

EXAMPLE: VISUAL ANALYSIS



Carol Rama, *Appassionata* (Passionate), Watercolour and pencil on paper, 23 × 33 cm, 1940

The figure of the woman has been pressed in the foreground. A cage-like structure, draped in weights and restraints, takes up most of the space of the painting. The whole scene seems to pitch forwards, and because of this incline, it is unclear if this metal cage is above or behind the figure. As the cage looms it seems to echo the bed frame below. The figure has only just been released from this contraption. She lies dazed, her eyes are unfocused, her irises turn inwards, and

their hue is reddish. She is heavy-lidded and drowsy. She is prone, flattened and immobile, as if she were still restrained. She appears as a stain on the bed sheets. Her body is pink, and the sheets are cream, and together they make a warm place in the picture. The rest of the space is cool and institutional. There is a forest green strip painted halfway up the wall, a design that indicates a mid-twentieth century institution. The distinctive metal frame of the bed supports this sense of time and space. The scene reads as post-coital. The overall sense of the painting is of violent eroticism. The woman's lips are a red smear, simultaneously pursed and melting off to the side of her face. Her nipples turn upwards, her face rolls towards us, although she looks at nothing. She is wearing black heels, another restraining device, but is otherwise naked. A light covering of pubic hair is visible. These hairs echo a halo of sun-yellow flowers that appear to have grown out from her head. They are little buds on long stalks. As a mass, they make up a field of colour, either some new life springing forward or the after-glow of electro-shock therapy.

CONTEXTUALIZING AND ANALYZING THE WORK

I first saw these works in a retrospective at the New Museum in New York in 2017. Rama has been characterised as an outsider artist, but this idea can be easily rebuked by her lifelong connections to collectors and her roles within artistic groups in Italy.¹ She was not widely known outside of Italy until she was included in a group exhibition curated by Lea Vergine in the 1980s. This exhibition, titled *The Other Half of the Avant-Garde*, sought to reinstate women's contributions to Europe's 20th century art movements. The New Museum's retrospective, *Antibodies*, has further increased Rama's international status. Rama's work is often contextualised through comparisons with other women artists of the twentieth century, such as Louise Bourgeois, Nancy Spero, and Frieda Kahlo.² Although she did not work with or communicate with these artists directly, their shared impulses towards the representation of a desiring female body serves to explain Rama's location within art history. Over Rama's career, her

¹ *Carol Rama: Antibodies* (New York: New Museum, 2017). 19. She is also photographed with Warhol in Mundici and Ruchs, "Carol Rama."; *ibid.*

² Vergine et al., *The Passion According to Carol Rama*. 36, 87

materials and methods shifted rapidly from early figurative personal works, to larger abstract pieces.³ I am largely interested in her early work, and in unpacking the relationship between her biographical experience of madness and confinement, and its representation within the work.

Rama's early work relates directly to her experience of visiting an insane asylum. She was born into a comfortably well-off family in Turin, but economic hardship occurred when she was still young. Her mother had a 'breakdown' and was committed to an institution. As a result of these visits, Rama states, "I began to make indecent drawings".⁴ Rama turned the encounter into material for her work. She felt a kinship with the free erotic expression of the subjects interred in the asylum, with their lolling tongues and spread legs. Multiplied and fragmented body parts are a consistent feature of Rama's early work. Women are shown with stumps for limbs, confined in wheelchairs and other contraptions. Some of the figures stick out overlapping pointed tongues, others display multiple cocks in fan-like compositions. Rama's use of very light flesh tones and wet watercolour increases the sense of a bodily fluidity within her work. She has stated that her favourite organ is the tongue because it never ages; it is a part of the body that is always moist.⁵ Rama has also been explicit about her intention to use her work as both a cure and an appeal to those who recognise suffering.⁶ Rama states, "I paint by instinct and I paint for passion. And because of rage and because of violence and because of sadness. And for a certain fetishism. And for happiness and melancholy together. And especially for anger."⁷ Rama's work revels in bodily and mental suffering and pleasure.

