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THE POWER OF VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE FEMALE FORM IN GENDER POLITICS.

EXPLORING THE WORKS OF PAULA REGO AND SARAH LUCAS.

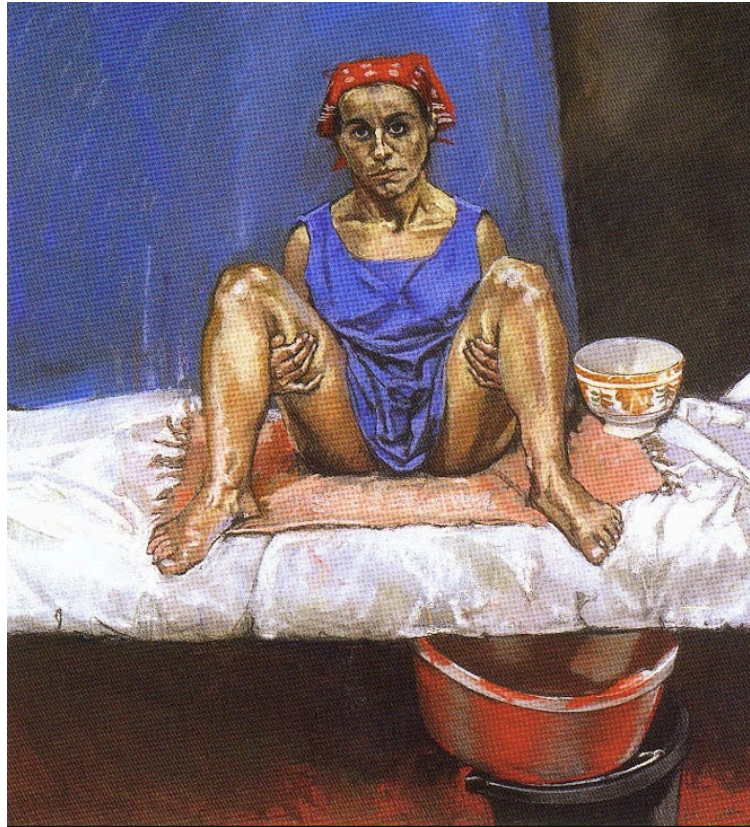
Word count: 2544

Paula Rego, a Portuguese/British painter and print maker (*Wikipedia Contributors, 2019*) and Sarah Lucas, an English installation artist apart of the Young British Artists in the United Kingdom (*Wikipedia Contributors, 2019b*), produced work in completely different mediums with opposing visual aesthetics. However, in my own personal research, I have come to the conclusion that what links them as artists is the use of the female form in their work. Even though their visual language is different, they use their art to illuminate their concern for issues that directly effect the lives of women, whether that be physically, socially or, in interpersonal

relationships. Rego's '*Abortion series*' and Lucas' '*Bunny series*' both rely on the female form to provide the viewer with the artists point of view on female struggles.

In late June of 1998, Portugal had an Abortion Law referendum (*Wikipedia Contributors , 2023*) in which the majority vote was for the law not to be changed, keeping abortion illegal. In 2001 in the municipality of Maia, Portugal, a trial on illegal abortions began which unmasked the danger and brutality of unsafe abortions. (*Vilar , 2002*) It also proved how working class women were especially effected, as the women on trial had used their wedding jewellery to pay for the illegal procedure. (*Vilar , 2002b*)

As a young child, Rego was raised in a liberal family, however, under the regime of Salazar, Catholic ideas and opinions were forced upon the majority (Warner, 2012). On the surface, religious morals didn't seem too restrictive, but for women and girls, many felt controlled when it came to bodily autonomy. Under Catholic rhetoric, any forms of contraception are forbidden and any form of abortion is also forbidden. When women needed this type of medical help, they were treated as sinners and condemned, and sometimes arrested and sent to prison, as an abortion was treated as any other crime.



Rego responded to the disappointment she felt towards the law makers and citizens of Portugal by creating a series of pastel paintings and etchings depicting different female characters experiencing a backstreet abortion.

