

JOANA VASCONCELOS

THE ARTIST WHO TRANSFORMS HUMBLE OBJECTS INTO COLOSSAL SCULPTURES GIVES A TOUR OF HER SPRAWLING OPERATION

BY SARAH P. HANSON PHOTOGRAPHS BY NELSON D'AIRES

SHARONSTONE is the talk of the lunch table when I join the Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos and her staff for a family-style meal a few days after the March opening of her exhibition at Lisbon's Palácio Nacional da Ajuda, which attracted 4,600 weekend visitors, Stone among them. The show is the artist's largest to date in Portugal and a reprise of her Versailles commission last summer, this time set in a 19th-century royal palace. It is anticipated to be one of the season's major cultural events in the city, a fact underscored by the commercial for it that appears on the flat-screen television as we tuck into chicken with spinach and rice.

Vasconcelos's star has risen quickly since her breakout at the 52nd Biennale de Venezia in 2005, when curator Rosa Martínez chose *Anoiva* ("The Bride"), 2001–05, a chandelier

sculpture made of some 25,000 tampons, for a front-and-center position in the Arsenale. Inverting connotations of purity and privacy, the piece deploys readymades, domestic in origin, in a bravado public gesture that is a Vasconcelos hallmark. Subsequent works, in media ranging from yarn to tile to marble to iron, shown at the Palazzo Grassi in 2011 and at her galleries—Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Paris and Brussels, Galeria Horrach Moya in Majorca, Casa Triângulo in São Paulo, and, until recently, Haunch of Venison in London and New York—delight and seduce with saturated colors, touch-me textures, and Pop slickness. "She is constantly reinventing herself in her work," says Obadia. Many trumpet their handmade-ness with craft techniques or labor-intensive repetition. Often there is a kinetic or musical component: *Coração independente vermelho* ("Red Independent Heart"),

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Studio seamstress Denise Gonçalves examines the swath of fiber work that now lines the interior of a Lisbon ferryboat Joana Vasconcelos enlisted for use as Portugal's pavilion for the 2013 Venice Biennale.



The artist and the studio mascot, Montana, sit in the reception area flanked by two hand-crochet-covered chairs: *Spring Ghost*, 2011, in translucent polycarbonate and cotton and *Pimple*, 2008, in wood and wool-polyester. *Copacabana*, 2012, in wool-polyester with ornaments, hangs overhead.

2005, a 12½-foot-tall organ modeled in thousands of plastic forks, spoons, and knives, spins to the voice of fado legend Amália Rodrigues. The works almost always feature some element that links them directly to Portugal, which is surely one reason the cash-strapped country (which effectively dissolved its culture ministry in 2011) tapped Vasconcelos for its national pavilion in this year's Biennale.

These pieces nevertheless found an apt setting last year at Versailles, when Vasconcelos became the fifth and youngest artist, and the first woman, to receive the nod for the palace's summer exhibition, which attracted record attendance. At first blush her work might seem to share a lineage with past honorees Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami, but her show was both bigger and subtler, responding to and appropriating each exhibition site individually. The Hall of Mirrors, for example, played host to *Marilyn*, 2011, a monumental pair of women's pumps rendered in stainless-steel cooking pots and lids. In the Gallery of Battles, where neoclassical murals document France's military history, she hung three bulbous pieces from her "Valkyrie" series—stuffed sculptures in a patchwork of sumptuous fabrics dripping with tassels, beads, and trim. They are sexually suggestive and jesterlike and bring to mind thoughts of a spreading contagion.

Contamination is an important word at Atelier Vasconcelos. It describes the process by which crocheted medallions are joined to sheath porcelain faience animals, which form a good part of the artist's Palácio da Ajuda show. It is also how she thinks of her general strategy. Her deceptively approachable pieces aren't exactly conceptual Trojan horses, designed to smuggle a foreign idea and disrupt native thought, but instead effect a

slower-acting subversion of apparent binaries. "What I try is to pick some points and put them in perspective," explains Vasconcelos. "That means that every person can look at them and, through their own experience and personal history, can reason with them. I don't try to give them solutions."

The artist—who despite her boosterish national focus was born in Paris to parents from colonial Mozambique—likens her approach to Portugal's polyglot former empire, whose conquering was less violent than Spain's, wider ranging, and more integrated. "That's what I mean with 'contamination': making your culture part of another and leaving space for you to be contaminated by it in return."

In that sense, the word could also be used to describe how ideas are passed down the chain of command from Vasconcelos to her 30-odd employees. Situated in a vast former grain-storage building on the Tagus River just west of Lisbon's center, her studio is a large concrete space regularly enlivened by riotous color. At one end of the main room, a flannel-clad young man is carefully shaping red plastic forks with a heat gun; at the other, three women sit at sewing tables, wrestling sections of blue fabric through their machines. Spread on the floor in front of them is a bag of foam peanuts and a vast quilt of the same blue fabric, "all for Venice," explains Vasconcelos's press liaison. The long drafting table pinned with sheet after sheet of blue watercolors of Lisbon is all for Venice too. She leads me through a smaller room devoted to knitting and crochet, with meticulously labeled bins containing a trim shop's worth of ribbons, threads, and gewgaws, and into another large room devoted to the more heavy-duty aspects, such as engineering and hardware.

