

Joana Vasconcelos: Through Mountains and Seas

Curator: Demetrio Paparoni

2023.7.11 – 8.6

Tang Contemporary Art Beijing 2nd Space

Tang Contemporary Art is pleased to announce a solo exhibition of Portuguese national visual artist Joana Vasconcelos, "Through Mountains and Seas," in the gallery's Beijing 2nd Space. Curated by veteran Italian art critic Demetrio Paparoni, the exhibition features more than thirty large-scale installations and mixed media works, and is the artist's first large-scale solo exhibition in mainland China. The exhibition will open on July 14th at 4:00 p.m. and will be open to the public on July 11th in advance.

In her first major exposition at the Tang Contemporary Art in Beijing, Joana Vasconcelos relates her oeuvre to the imagery of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, also known as *Shanhai jing*. Vasconcelos' hanging sculptures, with their colors, decorations and soft and malleable protrusions, are visually evocative of the dragons from Chinese mythology. Originally, these gigantic pensile figures stemmed from the symbolic context of the Valkyries, the warrior women of Norse mythology whose task was to collect the bodies of courageous slain warriors and bring them to Valhalla, the afterlife for fallen heroes. These sculptures, which began as symbols of power and female strength, also acquire a cosmological symbology. In order to emphasize the importance assumed by this interpretation, this exhibition also features sculptures depicting snakes, horses, bulls and other recurring animals in the Chinese zodiac, as well as several from the Western zodiac. In ancient Chinese mythology, the dragon is a serpent with the head of a crocodile, the whiskers of a catfish, the mane of a deer and the claws of a bird. This commingling is typical of mythological tales. Sirens from Greek mythology, for instance, are figures with the head and bust of a woman and the wings and feet of a bird. While in Chinese tradition, the dragon is a spiritual and cultural symbol representing prosperity and good fortune. It has acquired different meanings over the centuries in different geographical locations, even becoming a symbol of evil in Western Christianity. Based on the hypothesis that it was the very fascination evoked by mythology to lead distant populations to come into contact, Vasconcelos' s interpretation of the dragon is more akin to that of the Orient.

Through its allusion to the *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, this exhibition finds its cornerstones in the installation of Valkyrie Marina Rinaldi from 2014 and the more recent *Flaming Heart* (2019–2022), a large vibrant red heart, whose biomorphic appearance is reminiscent of a plant, an organ of the human body or even an animal shape, as we will see further ahead. The vast repertoire of ceramic animals covered in crochet or embroidery featured in the exhibition draws inspiration from the tales of Zhuangzi, which has strong affinities with the Western Aesop's Fables. The various versions of frogs featured in the exhibition are direct references to Zhuangzi and Aesop, reminding us how much these moral narratives by two immortal authors have in common.

Vasconcelos uses communicative method to approach thorny and controversial topics with lightness. And yet, the ironic tone that emanates from the work does not prevent the artist from calling into question the rigid gender distinctions. The decontextualization of the objects and the metamorphosis of their identities by way of their arrangement—reflect the desire to deconstruct paradigms associated with social roles and widely held beliefs. With analogous motivations, Vasconcelos created a series of works that represent her expressive and content-based style.

Shifting towards a different style, in 2004 Vasconcelos created her first Valkyries using fabric, woolen and cotton crochet, passementerie, piping, stuffing, sequins, beads, feathers, tassels and LED lights. The title of this hanging sculpture alludes to the semi-divine warriors of the heroic sagas from Germanic mythology. In the *Nibelung Legends*, the Valkyries are strong and armed blonde female characters who traverse the sky on war horses or ride just above water. Afterwards, Vasconcelos created more Valkyries series works, which features the art of weaving in its most varied forms, placing at its core the female propensity to unite elements that create a texture when brought together, despite their heterogeneity.

In her voluminous hanging installations made of fabric and passementerie, the mythical dimension prevails, though with ethical and political underpinnings. Vasconcelos extrapolates fragments from mythological narratives that serve the meanings expressed in her work. Through her sculptures made of fabrics, textures and sartorial materials that allude to femininity, Vasconcelos seeks to emphasize the virtues of women—not those attributed to them by conventions. Women, for Vasconcelos, are the strong sex; they are warriors who are able to attain their power and exercise it.

The relation to tradition in Vasconcelos' work is not only tied to the visual universe of Portugal, but to the Portuguese culture at large. A clear demonstration of this is her series of *Independent Hearts*. Begun in 2004, the hearts draw inspiration from the heart of Viana, The heart motif returns in *Flaming Heart* (2019), a hanging sculpture whose biomorphic appearance recalls a plant, an apparatus of the human body or the shape of an animal. The long arms that depart from the central body of the work resemble the tentacles of a sea animal or the roots of a tree. They invade the space much like Baroque architecture and decoration, where all forms of centrality are challenged. Vasconcelos reminds us that the Baroque, with its vital plenitude, overcomes all forms of "horror vacui", distancing us from any nihilistic temptation that could deprive us of a "heart".

