

Paula Rego interview  
By Richard Zimler

*Do you have a religious family background?*

My grandfather was anti-clerical, although his godmother was the Virgin Mary because there was no one else available. He was also a Republican but sensibly superstitious. My father didn't like the way we were indoctrinated by the catechism, so he always stopped me from being taught the catechism in school. Well, not entirely – we used to have Irish priests at St. Julian's School [in Carcavelos].

*Did you have to get a special dispensation?*

No, it was not a religious school. I did go to lessons, but when it came to studying for the first communion – we used to do that after school – he discouraged me from it. My mother used to go to mass and I went with her. We had complete freedom.

*I read that you did the first communion in secret.*

I did, after all the others had finished. I went to confession and did it, just to take part.

*In your adult life, your entrée into the story of the Virgin Mary would be through your reading? How did the idea for these pastels come to you?*

It wasn't my idea, it was the President of Portugal's idea. I would never have done it if I hadn't been asked.

*What was your first reaction when he asked you?*

Scared! And excited. I'd been looking for a church for some time to do, because I'd been doing saints for a long time, since I was artist-in-residence at the National Gallery in London. But the stories don't come from reading as much as from pictures – from that whole tradition in which people learned the Bible from pictures.

*So you accepted immediately?*

I had to walk next door and back again. My first reaction was no way. And then I thought, I'll have a go.

*Did you come to Lisbon to look at the space?*

No, the people at the Presidential Palace sent me the plans for the chapel with the measurements. I had to have those to be able to envision the pictures. If it's big it's very different than if it's small. And I read the Golden Legend again. It's a book by Jacobo de Voragine, and I first used it while I was at the National Gallery to do my pictures of

saints. Then I sat down with the sketchbook and put down what came into my head. It's jolly difficult squeezing it out sometimes!

*So how long did it take for you to complete the pastels?*

About three months.

*Was part of your original fear that you were about to start a project that has been a tradition in Western Art for thousands of years? And that you would have to deal with Giotto, Caravaggio, and the legacy of many other artists.*

Yes, it is a tradition, and the question was, how do you update the story? In a sense, you can't, but what you can do is see it from the point of view of a woman, which is what I've done. A woman telling the story – in fact, Mary telling the story.

*So you see these as Mary's version of events?*

Yes, it is about Mary, not about Christ. The story celebrates her – her in her own right. That's what I tried to do.

*One of the things I think you've done both to update the telling of this story and tell it from Mary's point of view is bring Mary back to her body. She is not an ethereal figure but a woman who experiences the shock of being told about her destiny and the pain of childbirth.*

Well, the story is a human story. What makes it transcendent, in fact, is its human qualities, and that's what I find moving about it.

*Yet there's a tendency to forget that Mary and Jesus were people and to reduce them to iconic or clichéd image. In that case, we lose what the story can mean in our own lives.*

I completely agree. The whole point is that story was that Jesus was a man and Mary was a woman giving birth – he comes from outside her. They are people! They don't come from outer space. They are flesh and blood.

*As you told the story from Mary's point of view did you find surprising things? Or said another way, which of the pictures turned out most differently from original conception?*

The "Adoration," because I originally had shepherds and a lot of outdoors. I ended up making up the picture with the people and objects I had around me. The tiger rug – which was in my studio – had been given to me. I improvised the whole thing as a picture rather than as an illustration of a story. As for what didn't change very much... To tell you the truth, I never did any preliminary drawing of the "Assumption," where she is being taken up to heaven.

