

FAMILY PORTRAIT THE FATHER FIGURE IN THE WORK OF HELENA ALMEIDA

RETRATO DE FAMÍLIA A FIGURA DO PAI NA OBRA DE HELENA ALMEIDA

Maria Luísa Coelho*
marialuisa.coelho@mercat.co.uk

Helena Almeida (1934–2018) é uma das mais interessantes e relevantes artistas no contexto da arte portuguesa contemporânea, tendo produzido uma obra de grande integridade e consistência, em que o corpo da artista e os processos de autorrepresentação (sempre em relação ambivalente, subversiva e transgressora com essa mesma tradição artística) ocuparam um lugar central. Tomando como ponto de partida para este artigo a obra *Retrato de família* (1979), pretende-se explorar a relação mantida por Helena Almeida com o familiar, sendo esta expressão aqui entendida nas suas implicações pessoais, artísticas e nacionais, uma vez que todas estas dimensões não podem ser dissociadas quando analisamos o trabalho desta artista.

Palavras-chave: Helena Almeida. Leopoldo de Almeida. Família. Estado Novo. Artistas portuguesas.

Helena Almeida (1934–2018) is one of the most interesting and relevant artists in Portuguese contemporary art, having produced an oeuvre of great integrity and consistency, in which the body of the artist and processes of self-representation (always in an ambivalent, subversive and transgressive relation with that same art tradition) took centre stage. Taking the work *Family portrait* (1979) as its starting point, this article will explore the relation Almeida had with the familiar, be it in personal, artistic or national terms, as all these dimensions of the concept cannot be dissociated from each other when we look at this artist's oeuvre.

Keywords: Helena Almeida. Leopoldo de Almeida. Father. Family. Estado Novo. Portuguese women artists.

•

* Center for Humanistic Studies (CEHUM) / University of Minho, Braga, Portugal and Language Centre/ Oxford University, Oxford, Great Britain. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2854-3421>

1. Introdução

Helena Almeida (1934–2018) is an artist whose career spanned the second half of the twentieth-century (her first exhibition happened in 1967, at Buchholz Gallery, in Lisbon) and, as such, witnessed and reflected the dramatic changes that would define Portuguese society of the period. Nonetheless, she produced an oeuvre of great integrity and consistency, in which processes of self-representation took centre stage (albeit in an ambivalent and subversive relation with the tradition of that genre), by means of a technique that originated from painting or drawing only to dialogue with other mediums: photography in particular, but also sculpture, dance, performance and cinema. In the words of Cornelia Butler, which accompanied a long-due survey of Almeida's work at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea/ Casa de Serralves, in 2015-2016: “[h]er project, and the source of much of what is perplexing about the status of her mature works, is nothing short of an embodied practice of drawing and painting that uses photography as its primary mode of delivery” (2015, p. 83). The formal hybridism suggested by Butler and the attention given to the body of the artist, who so often represented herself whilst paradoxically hiding from our gaze¹, places Almeida's work in dialogue with the main artistic movements emerging in the international art scene of the period, as well as with feminist-oriented art practices, which in itself corroborates the transnational reach of her work and the international projection she has had in recent years.² Despite such increasingly public and international visibility and an acknowledged radicality, this article will begin from a contrasting starting point, as it will seek to address Almeida's work through the prism of its familiar dimensions and in its relation with the family.

In his essay “Helena Almeida e o vazio habitado”, Ernesto de Sousa, one of the greatest thinkers of Portuguese contemporary art, comments:

Poderia dizer-se que, pelo menos desde 67-68 (primeiros anos de amadurecimento) a problemática de Helena Almeida, com rara coerência e um rigor claro, tem sido a investigação do centro. Um centro profano, evidentemente: essa problemática só existe desde que a terra perdeu o centro... Desde então se reforçariam outros paradigmas mundanais referentes ao centro ou... à ausência de centro. A família, por exemplo. No caso de Helena Almeida, qualquer análise da sua investigação própria passa indispensavelmente por uma referência mais ou menos profunda às respectivas estruturas familiares, que a ligam estreitamente à cultura portuguesa no que ela tem de mais estável, uma certa continuidade, e mais consistente, um tecido de ausências. Um estudo aprofundado e apaixonante destas relações exigiria a consideração das *esculturas* de (Mestre) Leopoldo de Almeida, do seu academicismo sincero, e da sua rendição às estereotipias de um sistema e respectiva política do espírito. (Sousa 1998, p. 159)

[One could say that, at least since 1967-68 (the first years of maturity) Helena Almeida's concern, with rare coherence and clear accuracy, has been the study of the centre.

¹ Cf. M. L. Coelho (2017a, 2017b) for further analyses of Almeida's processes of self-representation.

² A wider and more international interest for Almeida's work gained momentum in 2004, when her work was included at the Sydney Biennale and then again in 2005, at the Venice Biennale; both events are major surveys of contemporary art. In 2004 Almeida also won the prestigious BES PHOTO award and had a retrospective of her work at the Centro Cultural de Belém (Lisbon). More recently, she was included in the survey exhibition *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, held at the MOCA and other American art venues, in 2007.

