

**CAROL RAMA**  
**A REBEL OF MODERNITY**  
OCTOBER 11, 2024 – FEBRUARY 2, 2025

**WALL PANELS OF THE EXHIBITION**

**Introduction**

“Everything and nothing is autobiographical,” Carol Rama once said. This statement is perhaps a key to her body of work, which is intimate and highly personal. Made over the course of a long life as an artist, her art examines the major themes of humanity: sexuality, desire, illness, and death. Even as she takes new approaches and makes use of new materials and methods, she always remains true to herself. Rama was born in Turin in 1918, where she died in 2015. She began working as an artist in the mid-1930s, but instead of pursuing a conventional path, she abandoned her studies at the art academy. She became an artist in an art world (not only) dominated by men. In some ways, this made her an outsider, yet it also endowed her with immense freedom, as she herself noted. She knew how to make the best use of this freedom. Her series of erotic watercolors—which made her famous, perhaps even notorious—date to this period. In these works, she abandoned her origins in a middle-class milieu in the conservative city of Turin and in Catholic Italy during a time of Fascism. For a young woman from a respectable background to create such radical and daring works was unheard of at the time. Rama was a trailblazer who deliberately sought to provoke with her choice of subjects.

Eccentric, bold, and uncompromising, Rama created a multifaceted complex of works over a period of seventy years which this exhibition divides into sections. From the 1930s, Rama also created a series of relatively traditional oil paintings alongside her watercolors, many of which were self-portraits. In the early 1950s, Rama painted abstract works. In her constant quest for transformation, she began her *bricolages* in the early 1960s, in which she used objects to add a third dimension to the canvas. These works were superseded in subsequent decades by her minimalist works known as *gomme*, which made use of inner tire tubes. In the end, Rama returned to figuration in the 1980s, once again depicting actual forms.

Rama spotlighted the everyday, the abject, and the obscene. A survey of her work has often been overshadowed by the artist herself—or rather, by the vibrant persona she adopted as a disguise. Her work melds with her dramatic appearance and spectacularly staged studio, which itself can be read as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Yet Rama, far from an isolated outsider, was at the center of a group of like-minded intellectuals.

With her controversial and innovative work, Rama is, moreover, a pioneer in tackling topics and trends picked up decades later by the women’s movement and feminist artists. Today, her work remains more relevant than ever. But Rama is among the exceptional modernist female artists to whom recognition came only late in life—a fate she shared with many fellow women artists. It was only later in life that she was shown internationally and awarded major prizes, such as the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale in 2003. Though her work was often exhibited in Italy, including at earlier editions of the Venice Biennale, she failed to receive the major recognition she deserved. Rama spoke frankly on the belated recognition she received: “I see myself presented there in such an extraordinary way, I was afraid I’d be physically ill. It pissed me off, sure, because if I really am so good, then I don’t get why I had to starve for so long, even if I am a woman.”

## Picture as a Scandal—Watercolors

In a now-legendary series of works, Carol Rama conjures up dramatic scenes on paper with elegant strokes and delicate watercolors. She took it upon herself, a young woman and artist, to say (and paint) the unsayable. The artist once boldly proclaimed that her master was not some painter, but her feel for sin. Her work opens up an entire cosmos of hypersexualized spectacle played out by a libertine cast of characters amid which random objects are found. The obscene and unnoticed take center stage. Many scenes play out in a psychiatric setting. It is a series about freedom and oppression, about societal boundaries and their transgression. According to Rama, these works were created in direct response to formative events in her early life. The artist often offered detailed explanations of these images in interviews, linking them to specific events in her own life. Olga Carolina Rama was born in Turin in 1918, the youngest daughter of Marta and Amabile Rama, in a bourgeois milieu. Her father's business, Carozzeria Amabile Rama, made car parts and provided the family with a comfortable life. However, her mother experienced psychological breakdowns, and so, as a teenager, Rama often stayed at the *I due Pini* psychiatric hospital. Eventually her father went bankrupt and passed away in 1942—according to the artist, he died by suicide.

Her watercolors are dated between 1936 and 1946. An attempt to exhibit them in Turin around 1945 was, again according to Rama, nipped in the bud. The Vatican expressed moral concerns, prompting the police to censor the exhibition for obscenity and put a stop to it before it could even open. In fact, the watercolors did not come to public attention until 1979, when they were shown at Galleria Martano in Turin. Carol Rama grew up in a bourgeois milieu in the conservative city of Turin, in Catholic Italy in the midst of the Fascist era—but she left all of that far behind with these works—*épater le bourgeois!* People wondered how a young woman from a good family could create such extreme, radical images. Nevertheless, the themes of Rama's impressive watercolors place her right at the heart of the avant-garde. Artistic subjectivity is, after all, perhaps the foremost leitmotif of modernism. And the Modernist avant-garde artists had a great affinity with deviance. Transgressing the boundaries of artistic conventions and the social order was tempting not only for Rama, but also for viewers of her works, for whom the nonconformist may serve as a projection surface. For some, her watercolors are a subversion of the Fascist ideology of the 1930s and '40s. Others believe they indicate feminist rebellion. And still others assign them to the category of "outsider art," or even analyze them in the context of nonbinary biopolitics.

