



## Helena Almeida: Inside Me

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### Teachers' Pack

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## Background:

Helena Almeida was born in Lisbon in 1934. She completed a Painting degree at the Escola Superior de Belas-Artes in Lisbon. Her work includes painting, drawing, installation, sculpture, sound and video but since the 1970s photography has been a central element. She has been exhibiting regularly around the world since 1960, however this is her first solo UK show. Although Almeida always uses herself as her model, she insists that her images are not self-portraits. In her photographs she assumes positions that she has painstakingly choreographed in order to create complex visual compositions that are about space and line, as well as the relationship between the artist and the image. Sometimes she adds to these compositions by painting directly onto the photographs in bold primary blue or red or adding sculptural 3D elements such as horsehair.

## Key Ideas:

Gesture

Mixed materials

Artistic processes

Communication

Space

Composition

The body

Narrative

Artist and model

## Related artists and films

### Use of materials:

**Lucio Fontana** – exploration of sculptural properties of canvas for example *Spatial Concept 'Waiting'* 1960 – Tate Modern

**Pablo Picasso and George Braque** – collages for example Pablo Picasso *Bottle of Vieux Marc, Glass, Guitar and Newspaper* 1913 Tate Modern

### Films of artist's creating works:

For example Picasso drawing in light and Jackson Pollock painting.



Film: Woody Allen 'The Purple Rose of Cairo' (1985).

### Artist as model: Cindy Sherman



*Untitled Film Still #17* 1978, reprinted 1998 Photograph on paper Tate Modern

## Questions to apply to the artworks

### Physical properties:

What is the object made of? Is it made of more than one material? Can you tell how it was made? What else can you think of that is made of the same material(s)?

How big is the art work? What effect would it have if it was smaller or larger?

### Formal properties:

Is there a particular part of the artwork that you are drawn to look at first? Why do you think that is?

Are there contrasts of light and dark areas of the artwork? How are they arranged?

Does the arrangement of light and shade help to depict recognisable things?

Does it help create a mood? Does it make a pattern?

What shapes can you find in the artwork? What do these shapes remind you of?

Are there any repeated shapes or are any patterns created by them?

What colours can you see in the artwork? What do you associate these colours with? Why do you think the artist has chosen to use them?

Has the artist created something that looks like a 3 dimensional space (like a room seen through a window), has she placed an object against a flat background or does the artwork appear to be completely flat?

Is there a foreground a middleground and a background – what has the artist put in each 'layer'. Why do you think she has done this?

### The artist and the work of art:

Who is the artist? How do you know? Can you guess anything about the artist from looking at the artwork?

Can you see any physical evidence of the artist having made the work? Do you think the artwork is unique or could there be more than one?

How would you categorise the object e.g. is it an artwork, is it a painting, is it a photograph?

### Representation and narrative:

Does the artwork depict things you recognise, such as people, objects or places?

How would you describe these people/objects/places? Do these people/objects/places make you think of certain times/places/emotions?

What is happening in the scene – can you make a story about what might be happening?

What do you think is the subject of the artwork? How does this relate to the title?

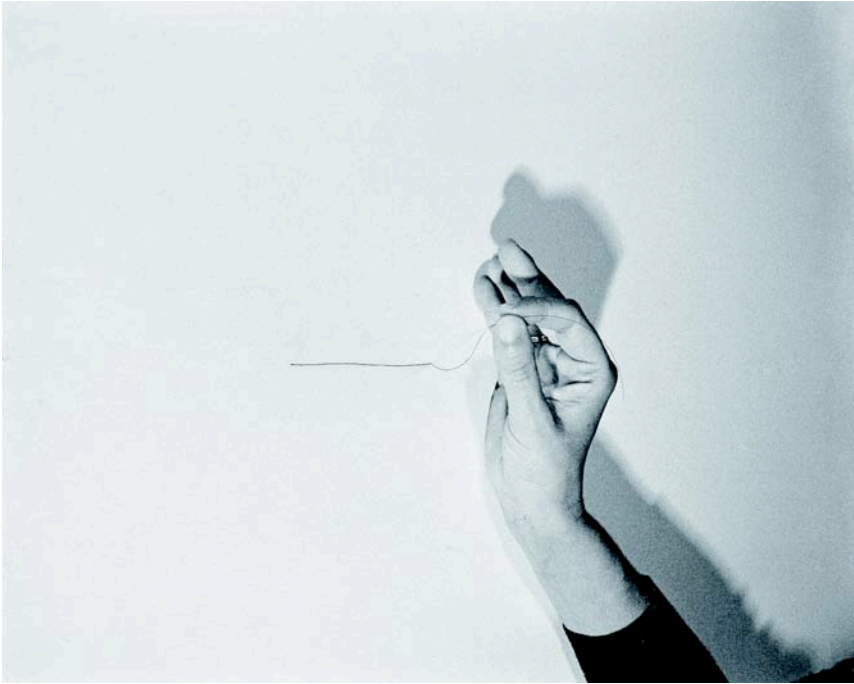
### Personal reactions:

What are your first reactions to the artwork e.g. do you like it, do you think it is sad/happy, does it make you feel relaxed/angry etc? Why does it make you feel like that?

Does anything about the artwork remind you of anything? Why?

## Materials

*'I consider myself a painter. I studied painting and my works, as far as I'm concerned, are paintings. It's my way of painting'* Helena Almeida<sup>1</sup>



Desenho Habitado (Inhabited Drawing) 1977 Black and white photograph with collage of horsehair

What materials are used in this artwork?

How would you categorise it:  
Is it a photograph? A sculpture? A drawing?

Does the title influence how you understand it?

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated all quotes: Helena Almeida *Tela Rosa Para Vestir* (2008) ed. Maria Brancós Barti Madrid:Fundación Telefónica

## Space

*'It was about changing the site of painting with regards to myself: I placed myself within the canvas and the colour placed itself outside of me and the canvas'*

Helena Almeida

*'I remember when I saw Woody Allen's 'The Purple Rose of Cairo', the scene where the female character comes off the screen, I felt as if I could have done that. I thought: that's me. It has to do with the other side, with the looking glass, with my fictions-fixations'* Helena Almeida

Looking at a photograph is usually similar to looking through a closed window into a room:

There is the space through the window, which we can not access

The window itself, which frames and limits what we can see (like the lens of the camera/the print on paper)

And the space that we stand in looking at the image.

Helena Almeida's work plays with these ideas of pictorial space in various ways by:

Adding materials to the surface of the images (e.g. Desenho Habitado 1975)

Appearing to 'reach out' from the photographs (e.g. Pintura Habitada 1975)

Using reflections to allow to the viewer to see further into the room in which she is standing (e.g. Dentro de Mim 2000)



Pintura Habitada (Inhabited Painting)  
1976 Acrylic on b&w photograph



Dentro de Mim (Inside Me)  
2000 b&w photograph

*'To live the experience of black was an experience of expansion in an uncontrollable live space. It was as if my inner self had fled to the extremities of my body and finding no further refuge, left, branching out and spreading over an indeterminate exterior'* Helena Almeida

*'We look at the body and see that it ends abruptly at the feet and hands... why do I end there and begin here? Why am I tied to this form, why am I isolated in this way?'* Helena Almeida



Negro Expresso (Thick Black) 1981 b&w photograph

In this image from the 1980s Almeida is still exploring extending the limits of the body into surrounding space, now however she is not adding materials to the surface of the photograph but using materials within the set up of her studio to manipulate the shape of the body and extend its limits.

What shapes has the artist created in these images from the 1980s? What do they remind you of? Do they relate to the titles?

## Self portraiture and the role of the artist

*'I turn myself into a drawing. My body as a drawing, myself as my own work'*  
Helena Almeida

*'I wasn't going to hire a model when I myself was in the studio. Furthermore, I know what positions I need to place myself in, which postures I should assume, and how to understand the settings. I prepare the setting and position myself in it exactly as I wish and with the expression that I want. But it's not me. It's as though I were another person'* Helena Almeida

*'The image of my body is not an image. I'm not producing a spectacle. I'm making a painting'* Helena Almeida

Helena Almeida always uses herself as her 'model', although the viewer can rarely make out an unobstructed figure. She plans the photographs in detail (her pose, the composition etc), in order that the body becomes almost an abstract form. Her husband, Artur Rosa, then takes the photograph itself.