Obviously, a profane centre: such concern only exists since the earth lost its centre... Since then other paradigms related to the centre - or to its absence - would be reinforced. The family, for example. In Helena Almeida's case, any analysis of her own research would undoubtedly consider a more or less extensive reference to relevant family structures, which connect her closely to the stable dimension of Portuguese culture, a certain continuity, and more consistently, a network of absences. A thorough and engaging study of these relations would necessarily have to consider the *sculptures* of (Master) Leopoldo de Almeida, his sincere academicism, and his surrender to the stereotypes of the system and its correlated politics of the spirit]

Sousa's analysis, which serves as the backbone for this article, highlights the ambivalent relation Helena Almeida had with the family, either in personal, artistic or even in national terms, since the term *family* in Sousa's text is both the father, Leopoldo de Almeida, and the Portuguese art tradition. These two elements are intimately related, as Leopoldo de Almeida, *the* sculptor of the Estado Novo³ and the creator of *Padrão dos Descobrimentos*, was a notable representative of the academicism dominant in the Portuguese art system until the 1970s.⁴ It was this *quadro familiar* [family painting], as Sousa also refers to it, thus exploring all the symbolism of the word *quadro* (in the sense of image/ painting but also of framework), that produced in Almeida's work a crisis in expression, in the years 1967–70 (Sousa 1998, p. 160); this, in turn, initially resulted in the production of anti-paintings (clearly visible in those works where shapes abandoned the frames and lay inertly on the floor) and, eventually, in the fusion between the body of the artist and the canvas, a process masterfully accomplished in the primordial moment that is *Tela rosa para vestir* [Pink canvas to wear] (1969). This radical gesture is thus interpreted by Sousa as a consequence of Almeida's interest in destroying the terms through which the *familiar* (in those personal, artistic and cultural connotations) is constructed and understood.

In this context, a work entitled *Retrato de família* [Family portrait] (1979) is central to the argument here brought forward, as it represents a pair of hands, one of which is holding a knife that cuts, from behind, the tracing paper attached to a photographic frame. This photo frame is the sort of object found in the household with portraits of its family members, a detail already suggested by the title given to the work. As a result, the image implicitly connects the artist's violent, transgressive and ultimately all-powerful act with her desire to break with a familiar structure and consequently claim her presence in the visual field, from a marginal and previously invisible position. In *Retrato de família*, the family is acknowledged and simultaneously questioned or even rejected.

³ Portugal experienced a dictatorial regime, also known as Estado Novo [New State], between 1933 and 1974, when the Carnation Revolution put an end to it. This regime, led by António de Oliveira Salazar, maintained a tight civil, religious and military grip to keep one of the poorest, most underdeveloped and illiterate peoples in Europe firmly subjugated.

⁴ The *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* is one of Lisbon's most recognizable public monuments. Set by the river Tagus, it was produced in 1939 by Leopoldo de Almeida, along with another emblematic figure of the period, the architect and cinema director Cottinelli Telmo. Originally created for the Exposition of the Portuguese World, which would open in 1940, the monument partook of the regime's celebration of Portuguese, past as well as present, greatness. A cherished artist during Estado Novo, Leopoldo de Almeida produced intensively during this period and a large portion of his work resulted from public commissions. Cf. E. W. Sapega (2008), for a critical overview of memory sites in the Belem neighbourhood of Lisbon, including the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos*.

2. Family portrait: the artist in the studio

The ambivalence towards the familiar also contaminated the relationship Helena Almeida had with her studio. This was an absolutely central aspect of her artistic practice, as indeed for other contemporary women artists', as suggested by Cornelia Butler: "[f]or many women artists, working from very different cultural positions in both the West and Eastern and Central Europe, the studio was a place of interrogation and rupture" (2015, p. 81). Almeida's studio was a warehouse situated in Campo de Ourique, a Lisbon neighbourhood occupied by artists and writers since at least 1946. In that decade, a glass-roofed complex provided workspace for artists like Leopoldo de Almeida, Pedro Anjos Teixeira and Lázaro Lozano. It was one of those studios that Leopoldo de Almeida bequeathed to his daughter. However, Leopoldo's studio had entered Helena's life way before, since as a child she used to visit her father in that space, where she would also model for him and show him her drawings. The artist recently recalled those primeval days:

Eu posava para o meu pai quando era pequena, desde os 10-11 anos. Quando não tinha aulas, ia para lá. E dava-me imenso prazer posar com os panos... e o silêncio do atelier, o barulho da salamandra; o meu pai a fazer escultura. E o que eu sobretudo aprendi com ele foram as horas de trabalho: o quanto é necessário trabalhar, horas e horas seguidas, em condições que se tem que deixar de sentir o corpo. O corpo não existe e o meu corpo era também como se não existisse. Eu estava ali, parada: era um modelo, não podia ter frio ou calor. (Carlos 2005b, p. 44)

[I used to pose for my father when I was little, since I was 10-11 years old. I used to go there when I did not have school. And I really enjoyed posing with the drapery... and the silence in the studio, the noise of the salamander; my father sculpting. And what I have mainly learned with him were the working hours: how much one needs to work, hour after hour, in conditions in which you have to stop feeling the body. The body does not exist and it was also as if my body did not exist. I was there, standing still: I was a model, I could not be cold or hot]

Almeida's words resonate with her own working method, so strongly conveyed by her oeuvre: ascetic, earnest, exploring the limits/ limitations of the artist's own body and even of pain (pain which, I would claim, is central to the few video works she produced in recent years, as in the case of *A experiência do lugar II* [The experience of place], in which the artist is seen surveying the studio on her knees, or the video created for the exhibition *O outro casal* [The other couple], at Fundação Arpad Szenes–Vieira da Silva, in 2018, which documents the painful preparation of the series *Seduzir* [Seduce], from 2002. Of course, these processes might be traced back to much of the performative art that gained notoriety in the 1970s and that was explored by the likes of Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci and Chris Burden, to name but a few; like them, Almeida conducted an exploration of space which was strongly dramatic and staged. Nevertheless,

her work ethics is, at least, equally indebted to her father, who provided his daughter with an inspiring role model.