## Anti-Portraits

In the late 1930s, she began to work in the traditional medium of oil, producing a group of paintings that are as different from her watercolors as can be imagined. Of these twenty or so oil paintings, quite a few are (self-)portraits. These pictures all have a melancholy, reserved air, and not only in terms of their facial expressions. Many would recognize a certain kinship with Felice Casorati's portraits of women. Rama's friend and patron, Casorati was a master of Neoclassical aesthetics and Turin's most famous painter. He was among the first to appreciate the quality of Rama's work, organizing an exhibition for her at Galleria del Bosco in Turin as early as 1947. He also worked with painterly reduction, but in Rama's portraits, just a few lines form noses and mouths. Her figures appear one-dimensional and almost disembodied, formed of an assemblage of colored patches. These portraits are quite unique. Although far more conventional than much else in her oeuvre, they can in no way be deemed Neoclassical.

While highly reduced facial features are found in a few of her portraits, Rama's other depictions largely free the face from any resemblance to an actual person and instead precipitate an existential crisis. *Sguardo* and *Senza Titolo* (1947), dispense altogether with facial features. The face is a mere flesh-colored oval. In another portrait, *Senza Titolo* from 1944/45, an orange blaze ominously flickers from behind a barely adumbrated figure formed from an accumulation of green

patches. In this way, Rama—a master of iconoclastic processes—stretched the portrait genre to the edge of disintegration, as demonstrated time and again in her work.

### **Abstract Intermezzo**

Carol Rama joined the Movimento Arte Concreta (MAC) in 1953. She said of this decision: “I wanted to become part of a system, a spiritual order. When I joined the MAC in the Fifties, I felt that I had to wean myself off that excess of freedom for which I had been criticized.” MAC was founded by Gillo Dorfles, Bruno Munari, and others in Milan in 1948. There was an outpost in Turin centered around artist and critic Albino Galvano (a friend of Rama’s), which attracted fellow artists including Annibale Biglione, Paola Levi-Montalcini, Adriano Parisot, and Filippo Scroppo. This loose association was united by a vague notion of abstraction. As in Germany, members wished to distance themselves from the Fascist imperative of realism. In Rama’s case, this resulted in rather atypical works in diverse media. In addition to working in oil and on paper, she also made abstract throws and a rug. In her oil painting *La linea di sete* (1954), rhythmically ascending black elements stand out almost like musical notation against a cheerful background in gray, yellow, and ochre, colors typical of the time.

Her experiment of integrating into this group lasted until the beginning of the 1960s. The creative limits such an association imposed did not wholly seem to suit Rama. The sobriety of abstraction and the classic media used did not give such an artist enough liberty. Adapting to a system was not for Rama.

### **Bricolages**

Carol Rama’s continued search for the new led her to begin a new chapter in the early 1960s. The materials used in her previous works had been fairly conventional. Now, she began to open up the flat pictorial space and add objects to the two-dimensional medium of painting. This mixed-media approach was all the rage in the 1960s, with the idea espoused that art in its noble isolation should merged more closely be with everyday life. It was an idea that artists of Nouveau Réalisme and Arte Povera, which emerged somewhat later in Turin, also subscribed to. Rama now began painting using glue, enamel, oils, spray paint, and pastels, and she also used metal shavings, cut-off paint tubes, doll and taxidermy eyes, bicycle inner tubes, and much more. Everyday objects thus found their way into the pictorial space—almost as reflections or echoes of the painted shaving brushes, shoes, and prostheses that had already appeared in watercolor form. The character of the materials she chose was quite varied. Rama used both natural and artificial materials, typical products of the industrial age, delicate little twigs, and medical supplies such as syringes. The larger works were created on canvas, cardboard, or similar solid surfaces, but Rama also often experimented on paper.

These new creations were shown in 1964 at Galleria Stampatori in Turin; Rama’s friends Albino Galvano and Sanguineti contributed to the catalog. Shortly before, *La Pensée sauvage* (The Savage Mind) by Claude Lévi-Strauss had been translated into Italian. The term “savage thinking” here means being open to new things and improvising—the founder of structural anthropology questioned the self-evident belief at the time in the superiority of “rational” Western thinking over forms of “exotically attractive” but supposedly “primitive” thought. Lévi-Strauss developed the term “bricolage” for the improvisational approach of savage thinking. And Sanguineti applied these possibilities for an associative approach and the free-form combining of different things to the work of his friend Rama, thus coining the name for what was arguably one of her most incisive work phases. Rama described her approach as follows: “When I paint, I have no professional skills, no slickness. I have no rules. I have never taken regular courses in painting, nor had an artistic, academic education. This limitation, in the end, has helped me. My technical uncertainty, my not

having a method, has become an aspect of my work. And this has helped me a great deal because with the technique left out of the picture, the idea was always very clear.”

