

Art in America

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Carol Rama:
Appassionata, 1943,
watercolor on paper,
9 by 7½ inches; at
the Musée d'Art
Moderne de la Ville
de Paris.

CAROL RAMA Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

“The Passion According to Carol Rama” is the largest show to date of the Italian artist, with over 200 paintings, watercolors, prints and sculptures made between 1936 and 2005. The exhibition, which opened last year in Barcelona, will finish its European tour in 2017 in Turin, where Rama was born in 1918 and where she has lived ever since. Her reputation was mostly local but grew in 1980 when curator Lea Vergine included her in an important show of women artists in Milan. She was nearing 80 when she had her first significant solo shows outside Italy.

The Paris exhibition opens with watercolors and oil paintings made in Fascist Italy during wartime. They are rarely over 15 inches in their larger dimension, but we remember them bigger. Rama renders the lonely singularity of desire like no one else. In *Marta* (1940), we see a corpulent figure from behind; she’s squatting and naked but for black shoes. Her head is turned to the right and sprouts wildflowers. She sticks out her tongue and her hairy asshole extrudes a pile of shit that looks like soft-serve ice cream. In *Appassionata* (1943), a full-breasted girl in the foreground, seemingly seated, looks directly at us, tongue extended. A naked man stands to her right, another behind her. Their tumescent penises are multiplied so they resemble two fat bundles of reddish asparagus and frame her neck. Wall texts of Rama’s frank remarks, excerpted from interviews, run through the show. She said that she loves the penis because it has procured her so much pleasure, and the tongue because it’s the only organ that doesn’t age.

Such explicit works appeared in Rama’s first exhibition in 1945, in a Turin gallery. The show was censored, and some pieces may have been destroyed. The artist never again treated erotic drives so directly. Her trauma is history’s loss: these radically sexed images keep company with those of Schiele, Bourgeois, Lassnig, Spero and Clemente.

Rama has a predilection for red, black and brown, the last of which she asserts to love for its evocation of shit. Rama attributes her move to geometric abstraction in the early ’50s to her need for wider acceptance and formal discipline. Two magnificent textile hangings from that period stand out: *Composizione* (1953)—at 5 feet square, a large format for her—which features different-size black rectangles floating over a luscious wine-red ground; and *Copriiletto*

(1959), where two elongated black shapes, evoking beds crudely rendered in silhouette, are sewn on yellow and natural cotton. It once covered Rama’s bed.

By the late ’50s the artist’s unruliness and drive for physicality had chewed through geometry. She rarely let paint work its magic in peace. In the small-to-medium-scale pieces that followed, on canvas or paper, splashes and blotches of various paints, from watercolors to metallic lacquers, coexist with odd elements, such as metal springs, animal fur and syringes. In *Bricolage* (1967), a black ground sports a large smear of semenlike resin, which in turn fixes two small clusters of artificial eyes with lashes. Many of the pieces from the ’60s exude an angry vitality.

In 1970, Rama began using rubber, mostly from bicycle inner tubes. The tubes were associated with her father, who manufactured bicycle parts; the failure of his business in the ’20s provoked a downward spiral ending with his suicide in 1942. Rama often sliced and flattened the tubes, keeping air valves and patches intact, and glued the rubber strips on canvas. She made a painter’s use of the surprising tonal range of the rubber and of its ambiguous texture, sometimes resembling dried skin.

In the 40-inch-square *Autotrattatrice n. 10* (1970), Rama collaged four rippled sections of inner tubes from car tires to fashion a vertical shape that fills the white canvas’s left half. The work is both very direct, with little transformation of the material, and strongly evocative of a truncated female silhouette, with the valve stems becoming nipples.

From the ’80s onward, Rama’s subversive sense of humor is increasingly evident. She often worked on found, printed papers, including pages of architectural plans, geometric treatises and mechanical drawings. She used the papers as a spatial matrix, which she bawdily populated with figures and beasts from mythology and fairy tales. From the late ’90s, there are etchings of genitals that still pulse with carnal joy.

Rama worked for seven decades despite little institutional support and restricted means. Her early watercolors are meteoric, and a number of the subsequent works lodge in memory. Rama said that she painted “out of passion . . . and out of rage essentially.” Yes, we said, yes.

—Wade Saunders and Anne Rochette