

Carol Rama

Early Life and Work

Carol Rama was born in 1918 in Turin where she lives today in the house she has occupied for seven decades. Her family's tragedies left a deep mark on her life and work – she began painting from an early age as a means to free herself from fear and anxiety.

The prospect of madness has haunted Rama all her life. When she was twelve years old her mother was taken to a psychiatric clinic where Rama would visit her as a young girl. The experience changed her perception of the world around her. Later, her father's bicycle business collapsed and he filed for bankruptcy, which, according to Carol, drove him to commit suicide.

Rama's work is impregnated with her personal experiences, without being literally autobiographical. Her watercolours and drawings from the 1930s and 40s are populated by figures like her grandmother Carolina, her beloved uncle Edoardo and her father Amabile Rama, as well as real and invented characters such as Dorina or Ivan Hurash. Familiar domestic objects become estranged and uncanny in her early watercolours. They carry the artist's emotional charge.

Rama's work was exhibited for the first time in 1945 and the show was promptly shut down by the police. This was Fascist Italy, a culture that glorified the machine age, the athletic male body and war. Her delicate, transgressive, overtly erotic and feminine images shocked that culture - and their taboo imagery remains disturbing to this day. Yet a dreamlike, poetic atmosphere also pervades these scenes - many of the naked women that feature in them wear delicate crowns of flowers, similar to those her mother made for herself when in the asylum.

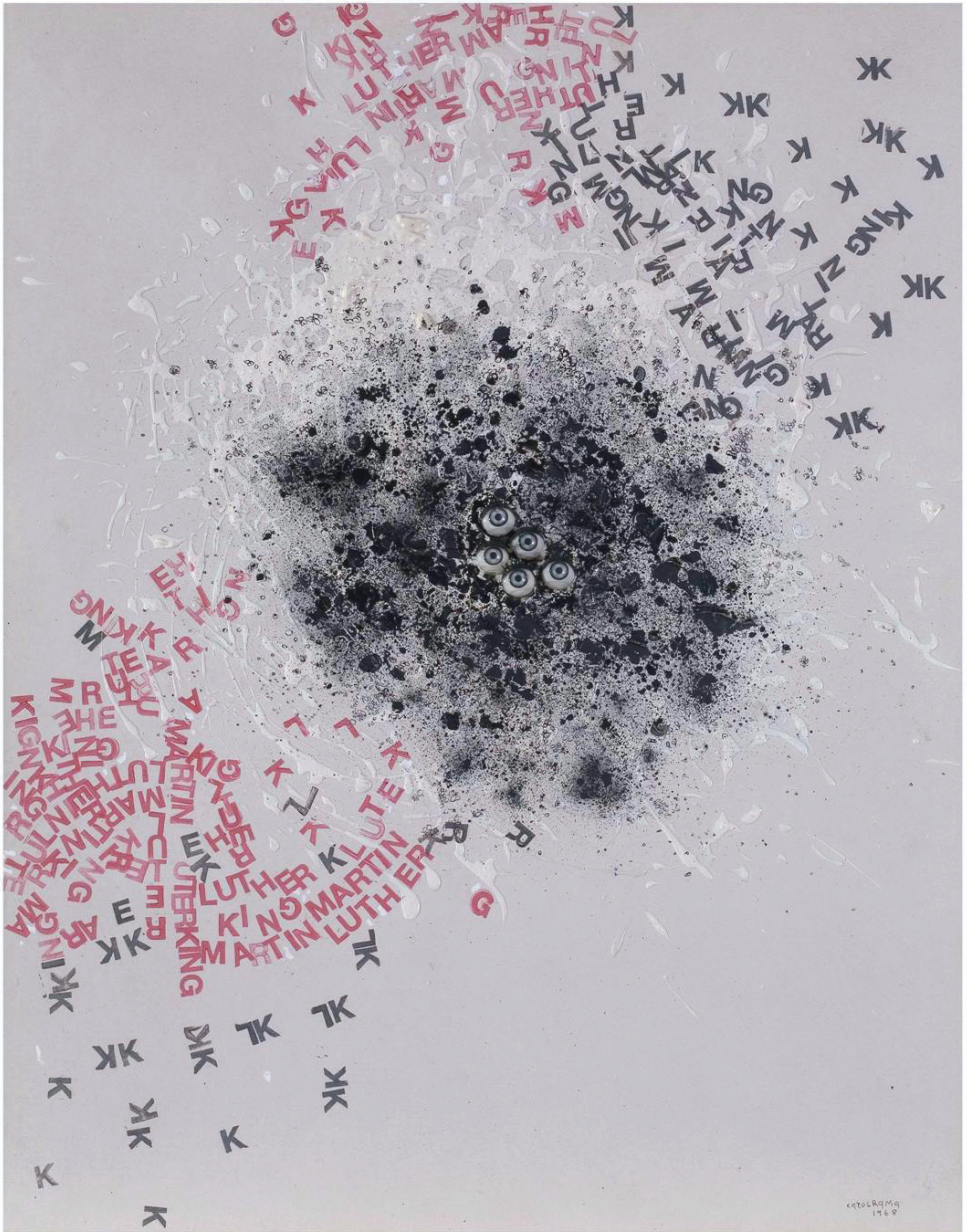


Carol Rama, Opera n.18, 1939
Private Collection. © Archivio Carol Rama, Turin

After the War

After the end of the Second World War, Rama wanted to be recognised as a painter and turned to abstraction, joining MAC, the Movimento Arte Concreta, which was part of the European-wide turn to geometric abstraction in those years. She would not show her early watercolours again for several decades, and changed her signature to Carol Rama instead of her birth name Olga Carol Rama.

