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**ARTFORUM**

## Rio de Janeiro Reviews

### Paula Rego and Adriana Varejão

FORTES DALOIA & GABRIEL: CARPINTARIA



Paula Rego, *Visions*, 2015, pastel on paper on aluminum, 51 1/4 x 43 1/2".

A powerful pairing of artworks by artists of different generations and backgrounds brought together imagery that spoke to their shared interests. Both Adriana Varejão (from Brazil and born in 1964) and Paula Rego (born in Portugal in 1935 and based mostly in London since the 1950s) use parody, theatricality, and collage-like recombinations of image fragments derived from literature, history, and folklore to explore the central role of narrative in shaping notions of culture and identity and how they are rooted in cross-pollination and power dynamics.

Rego is known for her taste for female protagonists, for storytelling, and for perverting plots, and the five works of hers included here—four of them in pastel on paper mounted on aluminum—were inspired by two books published nearly 150 years apart by Portuguese writers: José Maria de Eça de Queirós's *O Primo Basílio* (Cousin Basilio)(1878) and Hélia Correia's *Bastardia* (2005). While the former embodies a kind of social realism and the latter is a fictional narrative built on fantasy, symbolism, and archetypes, gender and social roles are core themes in both books. Rego's *The Mermaids*, 2016, takes on related themes in its depiction of a fully clothed reclining woman who appears to be asleep on top of sheets and pillows in a desertlike landscape. Her slumped body is flanked by a child waving while the three phantasmagoric figures who give the piece its title hover above her. Another work with the same title, made a year later, was a large papier-mâché mobile, in which mermaids like those in the painting hang from the ceiling. They are old, bald, with black wings, turquoise tails, and frightening countenances.

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Water, sea creatures, and fantasy were also central elements in some artworks by Varejão. A group of wall-mounted fiberglass-and-resin plates inspired by Portuguese ceramist Rafael Bordallo Pinheiro—*Nascimento de Ondina* (Birth of Ondine), *Pérola Imperfeita* (Imperfect Pearl), both 2009, and *Prato com Mariscos* (Dish with Seafood), 2011—all depict female figures in aquatic settings. The rich bodily quality of these large concave plates is intriguing, and their ornate details lend them an eerie yet seductive air. In these works, references to mythologies and symbols for birth merge to give a sense of mysterious worlds nurtured by women. Also on display were three of Varejão's leaf-shaped canvases, inspired by miniature Song-dynasty paintings on dried leaves. The connection between Brazilian and Chinese cultures established through historical trading routes underpins a great deal of Varejão's work, both figuratively and in her use of craquelure.

Although the two artists' divergent styles were evident, even from a distance the similarity not only of their themes but also of their palette came to the fore. This was especially clear in the juxtaposition of Rego's mermaid mobile and Varejão's *Olho D'Água* (Water Eye), 2010, an intricate oval wall piece in oil on canvas and polyurethane on aluminum and wood depicting a body of choppy water encircled by sinuous folds of green seaweed, crabs, and rocks. Also hung next to each other were Varejão's *Jardim das Delícias* (Garden of Delights), 2015, depicting mixed-race, cross-generational erotic scenes set against a dull ocher background, and Rego's *Visions*, 2015, which shows tigers and rats copulating in the foreground as a man undresses a woman while looking at a female observer reflected in a mirror. This pairing highlighted the artists' differences, while also standing as testament to how they both question the dynamics of power and patriarchy in the formation of cultures.

—*Camila Belchior*