(Fig. 1)

‘Paula Rego has been making images out of stories since she was a child’ (Warner, 2003) which continues into adult hood, using her artistry in this series to humanise the women portrayed in the scene, in efforts to connect the viewer to the core issue itself. In this series, brutal honesty is the backbone of the composition, and the disappointment in her fellow citizens was the fuel that let the

visceral energy of the images come to life. ‘The perverted uses of female power’ (Warner, 2003c) is what Rego wanted to fight against in this series. It angered her to see women mostly portrayed in portraits as beautiful objects, if the woman is physically attractive, or women in domestic scenes, washing dishes and tending to housework. She wanted to show the rampant inequality that was common place in Portugal at that particular time. From the time of the series’ creation and the year 2007, millions had viewed the pieces and Portugal’s citizen were beginning to see the truth of illegal abortions and how the only way to help these women was to legalise it all together. In 2007, a second referendum was put to the public and the vote to make abortions legal in Portugal won by 59.25% (Wikipedia Contributors, 2023).

When looking into Rego’s ‘Abortion series’ each painting is comprised of pastels, and when looking at one from the series, specifically *Untitled No.1, 1998*, the way Rego positions the life model, *Lila Nunes* (Judah, 2022) in the composition is vital in expressing all the nuanced emotions that are present in a back alley abortion.

At the first glance of this painting, vibrant cobalt blue jumps out, in contrast to the strip of black pigment in the top right corner of the piece. A red bandana slices through the blue, making the eye travel down to the woman that wears the

bandana. Two buckets, one black, one red, sit on top of each their under the make-shift bed that the figure is perched on. These buckets seem cleverly placed, as the colours drag the eye down, letting the viewer take in every inch of the figure.

Due to the position of the body, you prepare for direct gaze. The viewer expects anger and emotional torment to be spilling into the figures facial expression, contorting the mouth into an obvious grimace or scowl, the eyes squinted in pain and sadness.

Instead, Rego Sketches an eye line that feels distant and not present in the moment. The gaze is somewhere behind the viewer, as if all emotion is pushed down in order for the subject to get through what is about to happen, and an expression that is towing the line of brave defiance and an echoing, empty numbness.

The subject's legs are spread, with feet firmly planted on the edge of the bed. There is no evidence of medical stirrups, the subjects hands are gripping the inside of her own thighs, indents in the skin, so intense and real. Although Rego is not aiming for photo realism, the application of intense, almost Chiaroscuro lighting cements this scene in brutal honesty. Rego highlights the figures strong and muscular physique, especially in the figures calf's and feet. The highest point of each muscle is expressed through an almost white pastel, and due to the legs lining

up in the centre of the composition, they stand out even more. Rego was not interested in creating images of weak women. She wanted to show the choice, and how the option to have an abortion, no matter the circumstances, should be legal and accessible for any woman or girl who wants or needs it. '*...it is the woman's choice and decision to abort her pregnancy.*' (Strom, 2004b)

The blue garment that the subject is wearing seems too big for her, looking as if it might fall from her shoulders. The fabric then gathers at her pelvis, covering her genitals. This blue, creased fabric shift dress is the only thing between the subject and the 'backstreet' abortion that is about to take place. As a viewer, one feels as if we are witnessing the moment in which everything could go horribly wrong, or the moment in which the woman is finally free from all her constraints. Either way one views the situation, the piece captures a moment of monumental personal change for the women, and the anticipation is vibrating out of the painting

The colours in this piece are very muted and slightly de-saturated, yet shades and tones of red are poignant throughout. A red bowl in the bottom right, the washed out blanket that the subject is sitting on and the bandana on the head of the subject. Although this piece takes place before the abortion, the repetition of

the colour red seems to be used as a visual metaphor of what could happen, if everything goes terribly wrong during the procedure.

Sarah Lucas is an installation artist that plays with human form, mostly that of a female, in an abstracted and sometimes crude way. She uses found objects such as mattresses, women's stockings and tights, fruits etc. An ongoing theme throughout her work is perceived mockery, not of the female subject, but the role in which the female subject is forced to play by a patriarchal society. In Lucas' sculptural installation series entitled *Bunny Gets Snookered* (Coles, 2018), *Pauline Bunny* is a visual metaphor for the most desired woman.



