## Garageland Reviews



Garageland is an arts and culture magazine published annually by Transition Gallery, from its base in East London. Garageland Reviews features comment and extra curricular content that adds to the ideas published in the magazine. Also look out for the Garageland Salon podcast Click here for more about

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## **Blog Archive**

**2025** (1)

**▼** July (1) Anthony Rudolf's Pictures to Prove It

- **2024** (10)
- **2023** (12)
- **2022** (9)
- **2021** (8) **2020** (6)
- **2019** (18) **2018** (10)
- **2017** (5)
- **2016** (11) **2015** (9)
- **2013** (48)
- **2012** (23)

## Search This Blog

Search

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Anthony Rudolf's Pictures to Prove It

Paula Rego metamorphosises Anthony Rudolf in an exhibition at the Ben Uri Gallery

Our lives are shaped by trinkets, trips, memorabilia, parties and passings. For over two decades Anthony Rudolf accumulated gifts and mementoes from Paula Rego. This personal collection of over 50 works by the artist are currently on show at the Ben Uri Gallery in London until 5 September 2025.



Rego had a life before Rudolf, just as he did before her. Throughout the late 1990s the artist and the writer/translator/publisher built a companionship that would continue until Rego's passing in 2022. More than twenty five years was spent together in and out of her studio. From work, to pleasure, gallery openings, and trips. From the beginning of their relationship Rudolf knew how important and demanding studio hours could be to Rego.

'I tentatively and nervously put it to her that I would be pleased to model for her if this would be of use to her work and at the same time give her pleasure, She flung her arms around me and said she had I thought you would never ask...'(1)

One of the earliest works in the show is *Kneeling* Chair (1996). Rudolf sits at attention in one of those writers' computer chairs that seemed to be everywhere in the 1990s, promising good posture, while working endlessly at a bulky PC. Rudolf poses with hands clasped, body straight, gaze to the side, legs back. Rego follows his forms in pencil as she begins the process of rationalising him two dimensionally. If you flip through any of Rego's catalogues, Rudolf can be

found in series after series. Sometimes as a main starring role, sometimes as best supporting actor. Always close to the artist's stage. The first definitive series of the two working together was pictures related to the novel *The Crime of* Father Amaro by Eça de Quierós from 1997-8. The pictures had Rudolf playing the adulterous and troublesome priest, in various poses, in states of dress and undress. In one composition, adorned in a luxurious bathrobe, he is oddly posed over and behind a crimson armchair. This grand scaled pastel can be found on the lower level of the show. A photograph upstairs shows the artist posing with an unfinished work from the Amaro series where Rudolf's figure is centred in the still under construction composition. His feet and legs gigantic with foreshortening. Everything blank around him to be filled with four female figures that were all possibly posed for by Rego's long time model and assistant Lila Nunes.

'He's very angular, with long feet and forearms. I can get him quickly, and I can draw him over and over again like I can Lila. But he doesn't change like she does because I can't identify with him as I can with her, can't play the same games.' (2)

Once asked by writer Marina Warner to respond to Ovid's *Metamorphosis* for an exhibition, Rego winced. She loathed the idea of all those Gods up to nonsense. A fellow curator, Fiona Bradley, suggested Kafka's Metamorphosis as a solution. A light went on for Rego. The tale of a man's bodily transformation from human to insect after a night's sleep is a story of embarrassment. Waking up immobile in bed on his back, horrified by his situation, petrified that his family will find out. On top of this he is nervous he will be late to work. The parents denounce their son, ashamed of his horrific state. While his sister sickened by his condition has pity on her sibling, throwing scraps of food into his bedroom.

Anyone who has ever seen a bug on its back knows the helplessness that exudes in that moment. Rego devised a pose to literally harness the dangling wiry nature of bug-ness by placing Rudolf on his back with constructed pulleys and ropes to hold his ankles and wrists in aerial positions for the duration of posing. 'He was like a prisoner', said Rego, 'He had to be naked because he was a beetle.' (3)



Four versions exist by Rego confronting Kafka's tale – two studies and two solidified versions. The ropes were left out so everything dangles. The first version has Rudolf's body going from feet, torso, hands, head, in a room of severe Italian perspective. With an array of food scraps thrown to the floor referencing the sister's charity from the tale. The exhibited *Metamorphosis* study presents the second version where the body and pose is turned the other way completely. Resting his lower limbs on an armchair, twisted hands are placed cupped to his chest. The tones of the face are pushed back and darkened, it is more the neck down that Rego wants us to digest and take in.

Rego seems to realize not just how incredible Rudolf's limbs are in length but also the deep cavity that his ribs could create from a reclining pose. His trunk down seems to be like a water slide from ribs to the groin. The torso and softness of the shallow belly create a swooping motion which she grasps in pastel. It is the most naked male flesh Rego had or will show in her oeuvre, and it wins. There is tenderness here, but there is something raw underneath that brings a strong whiff of the Spanish master Jusepe de Ribera, the true inventor of body horror in painting.



This whole process is alluded to in a celebratory drawing displayed upstairs called Writing Yes, Reading No. Here Rudolf is shown typing away at his computer screen with pleasure with one of Rego's abortion series pictures is mischievously displayed on the screen. Books overflow everywhere like ocean waves. While the picture is predominately ink, flashes of colour come alive on objects on the shelf and the yellow towel that clads his body. While under his work desk a huge insect hides in the shadow, approaching or leaving the writers bare legs. Look carefully or you'll miss it.

There have been many exhibitions of Rego's work over the past few years. With many more to come where curators plead angles and theories. These are all valid but at times things are lost or repressed. This show is not presented in an ivory tower of art but has more heart and charm than most. The book lined walls of the gallery's lower level makes the exhibition feel like a place of visual study. In a sense Rego has curated this exhibition herself for her beloved, with Rudolf ready to share its power. For anyone who has ever met her the show brings back the wide eyed, smart, unflinchable Rego as she truly was. The sensations are real and human.

Michael Ajerman July 2025

> 'The Anthony Rudolf Collection – Works Gifted to him by Paula Rego' Ben Uri Gallery, London NW8 Until 5 September 2025

3: 'Paula Rego - Metamorphosis', Web of Stories - Life Stories of Remarkable People (YouTube

Channel)

1: Anthony Rudolf, The Anthony Rudolf Collection: Ben Uri Gallery Guide (2025)

2: Catherine Lampert, 'Paula Rego Obedience and Defiance' (2019), p39

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