

# Review

ARTS, BOOKS, TELEVISION & RADIO

## Saving Gala Dalí

*Can a new exhibition change the way we think about the Spanish surrealist's "demon bride"?*



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## COVER STORY GALA DALÍ



**IN THE SAME BOAT**  
Salvador and Gala Dalí, c1960; below, Gala in 1938 in an Elsa Schiaparelli hat

## Was Dalí's wife malign – or misunderstood?

*A new exhibition claims that Gala Dalí was not only her husband's ally, she was his equal.* By Benjamin Secher

**I**n June 10 1982, a midnight blue Cadillac sedan threaded its way from Port Lligat, a fishing village on the Catalan coast, to the medieval hamlet of Púbol, 40 miles to the south. At the wheel, setting a stately pace, was Artur Caminada: butler, chauffeur and longtime dogbody of the 78-year-old surrealist master Salvador Dalí. In the back – her delicate shoulders gripped by the doughty nurse beside her, a leopard skin cushion propped behind her back – was the artist's wife, Gala.

The trio travelled in silence. Even the notoriously demanding Gala – a Russian dynamo who for the past 53 years had taken charge of her chaotic husband's affairs, masterminding his metamorphosis from an unknown young painter into one of the most celebrated and wealthy figures in European art – didn't breathe a word. In fact, she didn't breathe at all. Hours before, at Port Lligat, Gala's 87-year-old heart had failed. Now, in accordance with her dying wishes, her seated corpse was being driven to its final

audience of famous acquaintances, who didn't hesitate to criticise Gala after her death. A year later, the film-maker Luis Buñuel dismissed her in his biography as "a woman I've invariably tried to avoid". To the gallerist Peggy Guggenheim, she was "beautiful, but too artificial to be pleasant". And Coco Chanel, who had enjoyed Gala's loyal custom, said: "since she ate sardines and stuck them in her hair, she stank".

In the 36 years since Gala died – and 29 since a heart attack ended her husband's life at 84 – the Dalís' story has spun ever further beyond their control. Peddled primarily by male critics of a certain age, a particularly pungent narrative has taken hold, in which the vulnerable and dotty artist was led astray by this shrewd, money-grabbing Russian, 10 years his senior; a woman who had already ditched one famous husband, the French

resting place, a purpose-built crypt beneath the castle that her husband had acquired for her 13 years before, an ivory tower for his queen. The following day, at 6pm, Gala's body, embalmed and dressed in a red Dior gown, was lowered into her brick-walled tomb. Flush beside it, an identical tomb lay empty, ready for the day that Mr and Mrs Dalí might be reunited in death. In attendance were a dozen friends, and one stuffed giraffe that stands there to this day – a long-legged sentry positioned on the tiled floor alongside two equine marbles and a headless classical athlete, like pieces on a surrealist chessboard. Dalí himself remained upstairs throughout the ceremony, howling in grief.

Or so the story goes. As with almost everything related to the intertwined lives of the Dalís, the facts about Gala's death prove as slippery and unreliable as the molten clocks in her husband's paintings, impossible to separate from the myths that the couple built around themselves. Ian Gibson, author of the 1998 book *The Shameful Life of Salvador Dalí*, recently admitted that his subject had been "a biographer's nightmare". He added, "what can you do with an individual who is always acting, always playing a part?"

The Dalís' double-act was not entirely appreciated by their

poet Paul Éluard, along with their 11-year-old daughter, Cécile. Writing in *Vanity Fair* magazine 20 years ago, beneath the headline "Dalí's Demon Bride", the influential critic John Richardson kicked up a particularly noxious stink, crowning Gala "one of the nastiest wives a major modern artist ever saddled himself with".

