ART AND OCCUPATION

Dame Paula Rego, The Maids 1987

The curtain rises on an apparently innocuous domestic scene from early 1950s Portugal. In a deeply carpeted, Dralon® furnished, velvet-draped bedroom, two quaintly overdressed maids attend to their mistress and her blonde-headed daughter. The masculine moustachioed mother sits meekly at her dressing table, head bowed, hands clasped on her muscular thighs. She wears a thick, buttoned-up, late 1940ish couture, check woollen jacket, short black skirt and thick grey tights—inappropriate given the warm sunshine lighting up the ochre patio wall. The black maid gazes down and gently places her right hand on the nape of her employer's neck, while her colleague embraces the girl, blonde head tucked underneath her chin and glances across the room. What's going on? The grasping hand-like shadows on the outside wall give an ominous clue. The black maid’s left hand is clenched tightly on something hidden beneath the folds of her pink apron as she focuses just a little too knowingly on her mistress’s submissive neck. The other maid's embrace—more struggle than cuddle—takes on a sinister tone, her glance more furtive than friendly. The over-furnished room turns claustrophobic, the shadow on the carpet pools and spreads like a forensic stain. The symbolically absent master’s dressing gown hanging on the back of the door confirms a feminine agenda. A small, black, demonic boar (the feral artist literally and metaphorically baring her teeth) hurries into the picture past a green occasional table on which rest an open prayer book and a large...
white lily, symbols of God’s mercy, purity and death [1]. Colonial emblems, a hibiscus in a tiny vase and a small toy leopard, sit at opposite ends of the dressing table. There is menace and imminent brutality in this story, matched by the artist’s violent technique. This is not a pantomime. There is villainy afoot.

Paula Rego loves to tell stories in which she can immerse herself as she paints and then let the painting take her where it will [2]. The Maids (acrylic on canvas-backed paper 213 × 244 cm) is based on the real-life case of the Papin sisters, Christine and Lea, who worked as domestics for a rich Parisian family. One day, for no apparent reason, they brutally murdered the mother and daughter while the father was out at work (1933). Rego develops the tale under the guise of psycho-sexual (oedipal) intrigue and magical realism [3] as a commentary on Portuguese colonial oppression, the subjugation of women and the transgression of female power [4]. Her intriguingly dark humour and repellent macabre inventions are ‘comically grotesque, viscerally feminine’ [5].

Rego is a self-declared ‘manic depressive’ [8]. People with bipolar disorder (BD) are over-represented in the artistic professions and there are higher rates of psychosis, depression and suicide among creative individuals such as artists, poets, jazz musicians and writers [9]. Research supports a connection between creativity and BD [10] as well as a genetically determined predisposition to these disorders [11]. Recent genome studies have identified a number of specific genes associated with BD and ‘strong evidence for the presence of multiple additional risk loci, each contributing a relatively small effect to BD susceptibility’ [12]. Genetic testing for bipolar illness should lead to a better understanding of its pathogenesis and may improve therapeutic strategies and family counselling [9]. It is even possible to test your own saliva for BD, but I suspect ‘that way madness lies’ [13] or perhaps painting by numbers?

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References