Rama's abject, uncanny, and erotic bodily forms can be contextualised in relation to the political climate of Italy at this time. Her work was censored in the 1940s because it was

³ She was briefly part of an Italian concrete art movement. Ibid.41

⁴ Ibid.49

⁵ Ibid.39

⁶ Rama stated, "above all I paint to cure myself" quoted in *Carol Rama: Antibodies* 49

⁷ *The Passion According to Carol Rama*.

considered obscene and several of her watercolours were lost or destroyed.⁸ The 'degenerate' sexuality of the work, its embrace of the failing and fragmented and disabled body, is a rejection of the normalising constraints of the political climate during the rise of fascism in Italy.⁹ Rama's messy body is a rejection of the highly organised body idealised by these military regimes; a quality shared with many avant-garde artists. Hal Foster has put forward a parallel argument in relation to Hans Bellmer's doll works, where he states, "However elliptically, these works may even juxtapose a development of a military-industrial type body with a regression to a (pre)Oedipal (dis)organisation of the drives."¹⁰ This interpretation situates Rama's work within the lineage of radical avant-garde artists of the 20th century. Though Rama was not directly linked to these movements, her early practice does share some surrealist impulses, the celebration or perhaps fetishization of feminine madness, and the rejection of social constraints.¹¹

Rama's work has been interpreted as a specifically feminine form of expression, showing woman as borderless, or as "mutable, leaky, wet, and hard to contain."¹² The body is oozing and contagious. This reading serves to re-contextualise Rama's work as part of a continuum a feminist art practice.¹³ Rama and Louise Bourgeois both present potentially threatening forms of the feminine. Bourgeois's spider is a maternal figure, who menaces and protects.¹⁴ Rama's women have multiple tongues, snake-like phalluses, and amputated limbs. These are both powerful and abject forms of femininity. Jack Halberstam extends this interpretation of Rama's fragmented forms of representation, stating that Rama's work shows that, "the human body can be extended and reshaped by its contact with the landscape, with other animals, with history and with

⁸ Ibid.50

⁹ Ibid. 27

¹⁰ Hal Foster, "Armor Fou," *October* 56, no. Spring: High/Low: Art and Mass Culture (1991).

¹¹ See the 1st surrealist manifesto by André Breton and his novel *Naja*. André Breton, *Naja* (New York: Grove Press, 1960 [1928]). "Manifesto of Surrealism," (Paris: Editions du Sagittaire, 1924).

¹² *Carol Rama: Antibodies* 18

¹³ Preciado argues against the over-emphasis on gender identity in the interpretation of Rama's work, seeing this as a convenient art historical categorisation that reduces her output to 'women's art' Vergine et al., *The Passion According to Carol Rama*. 22

¹⁴ Mignon Nixon, "Bad Enough Mother," *October* 71 (1995).

the shape of desires to come.”¹⁵ The mutability of the subject across Rama’s work can be read as opening up the subject to alternative codes of embodiment, moving beyond the restraints of gender, and the human. Rama’s anachronistic use of figuration makes her re-appear as contemporary in this interpretation.

Rama re-directs the trauma of her experience towards a creative outcome. I have not found any record of Rama’s mother’s experience of madness or of the asylum. There are points at which the interpretation of Rama’s work romanticises the artist’s relationship to madness. Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer states, “Madness demands autonomy, enormous energy, and total commitment.”¹⁶ This quote frames madness as an autonomous choice and a source of energy.¹⁷ But madness can also be a state of exhaustion, the opposite of autonomous expression. Rama herself did not go mad, but she uses her association with this state.¹⁸ For the artist, the work is part of a process of catharsis. But there is also the possibility that the work allows for the idealising of the insane asylum as a creative site.¹⁹ While I admire Rama’s work, my methods differ. I am more circumspect about translating trauma through the work.

¹⁵ Halberstam in *Antibodies Carol Rama: Antibodies* 88

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 11

¹⁷ The COBRA art movement drew on the works of children and the insane.

¹⁸ Griselda Pollock argues against a psychobiographical interpretation of Bourgeois work in her text “Old Bones” in a way that parallel’s an argument about the interpretation of Louise Bourgeois in a review of Claire Lambe’s ACCA exhibition. Griselda Pollock, “Old Bones and Cocktail Dresses: Louise Bourgeois and the Question of Age,” *Oxford Art Journal* 22, no. 2 (1999). Tamsin Green, “Playing in the Master Bedroom: Claire Lambe at Acca,” *Art & Australia Online* (2017).

¹⁹ The work of the surrealists idealized feminine madness, for example, Salvador Dalí, *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy*, Photo-collage, 1933.