(Fig 2)



(Fig 3)

When looking at this piece, it is hard to ignore the visual resemblance it shares with the iconic imagery of a 'Playboy' bunny. Although the Magazine giant *Playboy* ran into intense feminist critique of its contribution to the patriarchal media machine, by the 1990's Playboy was bigger than ever, and by the late nineties and early two thousand's, was starting to infiltrate a new and younger target audience with television 'reality' shows such as *The Girls next Door* (Burns et al., 2005). A Young

journalist, Gloria Steinem, who would go on to become one of, if not, the most recognised name in feminist ideology, went undercover as a bunny in Chicago's *Playboy Club*. During her time employed there, She used a false name, donned black stockings, red cuts where the corset stuck itself into her flesh, and discovered a work environment filled with sexual harassment and female degradation (Pitzulo, 2008). The visual clues reminding the viewer of *Playboy* seems to be extremely relevant to the topic this piece is exploring. It's exploring the woman's place in a patriarchal world that values the aesthetic of a woman and what a woman can do for a man, instead of what else she can bring to the metaphorical table.

The black stockings on '*Pauline Bunny*' is used by Lucas to separate this piece from the other 'bunnies'. '*Pauline Bunny*' is supposed to signify the most wanted; which instantly puts a value on not just this 'bunny', but also all the others. The black ball is the highest value ball in a game of snooker, and in Western Culture, black stockings are considered the most visually attractive.

The reference to snooker homogeneously fits into the visceral, and shocking world of Sarah Lucas. Lucas' modus operandi always includes a nod to her working class background and childhood. She grew up in London, her father a milkman and mother, a gardener. Visually, Lucas expresses an intense and magnetic connection to 'her' london, '*...so saturated with the sense of the London she grew up in*' (Edemariam,

2011). A snooker table, is another one of those objects that forms a bridge for her message or scene that she wants to convey to the viewer, it's an inter textual reference for cheap entertainment, something to do on the weekend with the 'lads'. I cannot help but make the assumption that the snooker table doesn't just give an a tangible environment in which the 'bunnies' can be observed, but is a visual metaphor for women trapped in the inescapable view of the patriarchy, women here are cheap entertainment, something to do on a night out with the 'lads'.

The official definition of 'snookered' is 'to be tricked or deceived (*Cambridge Dictionary, 2023*). Lucas makes no subtle hint to the male dominated sport, she makes it blatantly obvious. At the exhibition of the series, the sculptural pieces are dotted around, beside and on top of a snooker table. The physicality of each 'bunny' can be described as floppy and deflated, with the 'spine' of the figures slumped low on the chair, and the 'legs' dangling with no capacity to support itself.

However, *Pauline Bunny* is the piece I am most captivated and intrigued by. Even though *Pauline Bunny* is the most desired bunny, in no way is she in a position of power. This piece expresses the jarring imagery of perceived female power, the type of superficial power that a man would bestow upon an 'attractive' woman, and how if the 'power' is found in being the 'most desired' by men, the female has no power, she is a sexual place holder. The fact that the sculptures have no head, no

face, no personal identity further proves how the patriarchy sees women; as bodies and objects to be used for their sexual gratification. The physical positioning of the installation proves this point. In an article published on the *Tate* website, the installation is described as 'limply dangling arms & (*the*) passively lolling legs provide a representation of abject femininity' (*Tate, 2023*).

'This bunny girl is trapped by her femininity, only to be knocked against her fellow bunnies in a game of masculine skill.' (*Tate, 2023b*) This refers to the hegemonic stereotype that women see each other as competitors for male attention, validation and acceptance in a patriarchal society and culture. In this piece, the unseen man slips away from the responsibility of the toxic environment he has created, and we are left with these context clues and the 'bunnies', feeling as exhausted and downtrodden as the cotton-wadded figures. As explained in *Feminism is for Everybody* "Sisterhood could not be powerful as long as women were competitively at war with one another." (*Hooks, 2000*).