A hallway hung with photographs of openings and studio »

holiday parties leads to the architects' office, where technical plans for works and exhibitions are drawn up. The walls are covered with cross-sections of boats and flooring samples—also, I'm told, for Venice. Upstairs there are financial and communications offices, a massage chair, and, at the heart of the hive, the artist's office, with a purple crib for her daughter, Alice, born to Vasconcelos and her husband, Duarte Ramirez, in the thick of Versailles preparations in 2011.

Marronglacé, 2012, right, is one of the artist's many enhancements of the output of a local earthenware producer. Royal Valkyrie, 2012, below, created in collaboration with the artisans of Nisa and the support of French textile maker Manufacture Prelle, was suspended from a ceiling in Lisbon's Palácio Nacional da Ajuda.

As we talk, Vasconcelos doodles in her sketchbook. She rejects the romantic notion of the artist slaving away in solitude in a garret. Instead, she has orchestrated a studio that relies on specialized contributions from all corners. Trained in jewelry design and drawing at Lisbon's Center of Art and Visual Communication before earning a master's degree in contemporary art, she says, "With drawing I learned how to look, to compose colors and volumes. In jewelry I learned how to plan." Sourcing of materials is key. The porcelain animals, for example, come from the Caldas da Rainha factory, founded in 1884 by ceramic artist Rafael Bordalo de Pinheiro. In 2008 it was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, but Vasconcelos—who played on the figurines' kitsch value in works like *Passerelle*, 2005, a motorized conveyor that suspends porcelain dogs in loose collars that slip once the machinery is turned on—



stepped in with a large order. After she organized a grassroots campaign to preserve this patrimony, the factory was rescued by the Visabeira Group, an international conglomerate based in Portugal. Like everything else in her studio, these porcelains are organized neatly by type on shelves. Howling wolves, frogs, spiders, even the occasional Duchamp-style urinal await turns in the crochet and knitting room, where half a dozen women sit, fingers flying around hooks and yarn. Vasconcelos selects the colors for each animal and works with the knitters to devise a unique pattern that leaves selected features exposed. It takes about a week to completely encase a medium-size piece. It's not for nothing titles often invoke the memory of a tragic heroine: In the old days, Vasconcelos notes, "women were illiterate, they couldn't write or count, but crochet was a way of expression."

This raises an interesting, and intentional, quandary when it comes to the themes of domestic labor present in her art, but Vasconcelos dismisses the suggestion that using these workers, or the women in Portalegre whom she commissions to make traditional felt appliques and tapestries, is exploitation. "First of all, I pay," she says. "I use their craftsmanship but transform it. Anyone can buy a Bordalo in the store; anyone can buy a crocheted napkin. What I do with the mixture is my own. I'm using the materials to put forward a concept. Of course," she adds, "I work on the pieces myself all the time, but I don't spend eight hours knitting." Before, it used to take a long time to produce a large piece—the first heart took four months. Now, she says, a large staff is simply "what we need to be professional." She did 25 shows in 2011 but turned down many more. "I need to have time to control all steps of the way. If people have to wait, OK, they'll wait. This is not a factory."

That said, organization is privileged, and Vasconcelos makes sure little is left to chance. Someone from the studio travels for each exhibition to make sure the work is unpacked and installed correctly. The shipping crates are painted bright red for easy identification. Ideas that emerge from the artist's sketchbook are immediately translated into technical drawings by the architects, who pass them along to the »





Clockwise from above: Duarte Ramirez, head of the architecture department, and his colleague Sérgio Santos develop plans for Venice in a library documenting past projects; the ferry in the Navaltagus shipyard in Seixal, Portugal, gets a cleaning before traveling to Venice to become *Trafaria Praia*, 2013, taking its name from the boat's own; and Gonçalves sews together an assemblage that will be formed into soft sculpture for the boat interior.

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fabrication team, led by Vasconcelos's production director of 14 years, Fernando Monteiro, a veteran of special effects in the film industry. Solutions to problems are proposed by the various departments. "Everybody starts adding their own professional look to the project," says Vasconcelos. "Then we start working on the budget, permits, legal stuff, financials...and then I start public relations. I go and see if I can raise the money." That is another key element that cannot be outsourced: the hustle.

For her Venice project, curated by Miguel Amado, the artist is receiving only €175,000 from the government; the rest will come from global corporate and private donors. *Trafaria Praia* is a prime example of her precise planning and versatility across platforms. Instead of using the 2011 Biennale venue, the Fondaco Marcello, Vasconcelos staged the Portuguese pavilion on a Lisbon ferryboat, which will make daily tours of the Canale di San Marco. "It has no glamour whatsoever," she says. "In Venice, too, people take the *vaporetto* every day. It's what connects these two

cities today." There is also a historical link, as Venice's power as the distributor of Asian goods in the 15th century declined once Portugal found sea routes to the East. "In a way, we're responsible for Venice being the way it is today," Vasconcelos says. "And where once the two cities were known for economic reasons, now they are known for touristic reasons."

The boat's midlevel exterior will be covered in antique-style *azulejo* tiles—a common material in her work—painted with a panorama of the contemporary Lisbon skyline. The inside will be lined in textiles and a kind of magic forest of soft sculpture that twinkles with Christmas lights. "The outside is Lisbon, but then you get inside and you discover a new identity, a new reality," says Vasconcelos. "It's not a house, it's not a boat; what is it? That's where the poetry starts. People will fill in and interpret it with their own references."

"We Portuguese look at things in a very poetic way," the artist muses. "The sea has always been an escape, a solution; if nothing works, you can always leave. So my boat is just a place you can go and have a poetic solution for yourself." ■