

Obituary: Marisa Rueda, 1941–2022

Katie Cuddon

The artist and activist Marisa Rueda died in March 2022 at the age of 80 at her home in London.

In Sarah Kent and Jacqueline Morreau's book, *Women's Images of Men*, which followed the iconic 1981 exhibition at the ICA in London of the same name, Rueda's sculptures are remarkable for being fiercely outspoken. In *Man with Hands* (1977), a flayed skin extends into a desperate stretch; in *Gagged Mouth* (1976), the screams from a wide-open mouth are held forth by a taut sheet. An internet search will pull up other (although not enough) images of Rueda's work. Her sculpture *Nothing can frighten the man who hopes for nothing* (1976) is fresh and of the present moment: in it, another ceramic mouth, this time mid-shout, is covered with shiny-wet pink and yellow glaze.



photo by Paulo Gaspar Kosinski

The title, both poetic and blunt, evokes the monomania of certain men in power. As I contemplate this work, the hearing into the Capital Riot in the US is in progress and Boris Johnson's bitter farewell is imminent. This bewailing mouth could very easily have belonged to either man, and to many men alike. Although speaking directly of and to the politics of Argentina at the time of their making, these sculptures have a boldness and energy that makes them timeless. It is said an artist's character can be found first within their work, and by all accounts boldness and energy were in abundance in Rueda herself, too, as well as in her work.

Marisa Rueda was born in Argentina to Spanish immigrant parents in 1941. Her parents met in Argentina and became partners in business as well as love, establishing a textile company in Buenos Aires specialising in the design and manufacture of women's lingerie. Marisa was the eldest of three siblings, and it was her parents' intention that they should all go into the family business. She was sent to a specialist art school so she could develop her



Marisa Rueda, *Nothing can frighten the man who hopes for nothing*, 1976, glazed ceramic, photo by Emma Seery

creative skills and apply them to the design of lingerie upon graduation. Her brother, the middle child, was sent to business school so he could run the company, and her younger sister, Cristina, also became involved in the arts. Rueda eventually graduated from The National School of Fine Arts Prilidiano Pueyrredón in 1960.

Rueda was a woman with spirit, curiosity, enthusiasm and ideals. She had no intention of designing underwear for the rest of her life and she rebelled against this, engaging a lawyer in a fight with her parents to be allowed to leave the family home aged

twenty-five, and not marry but to live alone and pursue a career as an artist. She began specialising in ceramic work and soon established herself as one of Argentina's foremost ceramic artists, winning prizes in two of Buenos Aires's annual ceramic exhibitions, in 1968 and in 1973. She was later awarded a gold medal at the VI Biennial Internationale de Ceramic d'art in Vallauris, France in 1976.

In the early 1970s, Rueda left Argentina for the first time. She had dual Spanish and Argentinian citizenship and so headed for Europe, settling in London where she soon fell in love. When this relationship failed, she returned to Argentina, which in 1976 was in the throes of a military coup. The armed forces had seized political power from the president, Isabel Perón, after growing economic and political instability and had imposed a military dictatorship. There followed a period of widespread human rights crimes, including torture, extrajudicial executions and the imprisonment of thousands without trial. Rueda was advised by friends to leave Argentina, as many others with dual citizenship chose to do at this time. Instead of moving to Spain, as most Argentinian exiles did, Rueda chose to go to London as she had happy memories of the city, describing it as 'accepting of everything and everybody'. Soon after, however, she and other fellow residents of Freston Road in Notting Hill in west London where she lived were threatened with eviction to make way for the building of a factory. Forever seeking greater freedom and autonomy, for comrades as well as herself, she and other residents of the street, including the writer and activist Nicholas Albery, set up the Frestonia Republic, inspired by Freetown Christiania in Copenhagen – and the 1949 film *Passport to Pimlico*. Rueda was appointed Minister for Energy. In 1977, the Frestonian Republic voted in favour of independence from Britain; whilst not quite achieving full autonomy, they did manage to create a living co-operative in negotiation with Notting Hill Housing Trust.