After taking a queasy moment to commend her "appetising little body, and the libido of an electric eel", Richardson accused Gala, as Dalí's de facto business manager and publicist, of having turned a fleetingly significant artist "into as much of a monster of hype and megalomania as she was". In the critic's view, "by coming into his life just as his career was taking off, Gala helped to make Dalí, just as in less than a decade she would play an active part in unmaking him", leading him into a succession of lucrative, reputation-tarnishing wheezes, that reduced him "to a mere logo, a signature as flamboyant as his moustache". Whatever the truth of the matter, the stink has stuck – until now.

**T**his summer, the palatial Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya on the Montjuïc hillside in Barcelona, is staging the first-ever exhibition devoted to Gala in her own right. The compellingly curated, cumbrously titled *Gala Salvador Dalí: A room of one's own in Púbol* brings together more than 300 items pertaining to her life, including letters, books, clothing by Chanel and Schiaparelli, photographic portraits by Man Ray and Cecil Beaton, a lion-paw bottle opener, a plush Steiff squirrel, a pack of tarot cards and a glass eye. It takes us from Gala's childhood in Kazan, Russia, where she was born Elena Ivanovna Diakonova on the Sept 7 1894; to her 12-year romance in Paris with Éluard – begun when they met as teenagers in an Alpine clinic for tuberculosis sufferers – then beyond, to her half-century romance with Dalí.



Gala was called "one of the nastiest wives a major artist ever saddled himself with"

The exhibition culminates in a collection of 60 of his paintings and drawings. Many of them are portraits of Gala in various guises: with two meat chops balanced on her shoulder, for example, or as the "Madonna of Port Lligat" with the baby Jesus hovering above her lap and an egg suspended from a giant clam shell hanging over her head. A handful are signed "Gala Salvador Dalí", the hallmark the artist adopted soon after he first met Gala on the beach in Cadaqués in 1929 and continued to use sporadically until her death. "After my surrealist period," he wrote in French *Vogue* in 1971, "I signed my best canvases: Gala Salvador Dalí".

To Estrella de Diego, the exhibition's curator, this double signature is proof that Gala "was more than a just a muse and a model. She was an artist who was jointly responsible for Dalí's creative project". De Diego

compares that project to other collaborations in 20th-century art – such as the photographer Alfred Stieglitz's "multi-part" portrait of his wife, the painter Georgia O'Keeffe, striking calculated poses in 300 images taken between 1917 and 1937; or the photographic series, shot by Man Ray in the Twenties, of Marcel Duchamp disguised as his feminine alter-ego Rrose Sélavy.

As in those cases, the figure depicted in the Gala Salvador Dalí paintings is just as much the author of the final artwork as the man who is wielding the brush (or camera), since, claims de Diego, "he is painting what she is performing". Gala, to whom Dalí gave a litany of nicknames (Gradiva, Galuchka, Helen of Troy, Galatea, Placidia, Olivette) was more than a muse: "That outdated term," tuts de Diego,

"belongs in a museum". Rather she undertook "a perfect, complex project: this was to be her autobiography... Gala invents herself in Dalí's representations". De Diego, who has spent many years studying Gala, believes the time is ripe to "rewrite" her reputation. "She is often seen as a terrible woman, a woman concerned only with money and fame," she says. "But my basic

question when putting together the show was, if she was so worried about those things, then why in 1929 would she leave Éluard, who was, by then, a famous poet – and go and live with Dalí in Cadaqués, a nobody in the middle of nowhere?"

Gala, the only woman to feature in Max Ernst's landmark group portrait of the surrealists, *Au rendez-vous des amis* (1922), is often



ALAMY, ANDRÉ CALLET, MARÇAL FOLCH-FOTOGASULLI, SL. © SALVADOR DALÍ, FUNDACIÓ GALA-SALVADOR DALÍ, VEGAP, BARCELONA, 2018

**PERFORMANCE CAPTURE**  
*The Madonna of Port Lligat*, (1949); below, *Dalí Seen from the Back* Painting *Gala from the Back...* (1972-3)



'After my surrealist period,' Dalí said, 'I signed my best works Gala Salvador Dalí'

reported to have been a hate figure among those artists in Twenties Paris. The exhibition suggests otherwise: two books on show, given to the Dalís in the Thirties by surrealist-in-chief André Breton, bear unambiguously affectionate dedications to Dalí and "his remarkable wife"; another, a gift to Gala from René Char, the surrealist poet, comes inscribed "to my only friend".