After some years of geometric detachment Rama's memories and desires resurfaced as the driving force in her work and she began using unconventional materials in her paintings. The first of these was *Riso nero* (Black Rice) from 1960, which features rice and tar on canvas. Rama's close friend, the Italian poet Edoardo Sanguineti, applied the term *bricolage* to these works, referring to anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's use of the term, which literally means to work in an improvisatory manner with what's to hand. Soon she was applying dolls eyes, animal claws, pieces of wire, hair and syringes onto the surface of paintings. With these works Rama embarked on a new kind of abstraction by bringing together found objects and undefined form. There was a renewed interest in collage and the "readymade" at that time. A readymade is an ordinary object transformed into a work of art, as pioneered by Marcel Duchamp and other artists associated with Dada in the 1910s. In Europe this movement was known as *Nouveau Realism*, and in America as *Neo Dada*. Rama's works of this kind were also very close to *Art Informel* - a French and Italian counterpart of *Abstract Expressionism*. Rama's compatriot, Alberto Burri, composed collage-paintings with swatches of sackcloth and strips of plastic, for example.



Carol Rama, Martin Luther King, 1969
Private Collection © Archivio Carol Rama, Turin

Some of the bricolage works involve language. Some register violent events on the world stage. One made following Martin Luther King's assassination is crowded with his initials, while others feature the chemical formulas underpinning the making of the atomic bomb, and napalm used in the Vietnam War. A work from around that time was called *C'e un altro metodo per finire* (1967), meaning "there is another method to finish" and featured lines from poems by Sanguineti. He in turn wrote a series of poems stimulated by Rama's work. Dialogue with other avant garde artists, writers, poets and architects was an important aspect of Rama's life and art. She was close to and admired Man Ray and Andy Warhol, for example, as well as the eccentric Turinese architect Carlo Mollino, whom she met when she was fifteen, and filmmaker and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini, among many others. She was as striking a figure as them.

In the 70s she embarked on a series of collages on canvas in which she used the inner tubes of bicycle tires as substitutes for stripes of paint. Large, pared down and industrial-looking, the inner tube paintings recall the work of American Minimalists and seem a far cry from her early expressionistic figurative paintings. Some have sculptural appendages – inner tubes suspended from metal fixtures away from their flat surfaces. Yet these works convey a strong, sensual and emotional charge. The rubber strips – in grey, black and tan – have a flesh-like quality. Although highly abstracted, they retain the inevitable reference to her childhood – specifically the memory of her father, and the tragedy that followed the bankruptcy of his bicycle manufacturing business. The repetition of rubber also lends these paintings a fetish-like quality – Rama continuously searched for the erotic in everyday objects.



Carol Rama, Movimento e immobilità di Birnam, 1977
Private Collection © Archivio Carol Rama, Turin

Looking Back

More recently Rama returned to figuration and the motifs that populated her early watercolours have resurfaced. Many of these use architectural plans, engineering diagrams and documents from the land registry as a background for her paintings and drawings. Her lyrical, intensely personal motifs humorously undermine the logic and authority of these materials.

Carol Rama's art spans most of the 20th century. Her work has often adopted or echoed aspects of many of Modern Art's significant movements, Expressionism, Surrealism and Dada before the War, and Art Concret, Art Informel, Nouveau Realism and Minimalism after it. But it has done so highly idiosyncratically. Despite the flux in motifs and forms, her work is consistently charged with her experience of desire, trauma and loss. Experience is bodily in Rama's work, and conveyed from her perspective as a woman at a time when feminine values were subordinated to masculine ones. Her work anticipates some aspects of Feminist art of the 1970s, and so-called Abject Art of the 1980s and 1990s. The latter was concerned with the irreducible psychic reality of embodied experience – a realm that evades and disrupts the symbolic social codes of language and culture.

Although Rama's work has been exhibited extensively in Italy since the 1940s, it was only in the late 1990s that she began gaining significant recognition in the international art world. This culminated when she was awarded the Golden Lion Award for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale in 2003.



This exhibition precedes a large touring retrospective of Carol Rama's work initiated by MACBA in Barcelona and co-produced with the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, the Espoo Museum of Modern Art in Finland and the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Torino (GAM). This smaller selection of work at Nottingham Contemporary, which focuses on the early watercolours, the bricolages, the tyre paintings and the most recent works on diagrams and plans, is presented in close dialogue with Danh Võ's exhibition, and a few of Võ's works are presented amongst Rama's.

In addition, Italian artist Chiara Fumai will present a new performance in homage to Carol Rama within the exhibition on Saturday 19 July, Wednesday 27 August and Sunday 28 September.

Carol Rama and Danh Võ exhibitions are curated by Irene Aristizábal and Alex Farquharson.

For more information

If you have any questions or want to find out more about the exhibition, please ask our friendly Gallery Assistants. They're here to help.

Join us on our Wednesday Walkthroughs led by our staff and guests for more information about selected artworks and the ideas behind the exhibition. Please see our website for details.

If you would like to read more about the exhibition, or watch videos about the artists and artworks, please use our Study, off Gallery 1. Or you can learn more online by visiting the Research and Archive areas of our website.

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Front: Danh Võ, Good Life, 2007
Installation (detail) "Boy By the River" Vinh Long, 1966
Courtesy the artist, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin
Photographer: Nick Ash

Above: Spazio anche più che tempo, 1970
Courtesy of Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin.
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