Moreover, despite suggesting some nostalgic optimism with which Almeida revisited her childhood, the above words also disclose some ambivalence towards that early work as a model. On the one hand, Almeida seems to express gratitude to her father, who showed her the sacrifices necessary to the accomplishment of artistic creation, as well as the pleasures inherent to the same. On the other hand, she also seems to be aware of the objectifying process through which her body was exposed to the artistic gaze, even mentioning that her body did not exist while she stood still in front of the sculptor. Such ambivalence is relevant, since Almeida's own work offers a stark contrast to this recollection of the absent body of the young model by repeatedly demanding the presence of that same body, which is also represented as an artist's. If, as Isabel Carlos, a long-time follower and expert of Almeida's oeuvre, concludes, Almeida refused the model and being the model of her father's work (*in* Faria 2005), then her artistic practice should also be perceived as a reaction to the objectifying place attributed to the female body by the masculine tradition ultimately personified by Leopoldo de Almeida. Going back to that watershed moment, *Tela rosa para vestir* (1969), in which Almeida, smiling and finally free from the plinth, embodied the canvas and modelled for the camera, might we not also find there the grin that ensued from escaping the limitations of a patriarchal art tradition?

For Griselda Pollock, the power of this patriarchal art tradition and its need to reduce the female body to the objectifying gaze of the male artist is intrinsically connected to the studio: "the privileged space of modern art" (1992, p. 138). In such space, "the artist is canonically male (signalling the fusion of Culture with masculinity); his material is female (the assimilation of nature, matter and femininity)" (*idem*, pp. 138–139). In other words, in this characteristically modernist imagery, the body of the painter and the female body occupy opposite spaces, which are rarely interchangeable, for whilst the masculine body of the painter is active and creative, the female body of the model is passive and objectified. Pollock thus finds in the studio the metaphor for art, a social and sexual hierarchy, showing us that this space is not "the discrete space where art is made" (*idem*, p. 146), but rather:

Part of the signifying system which collectively constitutes the discourse of art. While the spaces of art have specific and local determinants and forms, they are, furthermore, part of a continuum with other economic, social, ideological practices which constitute the social formation as a whole. (Pollock 1992, p. 146)

According to Pollock, then, the studio is not just a physical space, but also an ideological one, and its centrality in artistic production and representation in modern art reflects a process by which social discourses are disseminated and sexual difference, along with the concomitant symbolic value of gender, reiterated. In Foucauldian terms, the studio is part of a system of power, a disciplinary technology that controls the body and shapes it into socially acceptable forms.

Almeida's childhood memories reiterate the modernist canon in that they describe a male sculptor actively working in his studio, where a feminine body, passive and

constrained, is offered to his gaze. The patriarchal implications of this scene are further reinforced by the family relationship existing between the model and the artist. In psychoanalytic theory, the family is a fundamental structure for ascribing gender difference and ultimately reinforcing the patriarchal order. Let's not forget that such patriarchal order is expressed by the Name of the Father (Lacan's *nom/n-du-père*), to whose Law the offspring must obey. In his essay "Femininity" (1933/1991, pp. 145–169), Freud had already explained that the daughter abides to the patriarchal law by assimilating her gender difference. Such process derives from seeing the father as an object of both desire and envy, as well as from identifying with the mother (an identification process perceived by Freud as deeply ambivalent) and, subsequently, accepting a female psychology that gives preference to passive objectives (*idem*, p. 149). In an interview granted to Maria João Seixas, Almeida admitted she had always wanted to become an artist because that's what she saw her father doing and also what her mother admired (Seixas 2004, p. 28). Her disclosure repeats the classic motifs of the psychoanalytic family drama, since it suggests the daughter's envy and her desire for what she lacks – the paternal phallus (the painter's brush) – which is also perceived as what the mother desires.

To sum up, the studio was for Almeida simultaneously an intimate and staged, private and public space, as well as a familiar scene, or picture, that is then slashed by the artist. Working and representing herself as an artist in her father's old studio, she performed a series of subversive moves and undermined the patriarchal art frame(work) as much as the family romance described by psychoanalysis. When she assumed the role of the artist, she transgressed the spatial and gender binaries at the heart of the modernist canon described by Pollock and, in that sense, she created a new space for herself; she did that with great strength, given the weight of an inherently masculine tradition in the context of art production and reception. Furthermore, her transgression was particularly radical given that by occupying the position of both the artist and the model, not only did she reverse the traditional gender roles, but also, she developed new possibilities for visual representation that reject that binary structure and its embodiment.

Pintura habitada [Inhabited painting] (1974) could be said to represent such radical move. Here Almeida presents herself wrapped up in white drapery, like the one she remembers wearing when she used to model for her father and which Ernesto de Sousa (1998, p. 165) also connects to both the intimacy of the bed sheet and the maternal and imperial symbolism of a roman matron; she is standing in front of a bare easel and holds a brush at arm's length; the slabs of paint superimposed to the photographic print suggest she is painting the void in front of the easel. The artist is thus model and painter, object and subject, in an ironic revision of art tradition. Moreover, she is stealing the power/ the phallus (represented by the artist's tools: the brush or the chisel) traditionally conferred to the masculine artist and the father and, as such, does not acquiesce with the passive model attributed to her sex. In a similar reading, Angela Molina (2005, p. 26) contrasts *Pintura habitada* with a rhetoric tradition made of feminine gestures and postures, as if the artist's body had fallen (or set free) from the plinth symbolically represented by Leopoldo de Almeida, just like previously she had liberated herself from the concept of the frame, as suggested by Isabel Carlos (2005b, p. 43), who opposes Helena Almeida's

work to the monumental scale of traditional sculpture, the latter also represented by Leopoldo de Almeida.

Contrary to her father's work, deeply academic and conventional, Helena Almeida created a hybrid art form, in which sculpture still had a place. This art form was radical in its methods and centred on the body – the body of the woman artist, who asserted her presence in the cultural and visual fields. On the other hand, by working in her father's studio, Almeida situated her subversive gesture at the centre of the patriarchal tradition and questioned the stereotypes linked to such working space. In other words, the inherited studio may reflect Almeida's desire to inscribe her art in a predominantly masculine tradition, but the way the artist understood her and her body's presence in that space also demonstrates her determination in appropriating that same art tradition, using it in her own terms.