*That's my favorite of them all. I like the slenderness of the angel. He's very much like the angels in the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela. And there is a great sense of movement, of her falling back in shock. One thing I find curious is that the angel seems too slight to carry her.*

It's like this... The boy I used as a model is the same one I used for the "Pietà." And he is an angelic child. In the tradition of painting you have these little boys, these putti, yet they have the power to carry people up to heaven. Sometimes they are only head and shoulders – tiny things – but they have the power to carry anything. They are magical, and I relied on that. Now the movement you mentioned is terribly important, because it's at the end of the whole row of the pictures. You have to have movement that works across the pictures. And at the end, for the last one of the series, I wanted something that was violently leaning and that somehow had an exaggerated movement. She's going up to heaven, but she's astonished. And she's perhaps a little fearful as well. Below the angel there's a deep black hole. There's a wonderful picture by Mantegna of Christ descending into hell. It's the most marvelous picture in the world. Seen from the back you have the figure of Christ and in front of him a kind of doorway. Then there is a blackness below, and you almost feel the air blowing from under there, and the smell of sulfur. It has a particular kind of mystery and it came into my mind when I was doing the "Assumption." The Virgin Mary is rising to heaven, but underneath her – underneath them – might be a black gap.

*The youthfulness of the angel and some of the other figures also seems to bring them back to their bodies and to make the story relevant for our present lives. In the "Pietà," for instance, Jesus and the Virgin are very young – just a boy and girl.*

The model for the young Mary was my granddaughter. In Michelangelo's "Pietà" she also a girl. Here, she's holding a very young boy. It could be a Christmas play or street theater. By having young figures – even children – their vulnerability becomes much more.

*It also does something a bit revolutionary, or maybe it only harkens back to an old tradition, in the sense that you make the Virgin and Christ equals in a way. They are both kids in over their heads. They are both frightened of what their fate has been.*

Absolutely true. "In above their heads" – well put! They're both in the same boat.

*The whole story of her life has been astonishing and in the "Pietà" the sorrow she feels seems mixed with a bewilderment of how has all this has come to pass.*

Absolutely.

*Did you worry about the reaction of people in Portugal to these youthful figures, or the pastels in general?*

Not at all. It never comes into your mind. I was just concerned if I could do it.

*And yet you've heard some criticism.*

Not from the President or the Church. Only from individuals who are used to Bible illustrations done in a Victorian style. Having something that isn't done in the style is disquieting to them.

*Maybe people don't necessarily don't want to be reminded that this is a myth that is present in their everyday lives. Yet if the story is going to power it has to have relevance to each of us, today, as we live.*

Of course. That's how it survives, because people identify with them.

*Do you think people are frightened of identifying with the Virgin as a woman?*

No, I really don't. They pray to ask the Virgin to do something. They must see her as a woman.

*But I can imagine some resistance to the next work, the "Lamentation," for instance. Mary Magdalene is portrayed as a contemporary prostitute, with a mini-skirt. There has sometimes been a tendency in art to make her angelic, yet you've returned her to what she was.*

She's a working girl, but that doesn't make her any less holy. It's redemption through suffering and sin. There was a wonderful film I saw called "Breaking the Waves," where Emily Watson plays this girl who turns herself into a tart. She heals her man, who is paralyzed, by becoming prostitute. I thought that was extraordinary. And I thought that was what Mary Magdalene was trying to do – to do her own bit in trying to save him.

*Which returns Christ to his body, as a man.*

Well, I don't know that he screwed her. I'm not saying that. But he knew very well she was a working girl and he didn't mind that. Leave her alone, was his attitude. That's how I see it.

*The figure of the Virgin in that pastel is very Portuguese – with her headscarf. Quite a number of the figures throughout the series are. For instance, in the "Purification of the Temple," the woman in black with the handbag who is standing next to the Virgin.*

She's almost grotesque and comical. But I risked it.

*So you didn't feel you had to stay away from the comical?*

You don't stay away from the comical because this is a story of everyday life. I mean, artists have done it before – Stanley Spencer and Caravaggio. Why not be a bit funny!

That figure is somewhat vulgar really. She's wearing a bad-taste hat. She may be a waitress in a restaurant or something like that.

*In the "Adoration," you have a Tiger-skin rug that the people next to the Christ child are sitting on. It fits another old tradition, in which Christ is the birth of the spiritual man or woman in each of us. He represents the possibility of rising above our animal nature – of our need for procreation and food. He is the next level of consciousness. So it seemed apt to me that they are on of the tiger rug.*

I didn't know that. I must remember that!