De Diego believes that Gala had earned the respect of these men of letters in part because she, too, had significant literary talent, founded on her elite Russian education. After all, back in 1914 when Éluard needed a prologue for one of his very first publications, *Dialogue des Inutiles*, it was to Gala, his critic and editor as well as his lover, that he turned. "Do not be shocked," she warned the reader, writing under the pseudonym Reine de Paleügnn "that a woman – or rather, a stranger – is presenting this little volume".

Of course, de Diego concedes, "Breton eventually took against them both when they became rich – but that is another story". Ah yes, the famous swan-dive into commercialism, that saw Salvador Dalí designing the packaging for Chupa Chups lollipops; writing screenplays for Hollywood; signing blank pages for \$10 a pop on to which, Richardson alleged, "publishers or dealers could print whatever image they liked from the artist's repertory"; and, worse still, flashing his moustache in advertisements

for Datsun cars or Gap clothing ("Salvador Dalí wore chinos," reads one from 1969, alongside a photograph of the man himself with cane, up-twizzled moustache and sensible trousers).

It was this phase, much of it played out on the celebrity circuit in America, that led Breton to rebrand the artist Avida Dollars (an anagram of Dalí's name, pronounced *avide à dollars*, or "eager for dollars" in French). But again, somewhere along the line the blame for the commercialisation of Dalí got pinned on Gala and her "constant need for ready money" as Richardson characterised it. "That's because if there's a woman around, it's easier to blame the woman than 'the artist' in inverted commas," says de Diego. "This is the way history has been written all the way through. And it's only ever true to a certain extent."

Besides, she adds, to criticise an artist for making money was to misunderstand the era in which the Dalís found themselves. Art had become big business: Dalí was only following a path already beaten by the fabulously wealthy Picasso, and later pursued by Warhol and pretty much every artist since. "This romantic image of an artist being poor and only interested in his own art is something that didn't fit the times," she says.

Certainly, by 1969, they were wealthy enough for Dalí to buy for Gala the derelict castle at Púbol and transform it, at no small cost, into a surrealist stage set (complete with trompe l'oeil doorways, and ostrich-foot coffee table) for the playing out of the final phase of their complex romance. It is said that during her summers in Púbol, Gala would host a succession of young lovers, among them the *Jesus Christ Superstar* heart-throb, Jeff Fentolt, while Dalí stayed away in Port Lligat.

In that issue of *Vogue* in 1971, Dalí recounted how he had first

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taken Gala to Púbol, blindfolded, and offered it to her as a gift. "Gala took me by the hand and soon she said to me, 'Thank you once again, I accept the castle of Púbol but on one condition, that you do not come to visit me at the castle unless by written invitation'". Dalí continues, "This condition gratified, above all, my masochistic sentiments and thrilled me; Gala became the impregnable castle that she had always been". But perhaps this, as so much else, was no more than a pose.

For much of the exhibition, as in life, Gala keeps her silence, but there is one exhibit – a page of headed notepaper from the St Regis Hotel, where the Dalís would stay during their frequent visits to New York – which carries her voice with startling clarity. On it, Gala has scribbled what appears to be the opening chapter of a book that would never be published. "Yes it is believed that



**WOMAN OF LETTERS** Gala checking Dalí's autobiography, 1940

I am a fortress, well defended and perfectly organised," she writes, in flawless French, "when at best I might be a small blinking tower that, through modesty, tries to cover itself and conceal its by now deteriorated walls to find a little solitude".

Less than a decade later, she would achieve that state of solitude, for eternity, in Púbol. Contrary to her wishes, the tomb beside her remains empty since, for reasons that are still obscure, her husband is buried instead beneath the Dalí Theatre-Museum, in his hometown of Figueres, 25 miles away.