There are interesting echoes of Almeida's *Pintura habitada* in the practice of another contemporary Portuguese artist, Paula Rego, whose works support the view that an akin conversation around the position occupied by women in the visual field and the art canon cuts across much contemporary art produced by women. In *Joseph's dream* (1990) Rego produced a subversive reading of the Renaissance work *Saint Joseph's dream* (c.1638), by Philippe De Champaigne, refusing the role traditionally attributed to women in visual art, that is, that of model, inspiring muse and object of the male gaze, and representing, alternatively, a woman who takes over the role of the artist; it is this woman who is the master of the house/ the studio and is in charge of the artistic process, controlling and directing the viewer's gaze. By comparison, the male model, defenceless in his sleep and old age, seems incapable of controlling anything, least of all the young, hefty woman painter, and is vulnerable to her gaze. Although it is not a self-portrait strictly speaking, Rego's painting has something of self-representation, as it shows a woman artist in her studio, thus evidencing the intention to move the woman from the object to the subject position. *Joseph's dream* is a good example of what Ana Gabriela Macedo has described as Rego's oblique relationship with tradition (2001, p. 68). This tradition has been culturally formulated in masculine terms and is subverted by Rego, as indeed by Almeida, through appropriation and re-writing strategies, as well as through a parody of high art (*idem*, p. 72). In *Joseph's dream* such parody entails the shift of opposite gendered bodies from their relative positions in the studio of art tradition. The painting thus exemplifies the notion of parody as suggested by Linda Hutcheon, that is, as "imitation characterized by ironic inversion" (1985, p. 6); in other words, a repetition with a difference, producing recognition as much as transgression.

3. Estado Novo, the family and father figures

The patriarchal connotations of Helena Almeida's studio also originate from the authoritarian regime in which the artist worked in the first decades of her career, even more so because it was in this same space that Leopoldo de Almeida produced his commissioned work for Estado Novo. Moreover, Salazar liked to portray himself as the father of the Portuguese people, exploring the correspondence between the dictator and the image of the father as head of the family.

Although Almeida has justified Leopoldo de Almeida's connivance with the regime, referring that he had had no choice and that he had to become involved in the commission circuit in order to survive as an artist and get some financial stability, she, nevertheless, felt the need to distance herself and her work from that political context:

Eu não gostava que o meu pai tivesse de responder àquelas encomendas todas. Gostava que ele fizesse mais o que lhe apetecesse, porque quando fazia o que lhe apetecia, fazia coisas lindas. Talvez por isso eu tenha sido tão radical na minha obra, como se tivesse medo de cair na armadilha das encomendas. (Carlos 2005b, p. 44)

[I did not like that my father had to respond to all those commissions. I would have liked him to make more what he felt like, because, when he made what he felt like, he would make beautiful things. Maybe that's why I was so radical in my work, as if I was afraid of falling into the trap of the commissions]

Works such as *Estudo para dois espaços* [Study for two spaces] (1977), *Ouve-me* [Hear me] (1979) and *A Casa* [The house] (1981) may be said to visually represent that desire to be radical and move away from the authoritarian regime to which Leopoldo de Almeida had succumbed, since the confined and restrained bodies glimpsed in these artworks seem to allude retrospectively to a moment during which civil liberties were limited, the right to freely move and talk denied and oppression was constantly experienced, even at the level of the body. Peggy Phelan also reads the recurrent presence of the body in Almeida's work as a reaction to the lack of freedom experienced in Portugal, in the 1960s:

Quando o regresso à figuração associada com a Arte Pop ocorre em Londres e em Nova Iorque nos anos sessenta, pode muito bem representar um repúdio do expressionismo abstracto nesses locais, como habitualmente é reivindicado. Noutros locais, porém, o regresso à figuração, sobretudo quando inspira o/a artista a utilizar o seu próprio corpo como *medium*, poderá também representar uma resposta à supressão da dignidade humana pela guerra, pela ditadura e/ ou pelo capitalismo agressivo. Para Helena Almeida, as possibilidades da figuração e a noção do corpo como *medium* foram centrais, apesar de não constituírem por si próprias ou em si mesmas qualquer tipo de libertação política ou psicológica imediata. (Phelan 2005, pp. 72–75)

[When the return to figuration associated to Pop Art happens in London and New York in the Sixties, it may well represent a denial of abstract expressionism in those places, as it is usually claimed. However, in other places, the return to figuration, especially when it inspires the artist to employ his/her own body as medium, may also represent an answer to the suppression of human dignity caused by war, the dictatorship and/ or aggressive capitalism. For Helena Almeida, the possibilities offered by figuration and the notion of the body as medium were central, despite not constituting by or in themselves any type of immediate political or psychological liberation]

In such a repressive period, when personal integrity and subjective freedom were constantly under threat and the body was at risk of being crushed and violated by a dominant and brutal power, Almeida's decision to figuratively represent her body acquired a localised and historical significance.

As Vanda Gorjão mentions in her discussion of the feminine and feminist opposition to Estado Novo, the majority of women's groups and committees that were part of the opposition movements of the period demanded civil rights for women, as well

as their social, cultural and economic promotion (2007, p. 119). The authoritarian regime was thus understood and experienced by women as a patriarchal one too. In the words of Paula Rego (voiced in 1993 but referring to her Portuguese youth): “I was being repressed and restrained by my mother, not Salazar. Maybe the authoritarian thing comes right through to the kid, who takes it out on the dog or the doll” (Jaggi 2004, n. p). The situation is hardly surprising, given that during the forty years that lasted Estado Novo, Portuguese women saw their rights and freedom drastically curtailed by an ideology that disguised the differentiation of rights according to gender difference under an apparent enhancement of women’s social position and value (Pimentel 2007, p. 91). This gender inequality flowed down from the top as it was actively promoted by a dictator who:

