

ELEPHANT

LIFE THROUGH ART

SUMMER 2020

A WORLD APART
*Redesigning
Our Communities*

Interviews with
Extinction Rebellion
Todd Hido
Tschabalala Self



Affair of the Heart

Joana Vasconcelos

“It’s interesting to see how we are connected throughout the world, even though our history is not always the same.” Joana Vasconcelos combines a deep love of her home country with meaningful connections that bring people together from all over the globe. Emily Steer speaks with the Portuguese artist about national pride, the strength of textiles and the mighty impact of women on her work.





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Pop Galo [Pop Rooster] at
Yorkshire Sculpture Park,
2020

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Tutti Frutti, 2019

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Valkyrie Marina Rinaldi, 2014

*“Sometimes our country
doesn’t make the right
decisions, but we have to
accept that”*

I’m standing on a chilly hill in Yorkshire, looking up at a giant rooster which is framed by a crisp blue sky, dotted with clouds. Joana Vasconcelos, Portuguese artist and effervescent powerhouse, is standing at its base, introducing the work to a huddled group of journalists. This piece serves as a punchy start to her exhibition, which runs until January 2021 at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. It takes the viewer on a journey from some of her enormous, symbolic pieces, dotted about the hills, to more intimate works, housed in the Underground Gallery.

The Portuguese flag may as well be proudly fluttering in the wind; the artist’s deep love of her home country, and its rich and globally impactful history, is woven throughout the show. “We were previously seen as a country that was lost at the end of Europe and really depressed,” Vasconcelos tells me. “It was really difficult to talk about and we would deny our own country. We didn’t see each other in a good way. People didn’t want to show this to the world.”

The blue rooster, *Pop Galo [Pop Rooster]* (2016), stands at over nine metres tall, and is covered in some 17,000 glazed tiles. It references the rooster of Barcelos, one of the country’s key cultural icons, which can be found in ceramic form (and emblazoned on towels, keyrings and more) throughout Portugal’s local and gift shops. As legend has it, in fifteenth-century Barcelos a deceased, roasted rooster came back to life, stood up and crowed, fulfilling the prediction of a condemned man and thus proving his innocence. Vasconcelos explains that this story is a reminder of the importance of truth, and the belief in who you are. Her rooster brings this traditional symbol together with LED technology and pop art; it is covered in 15,000 lights and plays a musical composition by Jonas Runa from its base. A QR code on the work enables viewers to read more about the history of the rooster on their mobile devices.

Lashings of Portugal can be found everywhere in this exhibition, and the artist brings the country and its history together with that of the UK, finding threads and narratives that both connect the lands and highlight their differences. She is interested in variations of interpretation, how two people from separate places might have a contrasting reading of a sculpture of a horse, a bull or a donkey. At one point on the tour, eight of us sit in a circle with the artist, inside a giant teapot. The work utilizes traditional Portuguese ironwork techniques. It has

small seats protruding from its inner walls and the very beginnings of jasmine tendrils encircling some of its lower framework.

As we all sit huddled in this social structure, the artist tells us about Catherine of Braganza, “the richest woman in the world”, who was in a miserable marriage to Charles II. When the king was ill, the two would take tea together in the afternoon, a British tradition that many believe to have been brought to the country by the queen. “I am looking for connections between cultures,” the artist says. “There always is one.” When we speak later, she tells me, “I want to show that in Portugal, people connect to history and tradition. It’s interesting to see how we are connected throughout the world, even though our history is not always the same. Even in places where no one knows where Portugal is, people connect with the work.”

One of the reasons people feel this connection is perhaps the raw emotion that Vasconcelos brings to the work. Wrapped up in her unadulterated love of her home country is a shameless and genuine expression of feeling that many artists avoid. “The emotion is there,” she agrees. “We’re talking about emotion and communication, and how people can communicate without words. Only 25 per cent of communication is done verbally; all the rest is done by the senses. I’m using that other 75 per cent. Most people don’t, but I do.”

Red Independent Heart #3 (2013) is part of a series constructed meticulously from red plastic cutlery using filigree technique. The work takes the form of the Heart of Viana, a symbol of honesty and generosity which is often used for jewellery pieces. Vasconcelos’ work consists of a giant red heart, which slowly spirals around within a black space, while Portuguese *fado* songs play, expressing feelings of love, loss and contractions between the head and heart. As a viewer who has no knowledge of the words being sung or the history of this visual symbol, the emotion is still palpable. It is felt and not understood; a cross-cultural connection with something that, in the artist’s words “goes right to the bottom of what [Portuguese people] feel”.