### **Black**

“The colour black will help me die, and I would always paint everything black, it’s a sort of incineration, a marvellous mortal agony, black has always been a piece of theater, a way to paint and also feel rather like a film director,” replies Carol Rama to her friend Corrado Levi in a questionnaire about the importance of different colors for her work. The artist repeatedly works from the blackness of the image. In the 1970s, she would enter a veritable black phase: “Black is a color I adore,” wrote the artist. In *Ricordati di quegli anni e li fa schizzar via* (By remembering this year, you make it disappear, 1967), the impasto application of black paint creates a vortex that converges on a blue circle on which several groups of dolls’ eyes uncannily appear. The austere and simple *Riso Nero* (1960) marks the beginning of this working method. It is a monochrome black picture with grains of rice, as indicated by the title. The icon of abstraction par excellence instantly comes to mind: Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* from 1915. Black was moreover the sacred color of Abstract Expressionists under the sway of Ad Reinhardt and Robert Rauschenberg; its austerity, forcefulness, and radicalism fascinated this men’s circle in the United States in the late 1940s. In her art devoted to the black theme, Rama brought together the sublime absolute of abstraction with the profane. Here, the bizarre dolls’ eyes cause bewilderment, while elsewhere, as in *Riso Nero*, it is the all-over use of the mundane material of rice, a food staple of the Po Valley. The effect is quite humorous, but the title also inevitably evokes *Riso amaro* (Bitter Rice), Giuseppe de Santis’s neo-Realist film from 1949 in which women in the rice fields struggle under harsh working conditions.

### **Gomme**

In the early 1970s, a new focus of interest became apparent in Rama’s work, resulting in strict, almost minimalist compositions. She titled one series *Spazio più che tempo* (Space Even More than Time). In it, she mounts sliced-open bicycle inner tubes or larger car tire tubes on canvas. Form, time, and space are the theme, order and rigor the design principle. But Rama wouldn’t be Rama if she didn’t find a way to undercut the severity of these works just as she did elsewhere: “I used that material because it represented the color of the skin, it was flesh, it was sensual to the touch, it was erotic!” Although these pieces are minimalist compared to almost all her other works from earlier periods, they nevertheless hint at biomorphic forms, so that even these strict compositions have something sensual and sometimes playful about them. Her various materials each bring with them different hues, and serial numbers can sometimes still be read on the flattened rubber tubes. This particular material reflects the industrial city of Turin, a car metropolis shaped by Fiat. Once more, Rama tied the materiality of her works to her own biography: “Tires have given me much joy. Tires remind me of my father, the factory, they remind me of power. But then this is not completely true because they were bicycle tires without much importance.” Sometimes Rama hung a whole bundle of bicycle inner tubes in front of the picture plane, as in *Movimento e Immobilità di Birnam* (1977), an allusion to Birnam Wood, which in Shakespeare’s play heralds the fall of the tyrant Macbeth. Rama’s interest in politics resonates here. And it becomes even more evident in the series *Autorattristatrici*, known as the “napalm pictures,” which were made as a reaction to the Vietnam War, including *Autorattristatrice n. 10* (1970). The title is a neologism made up of *attristatrice*—a mourning woman—and the prefix *auto*, which indicates that the woman is making herself sad. The term *autoritratto* (self-portrait) also echoes in the play on words. The free, almost floating form in this image takes on a horribly oppressive air by calling to mind bodies burnt by napalm. This shows perhaps the darkest side of Rama.

### **Late Figuration**

In 1979, Carol Rama ultimately returned to figuration. At the time, the Transavanguardia current was spreading in Italy. In the wake of Arte Povera, painters such as Francesco Clemente turned back to more conventional media and representational imagery. In her late works, Rama applied the principle of found footage, drawing not on blank paper but on documents, floor plans, and city maps of Turin, or in some cases on blueprints. She covered these rather technical backgrounds with her well-known cast of characters. The crowned female figures from her early watercolors reappear, as do the snakes, naked women, mystical beings, amputated torso, individual body parts, chimeras, winged creatures, and other fantasy figures. At times uncanny, often cryptic and associative, these works form a cabinet of the absurd, perhaps tending towards the occult, which is said to be native to Turin.

The vocabulary is unmistakably Rama's. As in the other phases of her work, links to Rama's biography can be found here as well. This is how she accounts for the frequently recurring frog, which can be seen for instance in *Venezie* from 1983: "When I was about six I slept with a frog that had latched onto me. When my uncle Edoardo explained that it was clinging to me because it was a cold-blooded animal, I cried for a whole day because I thought it was love." Once again, though, this private memory becomes generalized as Rama tries to gain some distance from what is overly personal: "[The plans] can help me invent an erotic, sentimental image, a private image, that is, but one that's not all that closely connected with me."