



# Woman's Realm

AS HER CURRENT EXHIBITION ILLUMINATES THE CHÂTEAU DE VERSAILLES, PORTUGUESE ARTIST JOANA VASCONCELOS TELLS DIANA D'ARENBERG WHY IT'S NOT ONLY FEMININITY THAT INFORMS HER SPECTACULAR WORKS



**U**PON ENTERING FRANÇOIS PINAULT'S PALAZZO GRASSI DURING last year's Venice Biennale, one was immediately transported to an imaginary world of play by an explosion of colour and fabric. As part of the exhibition *The World Belongs to You*, a plush, tactile, multi-tentacled creature was suspended from the centre of the Palazzo's atrium. It was entwined like crawling ivy around staircase banisters, invading every possible free surface and making its bold presence unavoidable in the exhibition space. The "do not touch" signs were largely ignored, as visitors stole brief touches of the sculpture's tactile limbs, while children greeted it with cuddles. The monumental work, *Contamination*, was by the 41-year-old, Paris-born Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos. And to say that the artist is experiencing quite a moment right now would be an understatement as colossal as her works.

Vasconcelos came to the art world's attention at the 2005 Venice Biennale with *A Noiva (The Bride ou La Mariée)*, a five-metre-high chandelier sculpture made of 25,000 tampons. There, she demonstrated what has since become a hallmark of her work – the re-appropriation of familiar objects, references and symbols. According to the artist, this is to "free them of their original meanings, and subvert them in order to present them to the viewer in a completely new way."

"I want the public to be challenged by what they see, to question themselves and their realities and, ultimately, to participate in the generation of discourse," says Vasconcelos. With *A Noiva*, an object representing a biological female fact that is somewhat taboo in the public realm is elevated above the mundane. Though devoid of the glitz of a real chandelier, it retains its grandeur.

*A Noiva* cemented Vasconcelos' career as a notable international artist, and she has continued to push boundaries and challenge audiences. Since her 2005 debut, she has been championed by Pinault, was recently announced as the 2013 Venice Biennale representative for the Portuguese Pavilion, and has just unveiled her largest and most prestigious exhibition yet – at the Château de Versailles no less.

Vasconcelos is the youngest artist, and also the first woman, ever invited to exhibit at Versailles, following in the footsteps of luminaries such as Takashi Murakami, Jeff Koons and Xavier Veilhan. Her plush, embroidered fabric sculptures take over the gilded halls and majestic grounds of Versailles in a display that would make a haberdashery enthusiast weep. Fifteen stitched, quilted, embroidered, crocheted, woven, beaded and

**HEAVY METAL**

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*Pavillon de Thé* (2012), crafted from wrought iron and jasmine plants; Joana Vasconcelos

**OPPOSITE**

*Marilyn* (2011), made from concrete and stainless steel pans and lids



energy of a setting that gravitates between reality and dreams, the everyday and magic, the festive and the tragic.”

Echoing last year’s display at the Palazzo Grassi, visitors are greeted at the Gabriel staircase of the palace by *Mary Poppins* (2010) a giant, multi-limbed body created from a melange of industrially made fabrics and objects with handmade textiles. The oversized, soft sculpture is knitted, patched, stitched, embroidered and stuffed with an obsessive eye for detail. It is also fantastically larger-than-life, vying for attention and space amid the grandeur of Versailles. It wouldn’t be amiss to say that there is more than a nod to Louise Bourgeois in Vasconcelos’ works.

Taking centre stage in the Galerie de Glaces (Hall of Mirrors) is a nearly three-metre-high pair of shoes titled *Marilyn* (2011), fashioned out of stainless steel pots and pans. The shiny metallic surface of the domestic utensils are a tongue-in-cheek play on the armour of Charles Le Brun’s warriors in the ceiling paintings and medallions.

The exhibition culminates in a display of ostentation that echoes the history of the palace and its most famous occupant, Marie Antoinette. In the 1830 Room viewers find *Lilicoptère* (2012), a golden helicopter with blades made of pink ostrich feathers, which jumps out in a campy and extravagant display of the era’s glamorous aesthetics. It also references Marie Antoinette’s curious habit of keeping ostriches in the palace gardens so she could use their plumes for her

*“My pieces exist for this place. They’re linked to Versailles in a timeless way”*

hats. Vasconcelos explains that she sought to interpret “the dense mythology of Versailles, transporting it into the contemporary world, and evoking the presence of the important female figures that have lived here.”

While the historical setting and decor would constrain many contemporary artists, Vasconcelos has used it to her advantage, creating a harmonious visual relationship between the contemporaneity of the works and their environs. Two fierce marble lions, *Gardes* (2012), sit in the queen’s guardroom, which is laden with symbols of power – from Noël Coypel’s paintings dedicated to Jupiter to the bust of the Roman emperor Vespasian. The lions are covered in white lace crocheted doilies, in a display that is both baroque and kitsch. Rather than disposing of these small, genteel ornamental objects like unwanted relics of the past, Vasconcelos gives them a new meaning. Here the feminine imposes itself on the masculine, soft

overcomes hard, and power and subservience are layered atop one another.

Putting together the exhibition was a laborious and time-consuming process that required over a year of planning for the artist, who worked alongside her team of 25 assistants to complete it. Vasconcelos has contributed a decidedly sensual and feminine take to that of her male predecessors. But she is quick to dismiss the feminist classification. “My work provides a feminine angle, due to my own subjectivity, but my standpoint will always be to defend human rights, regardless of gender, nationality or creed.”

Following the close of the Versailles exhibition in September, Vasconcelos will be presenting a solo show at London’s Haunch of Venison, an itinerant show in Brazil and next year’s edition of the Venice Biennale for the Portuguese pavilion. Although nothing is yet billed for Asia, Vasconcelos confesses a soft spot for the region ever since her participation in the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale in 2006 and a solo show in Seoul last year. She says, “My interest in Asia has grown, and I now realise that my work is generating interest among Asian collectors.” Keeping an eye out for her unconventional pieces won’t prove difficult; this is one artist whose work is truly unmissable. ■

*Joana Vasconcelos: Versailles will be on view at the Château de Versailles until September 30.*



**PRIDE OF PLACE**

**FROM TOP**  
*Blue Champagne* (2012) is created with champagne bottles, lacquered iron and LED lights; the two lions in *Gardes* (2012) are made of crocheted lace

**HALL ORDER**

**FROM TOP**  
A Bell 47 helicopter is covered with ostrich feathers, Swarovski crystals and gold leaf in *Lilicoptère* (2012); *A Noiva* (2001-2005) is crafted from 25,000 OB tampons

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