[C]onsiderava as mulheres não como pessoas individuais, detentoras de direitos, mas sim como seres mitificados, sempre em relação com os homens e como peças fundamentais da família, no seu sentido tradicional e simbólico: *a mesma mulher portuguesa – mãe, esposa, irmã ou filha de todos os que somos em Portugal – fez fixar na história e na arte, com tenacidade bem feminina, ao menos um momento de gratidão* (Oliveira Salazar, 1955). (Vicente 2007, p. 66)⁵

[Considered women not as individuals, holders of rights, but as mythified beings, always in relation to men and as cornerstones to the family, in its traditional and symbolic sense: *the same Portuguese woman – mother, wife, sister or daughter of every single one of us in Portugal – stamped in history and art, with true feminine tenacity, at least a moment of gratitude* (Oliveira Salazar, 1955)]

As Ana Paula Ferreira concludes in regards to this dark period of Portuguese contemporary history:

A diferença do feminino não é simplesmente uma construção cultural, um tabu ou preconceito herdado da tradição mas, efectivamente, assume o estatuto legal de diferença social e política institucionalizada a partir da Constituição de 1933. Esta diferença é disseminada por toda uma gama de práticas simbólicas que interpelam e pretendem consciencializar as mulheres portuguesas acerca da sua missão como esposas-mães, ‘fadas do lar’ reprodutoras da ideologia nacionalista e colonialista da ‘Casa Portuguesa’. (Ferreira 2017, n.p.)⁶

⁵ Cf. a further example of Salazar’s rhetoric, which emphasises the importance of women’s domestic role and sphere of action: “nos lugares em que a mulher casada concorre com o trabalho do homem nas fábricas, nas oficinas, nos escritórios, nas profissões liberais, a instituição da família pela qual nos batemos, como pedra fundamental duma sociedade organizada, ameaça ruína” (*in* Gorjão 2007, p. 66) [in those places where the married woman competes with men’s work, in factories, workshops, offices and liberal professions, the family as an institution we fight for, as a fundamental cornerstone of an organised society, is threatened with ruin].

⁶ The lack of citizenship rights for Portuguese women during the Estado Novo period was further expressed through a series of laws and decrees. Although the regime granted the vote to some women, only after 25 April 1974 did the right to vote become universal. Regarding women’s judicial situation, the celebration of the Concordat between the Holy Church and the Portuguese state in 1940 meant that all the couples married by the Church were no longer allowed to get divorced. Moreover, in 1967 the new Código Civil [the Civil Law] defined the husband as the head of the family, which was represented by him; the couple’s assets, as well as the wife’s, could only be administered by the husband; women were still forced to adopt the husband’s address and unable to leave the country or move deposits without the husband’s consent. As for women’s education, Salazar promoted a specifically feminine education, creating for that effect technical degrees and schools where women could learn how to be nurses, social workers or primary school teachers. For a further analysis of women’s social position during Estado Novo cf. Pimentel (2007, pp. 90–107).

[Feminine difference is not a mere cultural construct, a taboo or a prejudice inherited from tradition but, effectively, it assumes the legal status of institutionalised social and political difference since the Constitution of 1933. This difference is disseminated through a range of symbolic practices that address and are meant to make Portuguese women conscious of their mission as wives-mothers, ‘angels in the house’, reproducers of the nationalist and colonial ideology of ‘The Portuguese home’]

By rejecting the role of domestic goddess, Helena Almeida, who was already married and had children when she first began exhibiting her work in the 1960s, was clearly defying the ideal image of womanhood proposed by Estado Novo, as well as the conservative notion shaping the nuclear family. Such ideal image is compellingly questioned in works such as *A Casa* (1981), in which the juxtaposition of the domestic world invoked by its title and the partially obliterated face of the artist, with black lines rolling down her face, like bloodied ropes, suggests the invisible and violent condition to which many women were subject in those days (Phelan 2005, p. 75).

When considering the private sphere ascribed to women during Estado Novo, Almeida’s art practice offers a stark contrast as it is grounded on an aesthetics of bodily presence through which the artist’s female body is placed at the centre of the artwork and power is granted to woman in the art context and in the public sphere. When Almeida first exhibited her work, in 1967, she was already 33 years old since after three years studying at Faculdade de Belas Artes, in Lisbon, she interrupted her degree in order to focus on her children. These details say a lot about the difficulties of being an artist, and even more so of being a woman artist, in Portugal, during an authoritarian regime that denied equality of rights to women. Almeida’s self-portraits may hence be understood as a way of asserting the artist’s professionalization and her right to be *the artist in the studio*. Moreover, by taking the working space previously occupied by her father, Almeida also implicitly defied the obedience to the symbolic figure of father, master of the house and the family’s breadwinner, and the respect the daughter must display towards his higher social position; both of which were cornerstones of the ideology promoted by Estado Novo, as obedience to and respect for the head of the family mirrored the obedience to and respect for the head of state.

On the other hand, Almeida certainly made the most of her rather privileged, even if somewhat contradictory, position as she not only was the daughter of one of the sculptors most cherished by the regime, but also, she had that “*timbre de uma certa burguesia culta e dada ‘às artes’*” [the crest of a certain bourgeoisie, cultivated and prone to ‘the arts’], as Ernesto de Sousa (1998, p. 160) defined the artist. So, after dedicating four years of her life to her children and family, she returned to university in order to finish her degree and in 1964 she was awarded a grant by Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian (FCG), allowing her to spend a year in Paris, while her husband, artist and architect Artur Rosa, remained in Lisbon with the children. It was a period vividly remembered by Almeida in an interview from 1997 (Carlos 2005a, p. 47): in Paris, free from being the domestic goddess, the dedicated mother and wife, Almeida had time to spend her days in classes and exhibitions, reading and watching films that were certainly censured in Portugal and also meeting people, in particular other Portuguese artists en route through the French capital or living there. These biographical details insert Almeida in a remarkable generation of women artists (in which one must also include Paula Rego, Ana Hatherly and Lourdes Castro, among others), who found ways of overcoming the hurdles encountered by women during the Estado Novo and who excelled in the experimentalism and innovation that would define much of their and their generation’s work. In some cases, as in Almeida’s, financial and family circumstances, as well as the precious support made available by the FCG since 1956, presented these artists with the opportunity to

leave the country and contact with the avant-garde movements that were shaking the foundations of the art establishment in the 1960s and 1970s. In so doing, these women were also defying the regime's policy of *orgulhosamente sós* [proudly alone], in addition to the social role granted to women.