In 2017, 1.2million visitors descended on Figueres to pay their respects to this singular genius. Only 88,000 made the journey to Púbol. Those who did will have seen Gala's dressing table, converted from the old castle oven, bearing her perfume bottles; the crown made for her by Dalí from bent dining forks; the medieval tapestry customised with a flaming giraffe and, in the garage, her gleaming blue Cadillac, an old leopard-skin cushion abandoned on the seat.

**Gala Salvador Dalí: A room of one's own in Púbol** is at Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain (museu.nacional.cat) until October 14



**TABLE TALK**  
*The Escape* stars Gemma Arterton and Dominic Cooper

## 'People are upset by a woman not wanting children'

**Gemma Arterton**  
and director  
**Dominic Savage**  
tell **Chris Harvey**  
why their new film,  
*about a wife who leaves her family,*  
needed to be made

**G**emma Arterton and Dominic Savage are having their photographs taken in a London hotel. The star of the stage musical *Made in Dagenham*, in a blue dress, exudes confidence and energy; the writer and director of such brilliant TV dramas as *Freefall* (2009) and *Dive* (2010), in necktie and designer spectacles, appears a little shy. Having your picture taken with Arterton, he tells me afterwards, is like trying to play piano alongside a concert pianist. It makes you self-conscious.

Arterton and Savage first met 10 years ago, to talk about making a film that never happened. Arterton, then a rising star after

being cast as a Bond girl in *Quantum of Solace* (2008), asked Savage if he would send her his films. He obliged. To that section on her shelf, she can now add *The Escape*, a remarkable new film that they have created together.

Arterton, twice nominated for an Olivier award, gives what might just be the performance of her career as Tara, a wife and mother-of-two who succumbs to depression after she realises she wants more from life. Savage's camera dwells on Arterton's face as she withdraws deep inside herself, tears forming while she submits wordlessly to a "quickie" with husband Mark (Dominic Cooper, with whom she last shared a screen in the 2010 film, *Tamara Drewe*, directed by Stephen Frears).

It's a beautiful, internalised performance that, in part, grew out of Savage's belief in improvisation: "The whole idea of a director is as controlling and in charge and all that s---," he says. "And I don't work that way at all". Before filming began, the two of them talked in depth about their own lives, a process that required an unusual degree of courage. "Actors of a certain level are very untrusting," Arterton says. "They're nervous about opening up to you, in case it gets leaked out."

Both director and star grew up in Kent: 32-year-old Arterton in Gravesend, where the film was shot; Savage, who's 55, in Margate, where his father was an organist who played three times a day on the local bandstand. Tracey Emin,

whom Savage has known for 40 years and who also grew up in the seaside town, has told him that she still remembers that organ's evocative sound.

Savage was a child actor, who appeared, aged 11, in Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*; Arterton's father was a welder, her mother a cleaner. Until she was 16, she didn't know drama schools existed (she later went to Rada). Savage has always considered himself to be an outsider in a predominantly middle-class industry. "I've never felt let in," he says.

In preparation for the film, they went down to Gravesend to create a "look book" for Arterton's character. "You met my mum," she reminds Savage, "and you came to Mum's house, the house I was brought up in, and took pictures of me in there. That was a big inspiration that day." In the film itself, one scene between Tara and her mother, played by Frances

**'The kids I was acting with didn't like me. At first it was painful, and then I didn't care'**

grandmother didn't work, and I think that made them sad. That has influenced me."

Savage says that his mother "had a lot of potential but I think she was confined by the fact that she had two children. She felt bitter and unfulfilled at the end and that was very sad to see."

In one of *The Escape*'s most startling moments, in the bedroom confessional, Tara talks to Mark about their children, played in the film by two siblings with no previous acting experience. When he tells her "you love 'em to bits", she responds flatly: "I don't care about them. I don't care if they finish their dinner, I don't care if they fall over. I don't care." I ask Arterton how hard it was to get inside that emotion.