To conclude, although as made evident in this essay, Rego and Lucas' artistic practise are almost the visual antithesis of each other, what links their work is a profound need to create a visual language in which fears of the patriarchy can be expressed. Rego uses the traditional method of materials on canvas, or paper, and

a female subject that you can instantly identify (which for the viewer can be considered easier to digest), Lucas takes a different line. Lucas uses the suggestion of a female figure; like a disjointed collage of female limbs, wrapped in anonymity, as the sculptures represent a mockery of how the patriarchy views women and the female experience.

'Like so much of Sarah's art, it exists as an exquisite trap for heterosexual male desires: it is and it isn't alluring. The sculpture alludes to eroticism, but delivers a punch in the gut to the libido and ego' (Ruby, 2013).

Although this quote is written about Lucas' practice, I have come to the understanding that it also applies to Rego's *'abortion series'*. In this series, there is no room for beauty, lust and sexual desire, the context of the piece pushes away any opportunity for the women in this series of work to be sexualised or objectified. In this moment, they are not victims, they look physically strong and substantial, as Rego uses tonal value to convey a lot of muscle definition in the subjects' legs, arms and décolletage. The figure is not cowering, she is on the bed and makes no attempt to hide or shield herself, which evokes a sense of power and strength, to face such a dangerous procedure with no hint of fear.

“...Others are turned in on themselves, making it clear that what is happening is no one's business but their own. None of them accepts the role of victims.” (Bradley, 2002).

Lucas and Rego's series' are entrenched in a sense of uncovering truth, shedding light on obvious failing laws that continue to put the lives of women and girls at danger, and the more subtle, media driven ideologies and opinions that have the danger of misleading and perpetuating a culture that punishes women for the hypothetical 'sins' of men. Both as important and thought provoking, yet constructed differently and focusing on seemingly unconnected issues. I hope in this essay, I have expressed how these pieces of work are not of disconnected, separate issues, but have shown how both subject matters go hand in hand, as they are a byproduct of a patriarchal system that creates and encourages both issues to fester. To finish, in *The Art of Feminism* comments on Rego's work, yet what is written, I have proved that the same can be said for Lucas' practise as well.

“Rego works to affect the gallery goer in all her work... the paintings are unlikely to change the point of view of the viewer, but they will certainly challenge them to confront what such an experience might be like and shake them out of apathy.” (Reckitt et al., 2019)

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Images

Fig 1 - Rego, P. (1998). Untitled I, 1998. [Photograph] Available at: <https://elephant.art/paula-rego-untitled-no-1-1998/> [Accessed 13 Dec. 2023].

Fig 2- Lucas , S. (1997). Installation view, 1997. [Photograph] Available at: https://www.sadiecoles.com/exhibitions/8-sarah-lucas-bunny-gets-snookered/installation_shots/#/image_popup/image8/ [Accessed 13 Dec. 2023].

Fig 3- Lucas, S. (1997). 'Pauline Bunny' 1997. [Photograph] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/lucas-pauline-bunny-t07437#:~:text=This%20bunny%20girl%20is%20trapped> [Accessed 13 Dec. 2023].

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Take first personal

- + Marina Warner on Paula Rego
- + Luisa Brock on Sarah Lucas
- + Lauren Abbott
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Marina Warner - ART JOURNALIST

She is a feminist scholar and writer who has written many books on art and culture. She is also a journalist and has written for various publications. She is known for her critical and often controversial views on art and culture.

from the same essay

what she says in the first section of the Paula Rego

RESEARCH ON ABORTION: WHAT IS FORTHCOMING? - HANNAH 2001

In 1998, Portugal, a trail on illegal abortions began which concerned the danger and quality of unsafe abortions. In 1998, it also proved true working class women were negatively affected as the women on that level could not afford to pay for the legal procedure. (Influenced)

THE POWER OF VISUAL REPRESENTATION IN GENDER POLITICS: EXPLORING THE WORKS OF PAULA REGO AND SARAH LUCAS

Paula Rego - **what she says**

Sarah Lucas - **what she says**

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"Unhallow The Abortion Parody"

Paula Rego's Satire on Abortion

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A screenshot of my own personal research into the topics and artists discussed in my essay.