4. Significant others

In 2018, the year of Almeida's untimely death, an exhibition at the Arpad Szenes - Vieira da Silva museum in Lisbon reminded the viewer that Almeida was not just the daughter but also the wife of an artist (not to mention the mother, grandmother and aunt of several artists), with whom she intimately collaborated for more than sixty years.⁷ The title of the exhibition – *Helena Almeida e Artur Rosa. O outro casal* [The other couple] – provided an intended pun, as it evoked the intense partnership we have come to associate with the couple Arpad Szenes/ Maria Helena Vieira da Silva in order to focus on the collaboration developed between Artur Rosa/ Helena Almeida in the latter's oeuvre.⁸ In both cases, the border separating the private and the public spheres, personal and work lives, was porous and contended.

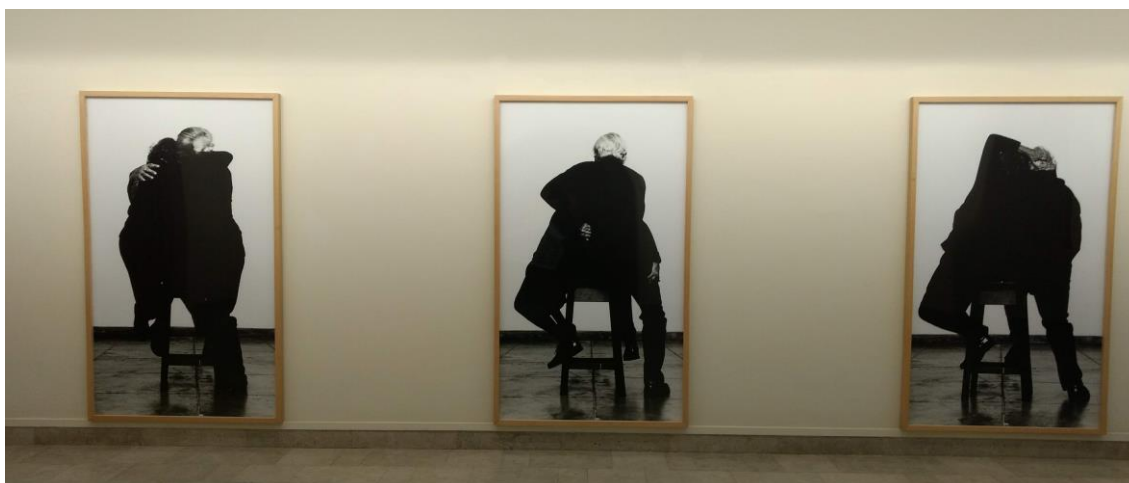


Figure 1. Detail of exhibition *Helena Almeida e Artur Rosa. O outro casal*, Museu Arpad Szenes - Vieira da Silva, 24 May – 09 September 2018. (photo: © Maria Luísa Coelho)

Most of the works on display at this exhibition were quite recent, suggesting that what had previously and mostly remained outside the frame and hidden from the viewer's gaze was now taking centre stage. Lucinda Canelas summarised this aesthetic swerve by saying:

Foi há 40 anos que Artur Rosa, arquiteto e escultor, apareceu pela primeira vez na obra da mulher, a artista plástica Helena Almeida. Ele, que estava sempre lá mas por detrás da

⁷ Helena Almeida was married to architect and artist Artur Rosa. She was also the mother of artist Joana Rosa and aunt to artists Rita Filipe and Rosa Almeida. Joana Rosa's daughter, Branca Couvier, studied drawing at Ar.Co and is a renowned jewellery designer. Helena Almeida's son, Leopoldo de Almeida Rosa, followed in his father's footsteps and became an architect.

⁸ Almeida's exhibition happened simultaneous with *Un couple*, an exhibition that focused on Szenes' representations of Vieira da Silva in his own work.

câmara fotográfica que registava aquelas performances feitas na intimidade do atelier, deixou-se ver. Em 2006 voltou a fazê-lo e dessa vez ficou. (2018, n.p.)⁹

[It was 40 years ago that Artur Rosa, architect and sculptor, was seen for the first time in his wife's work, the artist Helena Almeida. He, who was always there but behind the photographic camera that registered those performances created in the intimacy of the studio, agreed to be seen. In 2006 he did it again and this time he remained]

Nevertheless, Isabel Carlos (*in* Canelas 2018) also warns viewers not to mistake the twofold nature of Almeida's working process with some sort of collaborative artistic duo, a warning reiterated by Rosa (*in* Faria 2005), who has described his participation in Almeida's art practice as "helping with his hands", since he was not really the photographer, but merely someone who triggered the camera shutter.

In an interview from 1997, Almeida justified why it was her husband taking the photographs:

Porque é importante que as fotografias aconteçam no mesmo lugar físico em que eu as pensei e projectei. E como tal tem que ser alguém próximo de mim (...). Para mim não é importante que quem fotografe saiba muito de fotografia; que seja um fotógrafo profissional. A perfeição técnica não é fundamental no meu trabalho. (Carlos 2005b, p. 51).

[Because it is important that the photographs happen in the same physical place where I have thought about and projected them. And as such, it has to be someone close to me (...). For me it's not important that who photographs knows a lot about photography; it doesn't have to be a professional photographer. Technical perfection is not fundamental in my work]

Her comments highlight how the artist is in complete charge of the process through which her body, a female body, becomes visually represented. They also suggest that Rosa's collaboration is the result of a personal relationship, rather than due to his technical skill, a reason iterated by Almeida in a later interview: "[f]oi por acaso que tudo começou. Ele tinha a máquina, estava ao pé de mim. Depois começou a resultar muito bem. É a pessoa com quem eu converso, a quem mostro os desenhos" [it was by chance that everything began. He had the camera and he was just there. Then it worked really well. He is the person whom I talk with, to whom I show the drawings] (Agência Lusa 2008).

