

THE ARTS SOCIETY MAGAZINE
WINTER 2021 / £3.50



THE ARTS
SOCIETY

JOANA VASCONCELOS

Giant works and potent messages



THE LURE OF THE LIGHTED WINDOW + MAGRITTE'S SURREAL EYE + DANCE IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

On another scale

With her exhibition in Yorkshire, Joana Vasconcelos toys with our perceptions of the everyday, in a supersized way. Hers is subversive art, with potent messages, as *Holly Black* discovers



Right: *Red Independent Heart #3*, in the shape of a giant 'Heart of Viana', filled in with red plastic cutlery

Below: The artist's outlandish *Lilicoptère*, a gilded helicopter with ostrich feathers, gold leaf and Swarovski crystals



In the work of Joana Vasconcelos, nothing is quite as it seems. The Portuguese artist creates gargantuan installations that often take the form of recognisable objects, but it is her use of materials and subversive symbolism that encourage us to look again. A pair of glamorous high heels crafted from kitchen pots and pans; a Venetian mask formed from elaborate Baroque mirrors; even a chandelier made of tampons – all of these works resonate on an aesthetic level and cause one to marvel at their construction. Once she draws you in, more complex, conceptual concerns of gender, sexuality and cultural identity come to the fore, revealing themselves through her uncanny assemblages.

Vasconcelos is not the first artist to challenge the innate symbolism of everyday objects. The Surrealists loved to lean into the absurd (consider Dalí's *Lobster Telephone* or Méret Oppenheim's *Breakfast in Fur*), and feminist critiques have often interrogated the domestic space. However, her fusion of joyful motifs and epic proportions give cause to marvel. She is a master of spectacle, and loves to involve her audience, whatever their background.

'It's important to have universal symbols so that you can communicate with different cultures,' she explains, when we speak via Zoom. 'You enter »



Left: Vasconcelos' swimming pool in Edinburgh, *Gateway*

Right: *The Bride*, an imposing chandelier, made from tampons

Far right: *Solitaire*, on show now in Yorkshire

Below: the artist's handmade woollen crochet work, *Finisterra*



through something you do know, to discover something you don't.' She is at home in Lisbon, where the need to shut down her 50-person strong atelier due to the pandemic has not hampered her creativity. Throughout our conversation she draws beautiful looping patterns in a range of colours, reminiscent of her whimsical swimming pool *Gateway*, which was installed at Jupiter Artland, just outside Edinburgh, in 2019. It is formed from 11,366 hand-painted tiles produced in a traditional Portuguese factory. When seen from above, the pool calls to mind a fantastical cartoon-style paint splat; it also has celestial connotations relating to the artist's own astrological chart.

CRAFT AND COLLABORATION

Although Vasconcelos has a great deference for craftsmanship, she makes



it clear that she is driven by the idea, not the material. 'I am a conceptual artist. I'm not like the sculptors of the 19th century. I have a team of craftspeople with incredible knowledge and skills, from wood and metal to knitting and embroidery. They enable me to do my work. Sometimes I get these crazy ideas, and instead of searching for someone to make them a reality, I have those people right here. It's dynamic and empowering. There is no constant questioning of what is possible. It allows me to get crazier and crazier.'

These outlandish notions often come when she is invited to participate in a particular project. In 2012, for instance, she became the first female and youngest artist to exhibit within the Palace of Versailles. Instead of attempting to fit in with the opulent surroundings, she challenged them by centring ideas of

IMAGE BY ALLAN POLLOK-MORRIS, COURTESY JUPITER ARTLAND; KENTON THATCHER FOR ATELIER JOANA VASCONCELOS

LUIS VASCONCELOS; JONTY WILDE

'ONCE SHE DRAWS YOU IN, MORE COMPLEX, CONCEPTUAL CONCERNS OF GENDER, SEXUALITY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY COME TO THE FORE, REVEALING THEMSELVES THROUGH HER UNCANNY ASSEMBLAGES'

women's experience. While crochet-covered objects, a feathered helicopter, and a Heart of Viana (the Portuguese emblem for love) formed from red plastic cutlery were permitted, her chandelier was not, on the grounds that a sculpture made from menstrual products was 'too sexual'.