The idea of digging beneath the surface to get to something real appears a lot in Vasconcelos’ work. *Solitário [Solitaire]* (2018) creates a simple visual pun around cultural obsessions with marriage and money as the big life goals; *Tutti Frutti* (an ongoing series since 2011) explores the plastic perfection of





contemporary food, and the fact that the flavour rarely matches up (except in Portugal, where “the pastry looks awful but tastes amazing!”). *I’ll Be Your Mirror* (2018–20) is a giant mask covered in baroque-style mirrors (“I am *the* baroque artist!” she says) which all face in slightly different directions, rendering a complete reflection of the viewer impossible.

There is also a great deal of humour, which is woven subtly through numerous pieces. One wall-hung construction, *Big Booby #4*, is the result of two to three months’ work. It is a circular piece, made with a traditional technique that utilizes offcuts of wool at the end of winter. It is a feat of craftsmanship, padded in the centre and pulled tight with hooks all around the edge. It could be interpreted as a target, a mandala or, quite literally, a big booby. As well as its more traditional inspirations, this piece is connected with an episode of British sitcom *‘Allo ‘Allo!*, in which the characters search for a painting of “the Madonna with the big boobies”. Despite the fact no one wanted to work on this laborious piece to begin with—it required the same hand throughout to ensure consistency of stitches—Vasconcelos says it became the “bellybutton of the studio”. Everyone misses it now, she asserts; it was a point of connection.

I wonder how she sees her role within her large and almost entirely female studio. How do these collaborative works take shape? “I actually channel the pieces,” she tells me. “The idea comes to my mind already done. I have to find the right people to make it and I also have to convince them about the process of producing it. That is the hardest thing. It is a group effort to make it happen; all the architects, all the engineers. You have to believe in the process, which is not clear all the time.”

I wonder how clear the process is to Vasconcelos herself. She gives the sense that these come from the gut rather than from regimented planning. “I see a piece in my mind’s eye,” she tells me. “It’s not like I just decide, ‘This morning I’m going to have a new idea.’ Of course, I can prepare myself, do a lot of prep so I can be as clear as I can, but I don’t choose to have the ideas, I just have them. There is no such thing as a bad idea. If I could not see them as clearly as I do, it would be very hard to get to the end. There are so many problems in the way; people don’t believe things will work and there are technical challenges. If you don’t have it clear in your head, it’s not possible.”

Some of Vasconcelos’ most intricate works are from her long-running series of *Valkyries*: imposing, room-size sculptures which tower over the viewer and are compiled of fabric, beads, sequins and more, combining the soft tactility of textiles with a strength not typically associated with the form. These works take their inspiration from the mythical women who soar over battlefields, and each one is dedicated to a female figure from throughout history—the sculpture hanging at YSP is dedicated to Marina Rinaldi, the founder of the MaxMara group. The physical work that goes into each piece is astounding, all hand-stitched and immaculately detailed.

Vasconcelos mentions the associations people have with textiles as a “female” form, which has often been seen as less serious than others. She pokes fun at this idea with vast, cushiony fabric-covered canvases, referencing the macho history of monumental paintings. She says these pieces work actively against the idea of painting holding a certain power over the viewer. Her works invite you in, you can touch and “come and be part of it”. I wonder if the reception to her work, and her role as a female artist, has changed since she started practising?

“I think it has changed, and I am the result of many other women before me,” she tells me. “If it wasn’t for them, I wouldn’t be who I am. We are the result of each other, we depend on each other in many ways. I think I have more freedom to do my work today. I would have had resistance before, so I am also a response to what the system needs. You do what the system needs and the system also adapts to you. People do still say, ‘You’re doing this girly thing’ or, ‘I like your work, but not the fabric stuff’, and I say, ‘Why the fabric stuff? Why is it different to paint, or iron?’ The idea of quality, what is normal, what should be done... we are changing that.”

Finally, I ask the artist about the idea of national pride, at a moment when signs of nationalism are often very concerning. As an English person, such veracious love of one’s home country seems alien to me right now. Some of our most iconic cultural symbols—the St George’s Cross, the teapot, the Royal Family—are more likely to draw ashamed groans than heartfelt pride in many. The artist chides me, in her firm yet ultimately kind way, when I tell her this. “Many people were really tired about the pressure of our history,” she says, “and my generation really

pushed the country to be a very different place, because we had enough. We wanted to do it differently, to look into our history, accept it, and move on. It was just complaining and complaining... and we had to do it a different way. In the end, I think that is what will happen to you guys. Something happened which is difficult and you’re going to have to deal with it. Every country makes mistakes; in history there is no country that hasn’t made mistakes. Don’t you love your country? Sometimes our country doesn’t make the right decisions, but we have to accept that. It’s the same with families. Sometimes families don’t agree but it doesn’t mean they don’t love each other.”

This page, clockwise
from top
Finisterra, 2018

Portrait by Kenton Thatcher,
Atelier Joana Vasconcelos

Big Booby #4, 2018

