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Artist Helena Almeida's half-century of work reflects on the changing female body

A retrospective at the Jeu de Paume museum in Paris celebrates works by one of Portugal's greatest contemporary artists, from the 1960s to the present.

BY SARAH MOROZ



DETAIL FROM HELENA ALMEIDA, "PINTURA HABITADA"[INHABITED PAINTING], 1976.

“My work is my body, my body is my work” states artist Helena Almeida, on the cover of a catalogue accompanying her current exhibition. This pendulum mantra underpins the entirety of her stirring, sometimes tongue-in-cheek, oeuvre in which self and expression are entangled.

Born in 1934 in Lisbon — where she still lives and works today, at age 82 — Almeida studied painting, a medium she soon repurposed. The retrospective exhibition “Corpus,” on view at the Jeu de Paume museum in Paris through May 22nd, presents her early deconstructed canvases from the late 1960s to her more recent videos from the 1990s, and an image as recently-made as 2012. She is all-purpose: both the subject of her photographs and the director calling the shots behind them. Her husband has been a close collaborator, but even when he has stepped in to snap images, the work is credited to her.

The span of Almeida's career is heartening to see on multiple levels. "You have the sense that it is an ongoing, stretched-out kind of film," says co-curator João Ribas, Deputy Director at Serralves Foundation for contemporary art in Porto. The cinematographic nature of her series can be reminiscent of Eadweard Muybridge, who became famous for his pioneering work in photographic and animated studies of motion. Moreover, it is wonderful to see a woman age with her work, conveying to the viewer "the experience that is in the body over time," Ribas notes. "It's rare to see a body change over 50 years."



HELENA ALMEIDA, PINTURA HABITADA [INHABITED PAINTING], 1975 ACRYLIC ON PHOTOGRAPH, 46 x 50 CM, COLL. FUNDAÇÃO DE SERRALVES – MUSEU DE ARTE CONTEMPORÂNEA, PORTO PHOTO FILIPE BRAGA © FUNDAÇÃO DE SERRALVES, PORTO

Since the beginning of her career, Almeida has overturned flat forms of expression and invested the limits of painting and photography with unexpected depths. The show opens with her turning canvases into 3-D props. A canvas stretcher with the canvas tugged halfway down, as though undressing, becomes a symbolic shedding of the need for an intermediary platform. A telling 1976 photo — depicting Almeida bearing a white rectangle over a robe and looking meaningfully at the viewer — shows her relinquishing the canvas altogether, as she walks towards the border of the frame. Instead, she uses her own body as her primary tool and means of expression.



Helena Almeida encourages her viewers to see the body as the canvas.

Though there's a freeform feeling to her output, Almeida's poses are always deliberately plotted well ahead of time. "There aren't forty photographs and then she chooses one. These are composed, choreographic images," Ribas explains. The process often starts with preparatory drawings, in which Almeida outlines poses in simple, charming silhouettes. This storyboard-like model is faithfully followed and executed in her studio as stills and videos. These three elements — drawing, still photography, and film — inform each other like a triptych.

When Almeida turned to photography, she transgressively layered paint over stills, playing tricks on perspective and creating multiple layers from imaginary horizons. In the 1975 series "Pintura Habitada," her black-and-white images are beautifully "defaced" with bright blue acrylic paint: literally, in that she paints over her own image, sometimes effacing herself almost completely, and tarnishing any fixed notions of a decisive moment. In "Estudo Para um Enriquecimento Interior" (1977-1978), she dabs blue over her right eye or heaves out a stream of blue from her mouth, agog. "It's as serious as it is funny," Ribas says of the levity in Almeida's multifaceted work. The painted overlay adds a tickle of cartoonish physical comedy, reminiscent of *Harold and the Purple Crayon* — the 1955 children's book by Crockett Johnson in which a young boy draws the world into existence. Here, though, Almeida's take on the rogue paintbrush or pen is imbued with striking artistic and feminist significance — the architect of her own surroundings, displacing confines and making new margins.

Her 2001 series “*Seduzir*” (“seduction or seducing, depending on translation,” Ribas clarifies), which takes up an entire room, is a wonderfully wry sequence about the pitfalls of trying to lure another. The video of her clacking around in heels in her studio while she listens to *Orpheus and Eurydice* is at once peculiar and playful: like a girl playing at being a woman, an unsure creature testing her capacities. The precariousness of her body performing these exercises — cocked hip, duck-footed, or flamingo-limbed with one knee bent — is her “being elegant in this artificial way,” as Ribas describes it. But while she may be awkward-seeming, these physical shapes spotlight the control Almeida has to infuse meaning and purpose into her gestures. Rather, the fumbling, Ribas points out, “highlights how unnatural seduction might actually be.”

Two images, hung mid-exhibition and part of a wider Almeida series on the senses, feel especially — almost chillingly — prescient of present predicaments: photos of Almeida in a veil and Almeida blinded like a hostage, shrouded in black fabrics that declare “*Ouve-Me*” (“Hear Me”). They date from 1979, contemporaneous with the Iranian revolution, but their resonance “is what is haunting the European political imagination at the moment,” Ribas states. The layers of meaning — tempered by religion, misogyny, breach of free expression and rights — make manifest the physical and psychological obstructions women faced, and still do. This plea scrawled in plain text — “Hear Me” — articulates the desire women have to obtain the place they deserve, both in the pantheon of art history and society at large.

Almeida has distanced herself from being deemed a feminist artist. But she, through her art, unequivocally conveys empowering values: utilizing and inhabiting her own body, appropriating space as she pleases, channeling creative agency unbounded. To see these currents embodied in her work is exhilarating, and inspiring.