More recently, Vasconcelos has mounted her exhibition at Yorkshire Sculpture Park (open until January 2022), spanning both interior galleries and the landscape beyond. The exhibition is, says the park, 'a celebration of the artist's unbridled imagination'. Within, visitors can expect her multicoloured crochet, 12-metre long *Valkyrie Marina*

Rinaldi (2014), with its tentacle limbs, from her series *Valkyries*, based on those warrior women of Norse mythology. And without, they can catch works such as her *Solitário* [*Solitaire*] (2018). This seven-metre-high ring is made of car wheel trims, topped with a 'diamond' of whisky glasses. Representing society's ambitions to acquire wealth, it also speaks of symbols of luxury, such as the diamond *solitaire*, that bridge social classes. It was a proud moment for the artist, who had long considered the park to be a space of artistic renown. 'I started to get a bit fed up because friends and colleagues would say, "you've done Versailles, but have you done YSP yet?";' she laughs. 'It took me

a few years, but I'm finally here, and it is a pleasure to show work in such beautiful surroundings. You can see art with mud on your boots. What more could you ask for?'

IDEAS AND OPPORTUNITY

For her next major installation, Vasconcelos will take the idea of audience experience even further, by building a massive four-storey, 12-metre-high wedding cake in the grounds of Waddesdon Manor. The self-described 'impossible project', which she has been working on since 2017, will push the boundaries of art, architecture and a sense of shared celebration. Ceramic on »



Far left: *Pop Galo*, inspired by the Portuguese symbol the Rooster of Barcelos

Above: *Marilyn*, created from steel pans and lids

Left: *I'll Be Your Mirror*, made entirely from bronze mirrors

‘IT’S IMPORTANT TO HAVE UNIVERSAL SYMBOLS SO THAT YOU CAN COMMUNICATE WITH DIFFERENT CULTURES. YOU ENTER THROUGH SOMETHING YOU DO KNOW, TO DISCOVER SOMETHING YOU DON’T’

the outside and textile within, it will, says the artist, ‘exist between reality and a magical world, where people can be part of the artwork by entering the cake and becoming one of the two figurines on top. I hope visitors will be able to get married there. That way, people will forge memories that last a lifetime.’ Such an elaborate undertaking was inspired by the manor and the legacy that the Rothschilds have built there: ‘Some projects need to find the right partner. If you have the concept, but not the right location or person to make it for, it doesn’t make any sense.’

While Vasconcelos has certainly embraced illustrious sites in which to exhibit her work, she takes the social responsibilities of being an acclaimed artist seriously: ‘In troubled times, artists have a crucial role. We are a voice that can be heard,’ she has said. For her, that role involves her eponymous foundation, which supports young people in pursuing careers in the arts, through a range of

scholarships and bursaries. ‘I want people to be able to follow their dreams, whether it is through art, dance or music,’ she says. The foundation invests in individuals who need recognition and emotional support as much as financial provisions to flourish. ‘I am very proud of how we helped a local girl recently,’ Vasconcelos recalls. ‘She was not from a wealthy background, and her mother was ill. She wanted to study scenography in London but felt she had to stay at home to care for her mother and mind her shop. Instead, we said we would pay for her tuition. She was very brave, finished her studies, and has returned to a job in a reputable theatre in Portugal. Now she has the means to care for her family.’

Vasconcelos’ studio also works with institutions to employ people with mental health issues, refugees and others who might otherwise find work hard to come by. They work with other craftspeople to crochet and embroider, contributing to elaborate ongoing sculptural series such as Vasconcelos’ *Valkyries*. For

Vasconcelos, offering these kinds of creative, paid opportunities, is a given. ‘I do my share, and if the art world thinks I’m good enough, I will be able to support my studio and provide for my family, and that way I can help others to pursue their dreams. That is what I truly believe in.’ I ask her if the benefits of creative output across all areas of society have been ignored by governments and educational systems for too long. She agrees, yet, unsurprisingly, distills the concept even further: ‘If there were more artists in the world, it would be a better place.’ 📷

SEE

Joana Vasconcelos: Beyond – the UK’s largest exhibition of Vasconcelos’ work; Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Bretton, Yorkshire; Until 9 January 2022; ysp.org.uk