Why do you think she has chosen to photograph herself, rather than other people?

Does Helena Almeida give you any 'clues' about who she is from these photographs?

Why do you think she has obstructed/not included her face in many of her photographs?

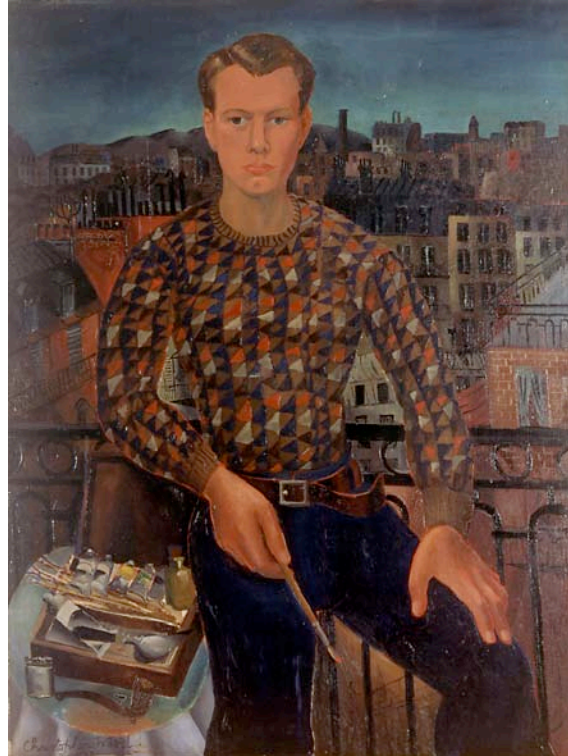
Do you think these images can be called 'self-portraits'?

How do these images compare with other artworks showing female bodies that you can think of?

Do you think it is of any importance that the artist does not press the button that takes the final photograph?



Desenho Habitado (Inhabited Drawing)  
1975 Black and white photograph with  
collage of horsehair



Christopher Wood Self Portrait  
1927 Oil on canvas (Kettle's Yard House)

Compare Helena Almeida's work with the Christopher Wood painting in Kettle's Yard House – both are images of artists with their tools.

What are the similarities/differences?

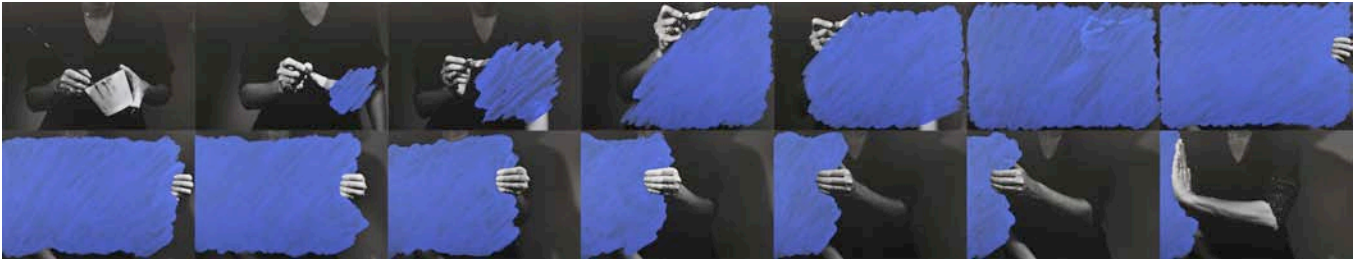
How do we know these people are artists?

What are they doing?

How are they looking at the viewer?

What spaces are they in?

## Narrative



Pintura Habitada (Inhabited Painting) 1976 Acrylic on b&w photographs



Pintura Habitada (Inhabited Painting) 1976 b&w photographs



Estudo para um Enriquecimento Interior (Study for Inner Improvement) (4 of 6 in series) 1977 Acrylic on b&w photographs

These works are made from a series of images, which can be read together as narrative sequences.

What other things can you think of that use series of images to tell stories?