"It's weird. I was really struggling with working with the children in this film, it was actually the most difficult thing for me," she says. "These were two kids that lived in the house we were shooting in, and they weren't actors and they had no idea what was going on, and they didn't like me."

"As in the film, I was struggling to keep upbeat with them and I just couldn't engage with them in the way that they wanted, like Dominic [Cooper] could. He would come in and be silly with them, and make them laugh, and I couldn't do it, and it got to where they'd look at me and they'd hide or they'd run away, and that was really, really painful. And then it reached a point where I didn't care if they liked me or not. And I thought, how tragic if they're your actual children, to feel ambivalent like that."

We chat about how audiences can react against non-maternal female characters. "I find that so fascinating," Arterton says. "If a guy says he doesn't want kids, it's OK, but if a woman feels that, it's like something's wrong with her. It threatens people's idea of what a woman is, what her function is. I think that's why this film is hard to watch sometimes."

It leads us into a discussion

about whether there is a resistance to portraying women realistically. I mention Carey Mulligan's remarks about how few unfaithful women appear on screen when, she says, "it happens all the time".

Arterton agrees. "I remember when I played Tamara Drewe, who sleeps around, and the number of people who said, 'oh, we didn't like her, she's a homewrecker, why would we want to watch a film about her?'" And yet what about Don Draper [from *Mad Men*]? It's so bizarre."

Savage notes that there was a time when actress Bette Davis played "fearlessly unsympathetic difficult characters like Jezebel... they were not frightened of that at all back then."

**S**ince appearing in *Quantum of Solace*, Arterton has written a short story about a "Woke Bond Woman", who rebuffs the spy's advances, and has said that she wouldn't want to see a female Bond "take advantage of a young man". But shouldn't a female 007 take as much advantage as the male?

"No, 'cause that would be double standards," says Arterton. "I know it sounds so worthy and boring, and everyone loves James Bond as a lothario, but if there was a female James Bond, I'd love it if she'd be just a little more respectful."

Savage scowls when I wonder aloud if it's essential to Bond that he's predatory. What would he do if he were asked to direct a Bond movie?

"I've always found the misogyny of that character really embarrassing," he says. "I've got three daughters. I remember as a child watching it and not being embarrassed by it, but now I feel really offended by it, and I think there's a way in which he could be really respectful to women that's more exciting, in a way. It's awful, absolutely

## FILM THE ESCAPE

**'Now I feel really offended by James Bond. It's awful, absolutely cringey'**



**ESCAPE ARTISTS**  
Arterton with writer-director Dominic Savage

cringey.

"Watching it more recently with my kids, it's unacceptable, and for me it has destroyed the brand a bit, because I can't put it on, knowing what they feel."

The sex in *The Escape* is hard to watch, too. Tara accepts the conjugal act without ever fully acquiescing, and her distress is plain. Do Savage and Arterton think sex is like that for a lot of people, where one person becomes merely the vessel for another's desire?

"The resounding thing that I get from a lot of women who've seen the film is, 'yep, we've been there,'" Arterton says. "One friend told me, 'I've not wanted to say no, because I didn't want to upset him, and I didn't want to hurt his ego and I didn't want to cause more trouble and that's often why people just get on with it."

"But it's really, really complicated when it's in a marriage or a loving relationship, you know, it's not like he's aggressive or anything."

Tara should really say no, but she doesn't...

[because] there would have been some sort of, oh, hassle. I do think it's incredibly common, which is really sad."

Both Arterton and Savage see the film as a turning point: Arterton because she felt herself going inside her character so deeply "that there were times when I couldn't even open my eyes or lift my head"; and Savage because it was proof that improvisation and experimentation can be a better way of revealing emotion than working from a structure already set out.

"The films I enjoy watching are those that get underneath something, whether it's a character or feeling. You can't make it happen," he says, "you have to kind of allow it to emerge."

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