Animals play a central role and are often evoked in the works of Vasconcelos. One of her series, begun in 2006, features ceramic animals wrapped in crochet and embroidery. The inspiration comes from the *Caldas da Rainha* factory, founded in 1885 by Portuguese illustrator, caricaturist and ceramist Rafael Bordallo Pinheiro. Vasconcelos's animal series work reminds us that the relationship between humans and animals is becoming increasingly contentious. She focuses her attention not only on the mythological and fantastical dimension of animals, but also on the meaning animals are assuming as we gradually become (re)aware of just how interconnected our well-being is with that of other forms of life in nature.

Symbolism and narratives are a fundamental basis for focusing on the art of Vasconcelos. Art exerts its power by allowing an object (or subject) to embody a meaning that reaches beyond its nature. When considered in its natural surroundings, an animal is simply an animal. The symbolic process is activated after cultural differences have been experienced through time, leading to meanings and narratives that change from place to place, but also influence each other and stratify. A symbol is generated through the association of numerous unrelated elements.

What fascinates Vasconcelos is this ambivalent and contrasting relationship with the animal—the fact that the same subject can attract or shock, having been ascribed both beneficial and malignant effects. Vasconcelos tells us that the way we perceive animals and relate to them reveals something about ourselves, too.

About Artist

Born in 1971, Joana Vasconcelos is a Portuguese contemporary visual artist with a 30-year career, renowned for her monumental sculptures.

Drawing inspiration from everyday life, pop references, Portuguese traditions and the opulence of the Baroque, Joana Vasconcelos also establishes a dialogue with artists who preceded her, such as Bernini or Duchamp. In the footsteps of Niki de Saint Phalle or Louise Bourgeois, her work gathers a wide variety of media and materials, from video to textile. She updates the arts & crafts concept to the 21st century, channelling old techniques into contemporary practice. Her immersive site-specific sculptures and customised installations work in dialogue with the architecture of the place, calling upon the interaction of the viewer. Her thought-provoking yet colourful and uplifting art reaches audiences from all ages and walks of life. International acclaim arrived with the first Venice Biennale ever curated by women with *The Bride* in 2005, followed by *Trafaria Praia*, the first floating pavilion in the Biennale representing Portugal in 2013. The youngest artist and the only woman ever to exhibit at the Palace of Versailles, her 2012 exhibition was the most visited in France in 50 years. In 2018, Joana Vasconcelos became the first Portuguese artist to exhibit at Guggenheim Bilbao with a major retrospective, which was one of the most visited in the museum's history and reached 4th place in *The Art Newspaper's* annual exhibitions' Top 10.

Her work has graced major museums and galleries, such as Palazzo Grassi, The Thyssen– Bornemisza, Royal Academy of Arts, Manchester Art Gallery, São Paulo's CCBB, Istanbul Modern, Moscow's Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, La Monnaie Paris, Palais de Tokyo and the Hermitage. Joana Vasconcelos' art can be found in major international collections, such as those of Calouste Gulbenkian, Coleção Berardo, The Ömer Koç, Tia Collection, François Pinault and Louis Vuitton's Foundations.

In total, more than 30 awards have been granted to the visual artist throughout her career. In February 2022, Joana Vasconcelos became an Official of the Arts and Letters Order by the French Ministry of Culture, adding to the degree of Commander of Infante D. Henrique Order by the Presidency of the Portuguese Republic in 2009. She was considered Personality of the Year by the Foreign Press Association in 2012 and won the Contemporary Art Prize in Israel in 2013. In 2012, the artist created Joana Vasconcelos Foundation aiming to promote arts for all. Besides managing her art collection, it collaborates regularly with other philanthropic entities to support social causes, develop fundraising initiatives, create special editions and/or prints. Every year it awards scholarships to encourage the study of the arts.

About Curator

Demetrio Papanoni, essayist and curator, was born in Syracuse in 1954 and lives in Milan. He is considered one of the most authoritative voices of Italian art criticism. In 1983 he founded the magazine Tema Celeste and the homonymous publishing house, which he directed until 2000. From 1996 to 2008 he taught History of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Catania. He has curated important exhibitions in Italy and abroad. He wrote numerous books and monographs, including those of Chuck Close and Wang Guangyi. He is the art critic of the Italian newspaper Domani. His latest book realised with Arthur C. Danto, "Art and Posthistory", was published in the United States by Columbia University Press and in South Korea by Misulmuwa.