Throughout history, women have repeatedly persevered as artists by using what was 'just there'. As a result, a connection between artistic creation and the private and personal spheres is shared by many women's art practices: some well known examples include Mary Kelly's *Post-partum document* (1973–79), Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the kitchen* (1975) and *Feministo. Portrait of the artist as a housewife* (1975–77).¹⁰ In the

⁹ The first time Artur Rosa showed in front of the camera was in the series *Ouve-me* [Listen to me] (1979). After that he only showed up again in 2006, with *O Abraço* [The Hug].

¹⁰ In *Post-partum document* Kelly explored the relationship between mother and child by engaging with her own child's development from the moment he is born. In Rosler's *Semiotic of the kitchen* the artist captured the dullness and oppressive nature of the household through a subversive performance that took place in her own kitchen. As for *Feministo*, it became a postal event occurring around Britain and through which women communicated with each other, using the domestic world of household chores and childrearing as the content and material of their messages.

Portuguese context, we can think about the relation between Paula Rego/ Lila Nunes (the nurse who used to care for Rego's husband, the artist Victor Willing) or the shadow theatres jointly created by Lourdes Castro/ Manuel Zimbro.¹¹ Many of these partnerships refused the image of the artist as genius, offering instead an emphasis on the collective experiences of women or the collaborative production of art. Marsha Meskimmon has mentioned that, since women have had to work with people and spaces available in their sphere of action, domestic time and space have been repeatedly used by these artists in their work (1996, p. 74). Women artists have been playing with the dynamics of interior/ exterior, shuffling the distinctions between inside and outside, domesticity and professionalization, art and craft, public and private spaces; they have therefore created "a concerted political effect in the fact that all of those boundaries are socially regulated in order to keep them in place" (Meskimmon 1996, p. 161). Catherine de Zegher has also addressed contemporary art practices that may be "defined by inclusion, connectivity, conversation, construction, constituting and even healing attitudes" and that, according to the same critic, produce an "aesthetics of relation and reciprocity" (2006, p. 216); these practices, she concluded, owe a lot to the work produced by women artists (*ibidem*).

A familiar context is also integral to Almeida's work and contaminated her art practice, apparently so abstract and averse to biographical revelation: the place and people engaged in her art production are well known to the artist; personal and familial relationships are interwoven with the physical space and the creative process; and the collaborative methodology followed by Almeida contributed to her reinvention of tradition.

Works such as *O abraço* [The hug] (2006) or *Sem título* [Untitled] (2010), which were exhibited at the Arpad Szenes-Vieira da Silva museum, suggested an exhaustion of the formula "lone self-representation", as perceptively pointed by Isabel Carlos (*in* Canelas 2018), whereas Bernardo Pinto de Almeida identified an enormous tension in some of these images (2005, p. 32), which produced an uncanny effect when the camera focused on two bodies joined by the legs and shackled by painful wires, or trying to get closer to each other, in an increasingly convoluted and desperate way, whilst holding onto a small, fragile and shaky stool, in what is literally a balancing act. What these images all had in common, however, was the representation of a subject in relation to another subject, with whom it engaged, no matter how strenuously, and, in those cases where the two black bodies/ shapes became indistinguishable, it merged with.

Rooted in an on-going process of collaboration and visually centred in that artistic marriage, Almeida's recent work suggested a subjective and yet still plural experience, a *transitive* subject who is able to exist *between* two entities. This subversive representation of subjectivity corroborates an understanding of art as put forward by artist, philosopher and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger, who talks about "[a] certain awareness of *a borderspace shared with an intimate stranger* and of co-emergence in difference" (1995, p. 28), as well as by Griselda Pollock, who believes that art can put us in touch with an "uncanny other or with a screen across which seeps something already familiar, curious, intriguing, disturbing" (1996, p. 80). My claim is thus that Almeida and Rosa's intimate

¹¹ In his discussion of Helena Almeida's work and its relation with the avant-garde, Ernesto de Sousa connected the desire to embrace the Other, incorporating it in the self, with several Portuguese artists who were also couples and whose personal relationship sustained that dialogue between the self and an intimate other: Vieira da Silva/ Arpad Szenes, Sarah Afonso/ Almada Negreiros, Ana Vieira/ Eduardo Nery, Helena Almeida/ Artur Rosa (Sousa 1998, p. 160).

collaboration similarly suggested and replicated in the artist's studio that borderspace/ borderlink mentioned by Ettinger and the uncanny other suggested by Pollock and intuited by Pinto de Almeida; her latest works may be said to represent the artist and an intimate stranger co-emerging in the space of visual representation.

5. Conclusion

Art criticism of Helena Almeida's work has rightly emphasised the artist's contribution to the opening up of a cut in the academicism and dearth that characterised Portuguese art of the 1960s. It has also consistently approached her oeuvre through a formalist perspective that, according to Leonor de Oliveira (2019), has defined much of Portuguese art history and criticism and has been averse to exploring art's social and cultural contexts. Whilst still taking into consideration the formal characteristics of Almeida's work, namely the processes intrinsic to her representation of self, other and place, this article sought to explore the social and political implications of those same aspects through an analysis of the artist's relationship with the *family* and the *familiar*. Such change of focus, or perspective, shed new light not only on the role played by Almeida's father in the shaping of his daughter's art practice, but also on the ways such art practice responded to the ideology of Estado Novo, as both the family and the figure of the father were important symbolic pillars of the Portuguese dictatorial regime. By so doing, we were ultimately able to place Helena Almeida's artistic choices within the context of a female subversion of the traditional roles granted to women in general and women artists in particular.

