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The Psychosexual World of Carol Rama Still Shocks

By JASON FARAGO MAY 11, 2017



"Spazio anche più che tempo" (1970) is part of "Carol Rama: Antibodies," at the New Museum.
Linda Rosier for The New York Times

"If I really am so good," said the fearless and licentious Italian artist Carol Rama in 1983, "then I don't get why I had to starve so long, even if I am a woman." Her first show, in 1945, was shuttered by the Turin police before it even opened, and for decades after, her erotic watercolors and rubber-slicked abstractions were appreciated by only a few. Some great artists wait their whole lives for recognition. Some female artists have to wait even longer.

Rama, a self-taught maverick, died two years ago at the age of 97. She at least enjoyed the fruits of success late in life: She was awarded the Golden Lion at the 2003 Venice Biennale, and European institutions began to mount retrospectives in her ninth decade. At last, if posthumously, she's getting the full New York treatment, with "Carol Rama: Antibodies," a large and illuminating tour of 60 years of Rama's unsettling art, at the [New Museum](#). (A smaller exhibition, drawn from her archive, [opened this week in Venice](#), alongside the Biennale.)



"Repose III" by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye in the exhibition "Under-Song for a Cipher."
Linda Rosier for The New York Times

With more than 150 works — hung a little too tightly for comfort, but satiating all the same — the New Museum's show may shock some viewers, and Rama would no doubt be delighted if she could see a new generation's reactions to her paintings and assemblages of masturbators, bike tires and cows' udders. But the sex is just the start: This is a show that will take you to the edge of madness, and will force you to acknowledge the fine line between genius and lunacy. It will also force you to reckon with the artistic significance of gender and to consider just how much Rama's womanhood informed the frenzy that fired her art. This show anchors the New Museum's third season in recent years devoted to women, and "Antibodies" will surely color your views of two concurrent exhibitions, one very strong and one off-target, by younger female artists.

Rama, born in 1918, made her most scandalous works at the start of her career: blotchy, mysterious watercolors of nude figures behaving very badly, as well as disembodied limbs and mouths. As early as 1940, under a Fascist government, the young Rama painted women in bed wearing nothing but high heels and golden crowns, and went out of her way to emphasize their sex organs. In most cases she depicted these women upright, flattened out into simple two-dimensional totems, and relied on color — especially runny reds and pinks, which stain the paper like blood — to provide the jolts. Frequently the women stick out their tongues, in acts of seduction or, more likely, defiance. One figure here, painted at the height of the war, is preparing to fellate two men, each equipped with multiple members. Another, eyes bulging and tongue wagging, fumes as a snake emerges from her private parts: Is she copulating with the serpent or giving birth to it?

You can trace the extremity of these early works to the artist's mother, who was committed to a psychiatric institution when Rama was a child. Rama often visited the asylum, where she witnessed electroshock therapy, and numerous watercolors from the 1940s depict nude women in states of confinement — trapped in a narrow wheelchair, perhaps, or tied down to a surgical bed. Though restrained, the women do not lack independence, and they wag their tongues as defiantly as ever. Insanity, fury, irrepressible passion: These risky paintings were not just assaults on Fascism but also expressions of uncontrollable femininity that roiled a patriarchal Italy.



Dozens of dolls on shelves from Costco dominate this work by Kaari Upson in her exhibition "Good thing you are not alone." Maris Hutchinson/EPW Studio, New Museum, New York

If the troubles of Rama's mother informed her psychosexual discoveries, those of her father were no less formative. He owned a bicycle factory, but it went bankrupt, and he killed himself in 1942. Rama, after the early watercolors and a postwar period of rather negligible Informel painting, began to create dark abstract panels from which she hung sliced, deflated strips of rubber tires. They hang like abject bodies, squashed and subdued, though their detumescent forms also have a sexual connotation that's hard to miss.

Rama returned to figurative works in her later years, when she made even more literal the overlapping of bodies and contraptions. She redeployed engineering diagrams as canvases on which she painted angels and lovers, tongues lapping the air as they float amid pistons and valves.

Her strangest series was inspired by the outbreak of mad cow disease in Britain in the mid-1990s, and consists of rounded spots of leather and rubber fashioned onto mail sacks. The ovoid forms, in beige, puce and black, recall human breasts as much as cows' udders or sex organs, and for Rama, anyway, sexual readings were never to be evaded. Around the time of the mad cow works, an interviewer asked her to imagine the reaction to her art from five viewers of different national backgrounds. Rama, then almost 80, had a particular theory about transcending cultural differences — she'd ignore the viewers' artistic tastes and sleep with all five of them "because instinct and pleasure are universal."



Carol Rama's "Eroica II" (2001). Linda Rosier for The New York Times

Upstairs from the Rama retrospective are two eagerly awaited shows. The better one is by [Kaari Upson](#), a live wire of an artist from Los Angeles, whose sculptures and videos share some of Rama's themes: bodies in extreme states, family inheritances and the insights that can come from lifelong obsessions.

Ms. Upson, whose work is also on view in this year's Whitney Biennial, is best known for her casts of couches and beds, rendered in parti-colored urethane and drooping from the wall like Rama's rubber tires. The casts form part of a complex array of artworks in which houses take on the lives of the people who occupy them, and psychological and emotional dramas are expressed through objects and built spaces. Along with a wonderfully creepy installation of dozens of dolls, resembling the artist's mother and arrayed on shelves straight out of Costco, Ms. Upson is also showing a dementedly forceful video in which the artist inspects a number of Las Vegas tract houses, appraising their value as she jams her body under the kitchen cabinets. That Ms. Upson appears in the video dressed up like the dolls — that is, like her mother — is only one of the many disturbances in this psychological hall of mirrors.

Less convincing is a new exhibition by the British artist [Lynette Yiadom-Boakye](#), who presents a rushed and feeble new suite of oil paintings that continues her project of fictionalized portraiture. The artist's untidy paintings of black dancers and dandies are inventions of hers, rather than true likenesses of individuals, and their wet brush strokes and cold tones recall the portraits of British modernists like Duncan Grant or Gwen John. Yet even more than usual, Ms. Yiadom-Boakye paints so hastily that she undoes her own best efforts. Backgrounds are often so light that you can see the weave of the linen underneath; faces are reworked carelessly, and the edges between the figures and backgrounds become scumbled. All but one of the 17 paintings here are from 2017, and her insistence on painting each work in a single day is not serving her well.

Perhaps Rama, and Ms. Upson too, have a lesson to impart. Ms. Yiadom-Boakye produced all the works here specifically for the New Museum, whereas Rama, the Italian master, and Ms. Upson, the Los Angeles prodigy, think across years, even decades. It's a wonderful thing to make an exhibition, but often the greatest insights come haphazardly, discursively, through the slow and unpredictable invention of the studio.

Carol Rama: Antibodies

Kaari Upson: Good Thing You Are Not Alone

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Under-Song for a Cipher

Through early September at the New Museum; newmuseum.org.