

Paula Rego

Video Interview Transcript

This interview is from a Channel 4 TV series called 'In Your Face' (available on DVD), made by Christopher Swayne and Bruno Wollheim, produced by Coluga Pictures.

Was it a very difficult portrait to realise?

I just couldn't get the likeness and her face shifts, she has a very mobile and expressive face and I think she probably had expressions going on, a lot of them and I couldn't pin any one down or even the outline of her head. So I found it very, very difficult.

At what point were you happy with the portrait?

It was worrying, I was so worried once I left here after the sitting I left the door open of my studio, you see. It was awful because I couldn't get it to look like her. And then one day as she was sitting there I said 'please, please just, just keep very, very still' and it caught you see, like it caught, when you catch something like the pencil or in this case the stick of pigment, caught in her face and it started knitting it, it started unravelling it, you see and it went and went and went and I held my breath because it might suddenly go off, I held my breath for a long time until I got it. And I think I got it, I got it, and I pinned it down you see.

Did the conception of the portrait change with time?

I had her sitting in a different position at first. She'd brought a little book of hers along and she sat there holding this book. So we didn't start off with this as it ended up. I didn't like it, it wasn't like herself and then I had this settee over there which was bought in Habitat in the 60s and it has all those soft cushions in leather and I'd been using it to sit my Ostrich women on and piling them up and my Ostrich women lay on them with their arms open, so they were being used a lot and I said to Germaine, 'why don't you sit there?' - it's very low. She has very long legs, they had to bend quite a lot so that put her in almost a crouching position so she actually fitted into this canvas and she fitted it so that she filled it almost all up which was what I was doing with my ostriches and so there she was, just so, just right.

What about the clothes Germaine is wearing?

Right at the beginning she was always going to wear this dress which was, this dress was made by Jean Muir who'd just died and I think it was one of the first proper dresses, she says, that Germaine bought. It was also a homage to Jean Muir who was such a wonderful designer and it was a good colour, simple, it didn't have a pattern which would have been more difficult, so it was great to do that and she brought her own shoes you see, she had her own comfortable shoes that she liked that she wore them very often, they were falling apart and that was nice because it'd opened out and had sort of mouth syndrome and I liked that.

Is there any sexual symbolism in the portrait?

I never wanted to use any symbols or any such stuff. The closest I came to any kind of sexual symbol was the little shoes with the little mouth in but that is just silly and the thought came after the event anyway. It is always thus. You do something and then you make the most of it by talking about it, but in fact it all comes out from copying. If you like there is a little hole there, unconscious, I didn't intend any such thing, I intended to show her hands as working hands because they were, full of callous from the gardening and I liked that but otherwise it wasn't intended to show anything symbolic thing at all. People can read anything they like into it that's okay, the picture's not mine anymore.

How did the sittings proceed?

She was listening to Wagner because she bought Wagner's Ring to listen to all of it and she bought the libretto too and I think she was sort of listening to the music and that's how I got her, which is okay. We had about sixty hours, she used to come in the afternoon from Cambridge and from her garden she used to bring vegetables and things from her garden. I like her hands because she has gardeners hands, quite rough, working hands and she'd bring baskets with things and we'd sit about 3 hours.

How do you see Germaine?

She's a very sexual, a very powerful woman with enormous presence, you see, full of vitality and that comes across I hope, it comes across in her, I don't know whether I got it.