It was at this time that she met her husband Barry Chaplin at an adventure playground where they were both working as facilitators, with Rueda running creative workshops for young people. The couple had a daughter, Cristina, but they divorced in 1993.

In the 1980s, Rueda became involved with a number of feminist arts groups and her work was included in the above-mentioned 1981 exhibition at London's ICA, 'Women's Images of Men': an open submission show selected by members of the British branch of the WAA (Women's Art Alliance), Joyce Agee, Catherine Elwes, Jacqueline Morreau and Patricia Whiteread. The question posed for submitting work for selection for the exhibition was: 'Women, how do you see men?'. Rueda submitted two works representing the barbaric behaviour of men and their reign of terror over her native Argentina at the time. Her involvement in the exhibition cemented her friendship with Jacqueline Morreau, with whom she went on to be involved in two further exhibitions that focused solely, and unusually for the time, on art by women that was concerned with political, religious, patriarchal and judicial power and the way it is abused. These were 'Pandora's Box' at Rochdale Art Gallery in 1984, and 'Power Plays' at the Bluecoat Gallery in Liverpool in 1983. Rueda's work held a central place in these three important exhibitions of art by women in the 1980s, but her expressive, emotionally and politically biting sculptures did not receive the wider recognition they deserved. Perhaps audiences cowered from the images and subjects that her work forced them to confront. There was certainly no apology from Rueda: when in 1982 Argentina and the UK went to war, she joined friends in the exhibition 'At the Crossroads', presenting a tortured victim within a window overlooking the street, and each day, as the Malvinas/Falklands crisis deepened, she added the day's newspaper headlines. The horrors of war 8,000 miles away followed the London public on their daily commute.

In 1986, Rueda was named Artist in Residence for the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. Her residency was completed in 1989 with the unveiling of a large sculpture, *The Man Who Blows the Clouds*, on Shepherd's Bush Green: a large reclining figure with his chin resting on his fist in the midst of a daydream. The sculpture was made from concrete, then painted and embedded with colourful mosaic. It was far from typical of the kind of public sculpture that was favoured in Britain at the time, or even now. Sadly, the work was dismantled by Hammersmith and Fulham Council in 2010 after a long fight that was spearheaded by Rueda and which attracted significant public support. This disappointment marked the beginning of the end of Rueda's time working with sculpture in the traditional sense. Suffering with arthritis meant that she had difficulty manipulating the clay with her hands or working with materials on a large scale. She began working with other media, including textiles, photography and film, to create installations and performances. She was also commissioned to create the illustrations for the book *Feminism for Beginners* (1993) by Susan Watkins. Although drawing was not fundamental to her work, her engagement with the feminist movement was. Teaching provided her with an income, but working with and alongside others to find freedom in creativity was also central to her character and ideals. In the 1990s she established, with

fellow ceramic artist and educator Adele Howitt, a charity, AME: Arts for Movements in Education, teaching arts and crafts to adults with learning disabilities. Community and collaboration continued to be the starting point for much of her work during the 1990s, and subsequently as her medium became more eclectic.

In 2010, the artist and her daughter, Cristina, travelled through remote rural areas of India with a group of artists, creating installations, performances and running workshops with local communities, supported by Art Karavan International. In many places they had no common language, so they would use acting to express themselves. Rueda was in her element: sharing experience and understanding through art in a spontaneous and non-hierarchical way.

In the last few years of her life, Rueda's political energy turned to the climate crisis and she was beginning to formulate ways of using art objects and performance to engage audiences and confront the apathy of our politicians towards the climate crisis. Perhaps this work would come to possess the same fierceness and poignancy of her earlier sculptural work – she was no less passionate about her cause.

When Rueda died in March 2022, she was in the process of planning her move to Spain to be near her daughter, Cristina, and her two grandchildren. Her work had already been moved there and she was planning a period of reflection and archiving of five decades of making, community activism and vision. This project, the consolidation of her life's work, she planned to title 'The Dream'.

Marisa Rueda is survived by her daughter, Cristina Chaplin-Rueda, and her two grandchildren, Jofre and Dylan.

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