Draw a series of pictures, without words, that tell a story.



In these series of images the artist explores the relationship between herself in the photograph and the artworks themselves: she walks out from behind the canvas and is wearing a canvas, becoming the painting; she appears to eat or breathe in the paint on the surface of the image; and paints a surface between herself and the viewer before sliding it away.

What do you think the Helena Almeida is trying to communicate about the relationship between the artist and the artwork?

Do we get any clues from the titles that these works have?

## Communication



Ouve-Me (Hear Me) 1978 b&w photographs

The works titled 'Ouve-Me' use the statement 'Hear Me' as well as fabric, hair and the mouth to make visual the idea of speech. However, they contain no words, so they do not communicate an idea in language.

Why do you think the artwork above is called 'Hear Me' if it contains no sound and no language?

Can you imagine what the person in the pictures might be saying? Why do you think that?

Who do you think the statement 'Hear Me' is addressed to? How does this influence what you think this work means?

## Photographic composition

*'Its just like in painting, you can create an even background and put the figure against it, or you can frame the figure inside an interior space or inside a landscape. I felt more and more the need of a wall, a floor'* Helena Almeida

*'What interests me is always the same thing: space... But what I want to work on is emotions. They constitute different ways of telling a story'* Helena Almeida

*'I always make drawings of what I want to photograph... the photograph is the end of the work, like a champagne cork popping out. But behind it is a great deal of work'* Helena Almeida



Dentro de Mim (Inside Me) 1998 b&w photograph



A Onda (The Wave) 1997 b&w photographs

In the 1990s Almeida starts to introduce more room like spaces in her work; you can see the slope of the floor and where it meets the wall as well as the texture of the floor tiles. Unlike her works from the 1970s all the black markings are part of the photographs themselves, not added to the surface afterwards, and these images must have taken careful planning.

Compare *Dentro de Min* 1998 and *Desenho Habitado* 1977 (see page 5)

In each photograph how has Almeida linked the space in the photograph with the space occupied by the viewer?

Compare *A Onda* 1997 and *Inhabited Painting* 1976 (see page 10)

What are the differences in how these series of images have been constructed? How do you think that would have affected how the artist planned making these works?

## Body



Sem Titulo (untitled) 2003 one of four b&w photographs



Seduzir (Seduce) 2002 b&w photograph with acrylic

*Sem Titulo*: In this image the body has become as abstract shape, only identifiable by the hands and feet. Compare the body in these photographs with Henri Gaudier-Breszka's *Seated Woman* (1914) from the Kettle's Yard collection.

What are the similarities and differences between these artworks? What shapes are created by the bodies? What negative shapes are created? What do these shapes remind you of? How would it feel to be assume the pose of the model?

Seduzir:

*'a foot uncovered by a fallen shoe exhibits a blood-like smear of paint. If the hand lifts a bit of the skirt in a "coquette" gesture and the high heeled shoes reinforce it, two aspects disrupt the choreographic intent: the body is a black shape, formless and headless, focusing the onlooker's eyes on the skin of the legs and the feet, and on an unexpected blob that has dyed a hidden part of the body red, and hints at the disguised violence that it, and some games of seduction, may contain'* Maria Almeida Lima<sup>2</sup>

This series of images explores the relationship between the body, the garments we wear and the space we habit. In these images what relationship can you see between the poses Almeida has assumed and the props she has included or the room she is in? Imagine the artwork pictured above without the patch of red paint – what effect does the red have? What do you think it means?

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<sup>2</sup> Helena ALMEIDA 2005, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian - Centro de Arte Moderna José de Azeredo Perdigão.

## Composition Activity

Plan a photograph of your own hands or feet. How are you going to position your hands/feet? What else do you want to be seen in the photograph? What kind of room do you want to be in? Will the photograph be landscape or portrait orientation? Are your hands/feet going to be at the top or bottom and right or left side of the photograph? How much of the area of the photograph do you want your hands/feet to take up? Will the photograph be black and white or colour? How will you light the photograph? Will you be able to hold the camera to take the photograph, will you need to use a timer or will a friend need to take the photograph for you? Draw your plan in the box below:

Portrait

Landscape

