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Adriana Varejão on her most shocking painting: 'It's important to see this violence'

## Visual Arts

### Adriana Varejão on her most shocking painting: 'It's important to see this violence'

The Brazilian artist is preparing for a major show in Lisbon, pairing her work with the late Paula Rego

Oliver Basciano

Published 10 HOURS AGO

Adriana Varejão's studio, in the lush, fancy environs of Rio de Janeiro's Jardim Botânico neighbourhood, is built around a courtyard. The main space for making art is a two-storey block of the tropical modernist style. Facing it is the artist's former house, now offices and a yoga studio her team uses after a laborious day making the large-scale "cracked surface" paintings Varejão has become known for. As I arrive, on the studio side, the artist — dressed casually in a purple vest and baggy shorts — is folding open a vast cantilenliaever door, opening up the entire upper floor to the midday sun.

This spring, Varejão has solo exhibitions at the Hispanic Society Museum & Library in New York — only the second contemporary artist to do so — and Gagosian in Athens, making a new series of "plates" for both, her vast highly decorated concave wall works.

Meanwhile, she is curating an exhibition of her older work alongside that of the late Paula Rego at the Centro de Arte Moderna Gulbenkian in Lisbon. It is this that is causing the most stress. "It is nice just to be making new work, because being a curator involves so much organisation: finding out where all the old works are, getting hold of the Paula Regos," she says, gently pushing away Lua, her dog, a nine-year-old former beach stray.

Born in 1964, the daughter of an air force pilot and a hospital nutritionist, Varejão studied at the Parque Lage art school in Rio. A trip to Ouro Preto in 1986, a colonial mining town in the state of Minas Gerais, brought an "epiphany", the artist awed by the baroque churches, in which excess mingled with symbols of death and decay — an influence on Varejão to this day.

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Rego was never a reference for Varejão until an exhibition of the Portuguese artist at Pinacoteca in São Paulo in 2011. "I said 'wow' to myself. 'Who is this furious woman?'" A studio visit followed. "She was full of stories. Her studio was amazing because she built her compositions as scenery first, which she painted after. All the figures were made out of papier-mâché. The place was like a theatre set."

They agreed to make a show together, but in 2022 Rego died, leaving Varejão to carry the exhibition alone. "Paula plays psychological games with her work, they have this subtle tension. The violence in my work is not so subliminal," she says of the pairing. "Paula shows violence in the domestic space, in spaces of intimacy; my violence is a social violence."



'Triptych' by Paula Rego (1998) © Estate of Paula Rego



'Extirpation of Evil by Incision' by Adriana Varejão (1994) © Adriana Varejão

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In response to Portugal's rejection of legalised abortion in a 1998 referendum, Rego made a series of works depicting backstreet clinics, emotionally intense but without being explicit — the artist's fury was conveyed just through the expressions of the women she depicted. In the Gulbenkian exhibition Varejão will pair Rego's "Triptych" (1998) — three women, including a girl in school uniform, lying in sparse grubby rooms — with her own, more visceral installation "Extirpation of Evil by Incision" (1994). Here, a real hospital trolley sits in front of a canvas in which a line painting of demons and the figure of death has been obliterated by a gory incision into the canvas. "I had started to study meat in the market or at the butchers," Varejão notes.

Female reproductive rights are not the only issue Varejão is keen to tackle. "It's very important for me to make this show in Portugal, because my work, especially in the '90s, was about colonisation, new histories, histories that were not the official narrative. In Brazil we are talking about that now, but in Portugal they still do not reflect on this. In Portugal you hear people say, 'Portugal isn't a racist country, we are not racists.' They still have no historical conscience."

Varejão, animated now, tells how she visited the Museu do Tesouro Real in Lisbon, an institution that opened in 2022 to show off the state treasures including gold and diamonds from Brazil. "If the texts that were in that museum were displayed in Brazil that place would be cancelled."

In the Gulbenkian show is a shocking work from Varejão's early era, "Filho Bastardo II" (1995). The oval painting in oil shows a colonial-era bedroom, the arched doors open to a lush landscape beyond. On a bed a white man in aristocratic dress is shown raping an enslaved woman. Down the centre Varejão inserted one of her trademark bloody, fleshy gashes, maximising the sense of horror in the work. "I think it's still important for the Portuguese to see this violence . . . I'm expecting a reaction, and I hope it will be very loud."

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'Filho Bastardo II' (1995) © Adriana Varejão

She says, however, that she feels it is no longer her place to make a work like “Filho Bastardo II” now. “Today in Brazil we have others better placed to talk about colonialism. So my work changed.”

In the 2000s, Varejão left behind oil painting and figuration, and the gashes extended to become cracks. “I fell in love with ceramics from the Song dynasty and I started to read the philosophy behind it all. This is when the cracks in the work first appeared.” A series of large-scale paintings that mimicked baroque *azulejos* tiles followed, as well as the plates.

“They were originally an accident. I didn’t like the texture of the canvas, and so I used to put some plaster and glue to prepare the surface. One time I put in a little bit too much and it cracked, but I liked it. For me it was natural: the lines signified the language of nature, the way a tree root spreads, or a river spreads across the land. This was my big break from the oil painting of the past.”

She points to a half-finished work destined for Athens which has a perfectly framed series of spreading cracks, recalling sun-baked earth. “I can’t control them. To get a composition I like for one of the big works, I have to make 200 and choose the one I like best.”

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Varejão's current work is no longer so explicit in its politics, but she remains interested in questions of identity. The new "plates", each more than a metre in diameter, which will be shown at the Hispanic Society, show richly detailed scenes from nature on the front, with the back making reference to a variety of global ceramic traditions, including the indigenous art of Marajoara culture.

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'Mata Mata' (2024) © Adriana Varejão

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The reverse of 'Mata Mata' © Adriana Varejão. Photo Vicente de Mello

"I wanted to bring various cultures together, so the back of one of the plates is influenced by 15th-century Valencian ceramics that they have in the Hispanic Society collection; then another is Ming Chinese. One is based on Iznik ceramics from the Ottoman Empire," she says.

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She was invited to dive into the institution's collection and pick out objects to sit alongside her own work. "They don't have any Marajoara in the collection, so I wanted to include two works that reference that tradition, because it's Amazonian and it's pre-Columbian. It speaks to hierarchy, to put something from the region alongside the Ming references."

Given she is so aware of the decolonial politics that bubbles under so much of Brazil's art making, I ask whether she's worried about accusations of cultural appropriation. "My work comes from the baroque. It is not about one thing, but about pastiche and representation. Mimicry. The baroque has the capacity to absorb cultures, it gives space for individual artisans to incorporate different aesthetics. There is a space for more and more and more."

While the piles of books that lie on her table in the studio offer guides to ceramic traditions from China to Turkey, indigenous Brazilian making to pre-Columbian Mexico, her own fantastical, maximalist works go beyond anything documented on their pages. "My work is an expression of hybridity," she says, nodding to the library. "Which is the story of Brazil itself."

To June 22, [hispanicsociety.org](https://hispanicsociety.org); April 11-September 22, [gulbenkian.pt](https://gulbenkian.pt); May 15-June 14, [gagosian.com](https://gagosian.com)

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