depending on how the conversation went. I'd say: "Listen, we're talking, talking – we need to work." And she'd say: "This is all part of the work." I developed a Zen mode, I distanced myself from the pose. I wouldn't look at what she was doing. We'd have opera on in the mornings – quite loud. Paula had a wonderful sense of humour. Other people's awkwardness made her laugh, how people react – the comedy of body language. We used to call it "that thing".

Paula once said about me, "She is really myself", and what she meant, I think, was that she could see through me and come out with whatever was in her mind. I don't see myself in the paintings, it is mostly her – her inner life – and sometimes it is neither of us. I never think: there I am. I think: I remember that pose, how hard it was.

Paula's health started to fail around 2009 and she said: why don't you work for me full-time? So I did. She kept working every day until nearly the end. And when she was too ill to go to the studio, I'd go to her home and we'd spend the day drawing with pastels. She kept going, didn't give up.

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📷 Dog Woman, 1994, by Paula Rego (posed by Lila Nunes). Photograph: Copyright Paula Rego, Courtesy Marlborough Fine Art'

Even now after her death – I’ll be thinking about her and I’ll see things that would be good for her studio. I used to shop for the props. Whenever I went away, I’d return with things: Brazilian dolls, children’s clothes, a sombrero from Monterey. Once, Paula asked me to find a ceramic parrot on a trip to Brighton. “We need a parrot,” she said. I couldn’t see many parrots in Brighton, but did find one.

Her death leaves such a gap in my life. I’m in limbo now. Not knowing what to do. I miss her a lot. She was very generous yet her belief in herself was easily knocked: a bad review could do it. She would work and work but she needed someone to tell her the work was good. When we started here, hardly anyone came to see the work until it was done. She did not answer the phone, people would leave messages. Perhaps the self-doubt was necessary to the work. I remember her saying, “No, no, no...” before changing a painting. I’d think: “Oh my God... but that was so *good*...” It would only be after she changed it that I’d understand.

I don’t know if, even at the end of her life, she knew how loved and respected she was as an artist. “Lila, can you imagine, the Tate is giving me a retrospective,” she said to me. And I said: “For God’s sake, you should have had one a very long time ago.” The show last year gave her a wonderful boost – she went to the opening and it was fantastic. When I went, I felt... I saw the end.