Research grant: This research was made possible by an FCT post-doctoral research grant, ref. SFRH/BDP/112293/2015.

References

- Almeida, B. P. de (2005). Signs of an immovable writing. In M. M. de Almeida, M. Ramos, & J. Ribas (Eds.), *Helena Almeida. My work is my body, my body is my work* (pp. 18–33). Porto: Fundação de Serralves.
- Agência Lusa. (2008, November 19). Antologia de Helena Almeida inaugurada hoje em Madrid. *RTPNotícias*. Retrieved from https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/cultura/antologia-de-helena-almeida-inaugurada-hoje-em-madrid_n167987.
- Butler, C. (2015). Out of the frame: Helena Almeida's inhabited canvas. In M. M. de Almeida, M. Ramos, & J. Ribas (Eds.), *Helena Almeida. My work is my body, my body is my work* (pp. 80–86). Porto: Fundação de Serralves.
- Canelas, L. (2018, May 29). O outro casal, a outra Helena. *Público*. Retrieved from <https://www.publico.pt/2018/05/29/culturaipilon/noticia/o-outro-casal-a-outra-helena-1832378>.
- Carlos, I. (Ed.) (2005a). *Helena Almeida. Dias quasi tranquilos*. Lisbon: Caminho.
- Carlos, I. (Ed.) (2005b). *Intus. Helena Almeida*. Porto: Civilização Editora.
- Coelho, M. L. (2017a). Woman-Body-Paint. Helena Almeida and the visual inscription of sexual difference. *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 57 (1), 55–77. <https://doi.org/doi: 10.3368/lbr.54.1.55>
- Coelho, M. L. (2017b). The eccentric self-portraits of Helena Almeida. In M. J. Blanco & C. Williams (Eds.), *Feminine singular. women growing up through life-writing in the luso-hispanic world* (pp. 311–340). Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Ettinger, B. L. (1995). *The matrixial gaze*. Leeds: Feminist Arts and Histories Network.

- Faria, O. (Dir.). (2005). *Helena Almeida. A segunda casa* [DVD]. Portugal: Ideias e Conteúdos.
- Ferreira, A. P. (2017). A urgência de contar. Casos de mulheres, anos quarenta. *Actas do Sexto Congresso da Associação Internacional de Lusitanistas: Rio de Janeiro, 8 a 13 de agosto de 1999*. Retrieved from <https://lusitanistasail.press/index.php/ailpress/catalog/view/28/43/426-1>.
- Freud S. (1991). *New introductory lectures in psychoanalysis* (Vol. 2). London: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1933).
- Gorjão, V. (2007). Oposição feminina (?), oposição feminista (?) ao Estado Novo. In L. Amâncio, M. Tavares, T. Joaquim, & T. S. de Almeida (Eds.), *O longo caminho das mulheres. Feminismos, 80 anos depois* (pp. 108–123). Lisbon: Dom Quixote.
- Hutcheon, L. (1985). *A theory of parody. The teachings of twentieth-century art forms*. New York: Methuen.
- Jaggi, M. (2004, July 17). Secret Histories. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2004/jul/17/art.art>.
- Macedo, A. G. (2001). Through the looking-glass. Paula Rego's visual rhetoric, an 'aesthetic of danger'. *Textual Practice*, 15 (1), 67–85.
- Meskimmon, M. (1996). *The art of reflection. Women artists' self-portraiture in the twentieth century*. London: Scarlet Press.
- Molina, A. (Ed.). (2005). *Helena Almeida. Aprender a ver/ Learning to see*. Porto: Mimesis.
- Oliveira, L. de (2019). *Portuguese artists in London. Shaping identities in post-war Europe*. New York: Routledge.
- Phelan, P. (2005). Helena Almeida: O Interior de Nós. In I. Carlos (Ed.), *Intus. Helena Almeida* (pp. 62–92). Porto: Civilização Editora.
- Pimentel, I. F. (2007). O Estado Novo, as mulheres e o feminismo. In L. Amâncio, M. Tavares, T. Joaquim, & T. S. de Almeida (Eds.), *O longo caminho das mulheres. Feminismos, 80 anos depois* (pp. 90–107). Lisbon: Dom Quixote.
- Pollock, G. (1992). Painting, feminism, history. In M. Barrett & A. Philips (Eds.), *Destabilising theory. Contemporary feminist debates* (pp. 138–76). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Pollock, G. (1996). Inscriptions in the feminine. In M. C. D. Zegher (Ed.), *Inside the visible. An elliptical traverse of the 20th century art, in, of and from the feminine* (pp. 67–87). Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Sapega, E. W. (2008). Remembering empire/ forgetting the colonies. Accretions of memory and the limits of commemoration in a Lisbon neighbourhood. *History and Memory*, 20 (2), 18–38.
- Seixas, M. J. (2004). Helena Almeida. A sagração do lugar. In M. Valente (Ed.), *BES Photo 2004: Helena Almeida, Nuno Cera, Vitor Pomar, João Tabarra* (pp. 27–33). Lisbon: Fundação Centro Cultural de Belém, Banco Espírito Santo.
- Sousa, E. de (1998). *Ser moderno... em Portugal*. Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim. (Original work published 1977).
- Vicente, A. (2007). O pensamento feminista na primeira metade do século XX e os obstáculos à sua afirmação. In L. Amâncio, M. Tavares, T. Joaquim, & T. S. de Almeida (Eds.), *O longo caminho das mulheres. Feminismos, 80 anos depois* (pp. 59–73). Lisbon: Dom Quixote.
- Wright, E. (Ed.). (1996). *Feminism and psychoanalysis. A critical dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Zegher, C. D. (2006). The inside is the outside. The relational as the feminine space. In C. Armstrong, & C. D. Zegher (Eds.), *Women artists at the millennium* (pp. 189–218). Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

[Submitted on March 16, 2020 and accepted for publication on May 5, 2020]