*I mention it because it brings me to your use of symbolism. In the "Adoration," the baby Christ holds a snake in his hands. Were you very conscious of symbols you wanted to add or omit as you did these pastels?*

Not at all. It all happened unconsciously. It's really very curious how things happen. The tiger rug was given to me because friends of mine couldn't sell it at Christie's. It's too politically incorrect to have stuffed animals. But when you mix animals up with human figures, it's always much more interesting visually, because your identification with each creature is different. A variety of forms is important. My granddaughter who was the model for Mary was playing – just by chance – with a wooden snake I had my studio, so I said let's put it in.

*But in putting in, did you think consciously of what you might be evoking?*

Yes, and I said leave it, that's really good. I wouldn't have chosen it myself. But now that you've chosen it, let's leave it.

*You did this series with live models in your studio. Who were they?*

Lola, my granddaughter, played the young Virgin Mary, and Lila – who I've used as a model many times before – is Mary as an older woman.

*Did you know right away they would be playing these characters?*

Yes. For one thing, my granddaughter is very good at sitting. It's very helpful because it takes days and days of sitting. On Friday afternoons after school and Saturday she'd come to my studio.

*Did you have to treat these pastels before framing them?*

Yes, I had to fix them. I haven't used pastel like other people usually use it. They are not rubbed. They're drawn and drawn... It takes a long time to things like the hands. They suffer a lot of changes.

*You obviously feel comfortable with the technique.*

Yes, pastel is an extension of my hands really.

*I saw in photographs that you even had a pair of wings in your studio for your model to wear.*

I hired them in Cosprop. They provide all the dresses for films and the stage – they are famous. They are just down my street. These wings were designed by Deborah Warner for some staging of “The Fauns.” I went in and said, “By the way do you have any wings?” “We do have a pair,” they said, and they went to fetch them. They are amazing! I’ve had them in my studio for months. It was just a piece of luck. They’ve got a harness you put on the shoulders and that’s buckled in front. At one point, I thought, shall I leave the harness on? But I thought it would be too much.

*You mean leave the harness in your picture?*

Yes. But I took it out.

*It would change the whole feel.*

Of course, it would! And it would bring in something else that was unnecessary. But the model had to wear it to play the angel – like in the “Nativity.”

*That pastel brings gives us the Virgin with her legs apart, suffering the pains of childbirth. Do you feel happy with the way it turned out.*

Oh yes, particularly happy.

*Obviously these works touch on your on your own experience as a mother.*

Of course. I think every woman feels it, that’s why we can identify with her. We all know it’s like that – to be pregnant so you is upsetting and frightening. She’s frightened and yet she’s accepting. And she’s got a very helpful angel! Her Guardian Angel, that’s what he is! They say it’s Gabriel, but I think it’s her Guardian Angel. Gabriel is an agent, but this one, she is her guardian!

*In the “Nativity,” Mary is lying across the thigh of the angel in this very difficult moment. It’s a particularly beautiful how the angel is helping her.*

In the story I read, Joseph calls a midwife called Salomé and when she touches the girl her hand withers. The angel comes and says don’t worry, if you touch the baby after its born your hand will go back to normal. The angel helps her.

*Which brings up the aspect of solidarity, which is present through the entire series. In the “Lamentation,” for instance, there’s the kinship between Mary Magdalene and the*

*Virgin, sharing the same feelings of sorrow. To me, there is something about the way the figures are placed in each painting that implies solidarity.*

That comes out the Gurdian Angel, who helps Mary all the way through. Some people say they are all playing a part, but it's less theatrical than you might think.

*That's what you could have done if you had put in a harness.*

Yes, and it's wasn't a good idea.

*Especially not in a chapel.*

It would have been silly here – post-Modern or something dreadful like that.

