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A vivid dream post-lockdown

*Sculpture park reopens with
monumental exhibition*

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It's fair to say that Joana Vasconcelos has blazed a trail wherever she has gone. She was the first woman and the youngest artist to exhibit at the Palace of Versailles in 2012, and six years later she became the first Portuguese artist to have a solo exhibition at Bilbao's fabled Guggenheim Museum. She has also shown her work at the Venice Biennale and in numerous other prestigious galleries around the world and this year, finally, she has made it to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP).

I say "finally" because she had been in discussion about having an exhibition here for several years but for one reason or another the timing wasn't quite right, which is perhaps ironic given what's happened these past few months.

When I met Vasconcelos at the beginning of March it was on the eve of her exhibition which – featuring more than 25 works – is her largest ever held in the UK. Visitors were able to see her totemic sculptures for a couple of weeks before the YSP, like all other galleries and museums, had to close.

It was a blow, with Vasconcelos the star name in a year of exhibitions dominated by female artists. But with the YSP having recently reopened on a pre-booking basis, people now have the chance to see one of the 21st century's most impressive and thought-provoking conceptual artists.

I was fortunate enough to see her Bilbao exhibition in 2018 and was struck not only by the sheer size and scale of her works, but also their innate skill and playfulness.

Her latest exhibition brings together works

produced over the last 20 years that examine, question and celebrate the lives of women, as well as tackle issues such as identity and materialism.

Some of her largest sculptures take centre stage in the grounds outside, while the rest fill the Underground Gallery in what is a compelling show.

Like her work, Vasconcelos's background is a colourful one. She was born in Paris in 1971 to Portuguese parents living in exile. The family returned to Portugal three years later following the Carnation Revolution which ended nearly 50 years of dictatorship.

Vasconcelos has been exhibiting her work since the mid-90s, though initially her focus wasn't on art. "I was supposed to be a karate teacher and then I studied jewellery making," she says. On the face of it, this sounds like quite a leap, though she doesn't think so. "One is a martial art and the other is contemporary art," she says, with a chuckle.

Her background in designing jewellery helped when it came to creating sculptures. "I discovered that what interested me was not things on a small scale but a large scale." It's an ethos that fits in with the YSP's sprawling, verdant landscape. "There is a quality here that is different from other sculpture parks – it's difficult to have an inside and outside space and to make them both interesting, and here the combination works very well."

Vasconcelos's work taps into collective identity, cultural traditions and women's roles and takes ordinary household appliances and fabrics and subverts their meaning, echoing the work of Marcel Duchamp.

Her art installations demand to be noticed. They are monumental in scale and almost garish in their vivacity and colour, as is



VIVID IMAGINATION: Joana Vasconcelos at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, near Wakefield, alongside two of her works, Finisterra, right, and Call Center, above, a giant Beretta pistol made up of 168 rotary-dial telephones.





Ready to be dazzled?

A major new exhibition featuring the work of Joana Vasconcelos is on display at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, which recently reopened.

Chris Bond met the Portuguese artist.

Pictures by **James Hardisty**.



IN THE ROUND: Vasconcelos next to another of her artworks entitled *Solitaire*, one of 25 sculptures in her first exhibition at the YSP which runs until January.

→ the case with her *Pop Rooster*. This nine-metre high sculpture combines handmade ceramic tiles and LED light technology, to create a contemporary pop art statement which celebrates the rooster of Barcelos – Portugal’s most popular piece of traditional pottery. At dusk, the rooster becomes animated by 15,000 LED lights that illuminate the landscape.

Vasconcelos’s work in the Underground Gallery is equally intriguing, including the 12-metre-long *Valkyrie Marina Rinaldi* hanging suspended from the ceiling, one of a series of works that represent “valkyries” – female figures from Norse mythology.

Then there are oversized the silver stilettos of *Marilyn* made from stainless-steel saucepans. “It’s a connection between the traditional role of the mother as the cooker, the cleaner and wife, and the modern woman who is expected to be all these things and also go out to work and at the same time be sensual. How do you combine all that? I don’t know, but it’s an issue for women today.”

In her *Call Center* installation, Vasconcelos plays with ideas of strength and power by creating a giant Beretta pistol comprising 168 old-fashioned rotary-dial telephones. “I like taking domestic objects and taking them beyond normal use and what you expect from them,” she says.

This gets to the nub of what all good art does, which is to make us look at something familiar in a completely different way. “It’s not magic but it can have a magical effect to take the viewer beyond what you imagine something could be. You can take something like a shoe, or a chandelier, and when you look more closely you see something else.”

Her desire is to provoke a response through her work. “Someone might say, ‘what a lovely chandelier’ and then they look closer and go ‘oh my God, those are tampons’. The only thing I want to happen with my show is for people to feel something, even if they don’t like it, because then they are at least talking about it.

“If you are a man or a woman, or young or old, you relate to it in a different way. But it’s not up to me to decide how you react, it’s up to me to give you a window of opportunity to relate to the world in a different way. That’s what I do. I open windows so you can look into the world from a different angle.”



STEP ON IN: From top, *Valkyrie Marina Rinaldi*, 2014, was inspired by figures from Norse mythology; *I’ll be your Mirror*, 2018, a mask made using mirrors; *Marilyn*, 2011, created with stainless steel pans and lids.

Vasconcelos is at the peak of her powers right now and understands the transforming power of art. “We are the only species that tries to represent itself so that in the future people will know that we were here. Some of us write, some of us paint and some of us sing, because without representing ourselves we will never exist in the future, and that’s what we’re doing. It’s a collective role and we are all part of this process,” she says.

“The rule of art is to represent the world in which we live, and to keep on giving hope to people and to encourage the world to keep on evolving.”

■ The Joana Vasconcelos exhibition runs until January 3, next year.

Back on the art trail...

- The Yorkshire Sculpture Park, near Wakefield, has reopened, including the Underground Gallery, to the public between 10am and 6pm.
- Over the coming months, additional galleries including the Weston, Chapel and Longside will open as restrictions and funding permits.
- The shop in the main visitor centre is open, and the main cafe will reopen in due course.
- In order to ensure the safety of visitors and staff some essential changes have been put into place. These include social distancing, one-way systems and restricted visitor numbers.
- Everyone must pre-book a £6 ticket online, which includes parking, through www.ysp.org.uk to gain entry. Under-16s, carers and Max card holders are eligible for a free ticket but must also book in advance.