*You've told me that you are particularly attracted to perverse stories. But that's one thing you've stayed away from here in the Virgin series. Nothing even slightly perverse about them.*

Not at all perverse, which is good – to be able not to do that.

*You don't want to be typecast.*

Exactly. I'm pleased and amazed I was able to do them. And you know, the hardest one was the first one – the "Annunciation."

*Why was that?*

I have five versions of that one because I couldn't get it. The one here was the first version. I did the figures and then I put in the background, which reminded me of those Indian religious paintings, the ones with the very bright colors. Then I said, that's it! It set the color and mood for every one of them. I'll tell you how it happened. Sometimes the Hari Krishna people in London give away pamphlets and these little prayer books. I was in a taxi and the driver gave me a Hari Krishna book, and it had these very brightly colored illustrations. A mystery exists when there is bright color, equally as if there is shadow and light. And it's so much more interesting if the color is lurid. So I thought, let's do it. And I used it for all them.

*Which makes the palette similar throughout.*

Yes, like the sky in the "Pietà." I would never have done bright color before. Or the violet with the yellow in the "Annunciation."

*Now that you're seeing them at in the chapel for the first time, what are your feelings?*

I'm very pleased. I think they fit in very well.

*And the niches that each pastel fits in, were they here originally?*

They were deeper, and they had thick gold frames that the architect took away so that I could have my own frames on the pictures.

*You've used thin gold frames.*

Yes, just something simple – gold leaf, in fact, which looks fine here.

*We haven't talked about the "Flight to Egypt" yet and there's something curious in that one. First, who are the two figures in the background?*

Mary's mother is on the left, watching her go. The man at the top is taking her – it's Joseph in the story.

*Occasionally in your works, you have pictured yourself in the act of painting. I thought the woman on the left was you holding the canvas.*

Oh, what a lovely idea!

*I thought: Paula has drawn herself holding her canvas, trying to figure out how she's going to paint this scene.*

That's very clever of you! A very cinematographic idea. I'm going to tell that to people now. It's my daughter playing the Virgin's mother, so she does look a little like me.

*The Virgin is obviously the "star" of these pictures...*

(laughing) Yes, she's the star.

*But you have to have Christ there as well. Yet in the "Lamentation" you do not show him on the cross. You've purposely left that out. Why?*

How can you do a crucifixion? If you do one it upstages everything. You cannot put it in this series. And it's not necessary. The crucifixion is there in the lamentation, but it's out of the picture. So you concentrate on Mary.

*What's there is the ominous shadow from the cross.*

Yes, and it has a glow on it from the sky. But it's not red. That would be very crude. The red of the blood of Christ is on her scarf. The red has moved somewhere else.

*The reflection on the cross is from the sky that's in the next painting, the "Pietà."*

Yes.

*Which gives them a nice feeling of needing to be in this precise order.*

They were done in this order. They are the various stations of Mary's cross, if you like.

*Another choice you made is to put the Christ in the "Pietà" wearing underwear.*

Well, he usually has a loincloth – always, in fact. In this one, he wears underpants because he is a modern boy.

*Did you use the same little boy as you had in your Pinocchio painting?*

No, that was my son-in-law Ron Mueck who sculpted Pinocchio for me. That wasn't from a real boy.

*Ron's work has a wonderful volume. You have that here.*

You have to have volume to have the shadows! That's important, to represent mortality and time. You have to have bulk for that. If you do it all flat, it's not the same. You have to have it to make them real people.

*When people visit the chapel, what would you like them to get from the whole series?*

I hope they'll feel in here a good company – good and helpful company. You don't even have to look at the pictures particularly carefully, because they are all around.

*The pictures will stay here forever?*

Yes, forever. They belong to this chapel.

*Are you happy to see them in Portugal?*

Yes, they couldn't be anywhere else!

*Why?*

Because they are Portuguese pictures. They are about how Mary is in Portugal. There's a great cult of the Virgin Mary here. People talk to her and ask her things all the time. And she appears all over the place. The cult doesn't exist in England. The pictures belong here.