

Introduction

Joana Vasconcelos takes inspiration from the dominant views of the world in order to examine the multiple issues of society beneath an allegorical impulse. In deconstructing the values, habits and customs latent or manifest in mass culture, the artist comments on today's ways of living, particularly those rooted in collective identity, whether this arises from gender, class or nationality. Her sculptures are constructed with highly symbolic consumer goods with strong visual efficiency, manipulated according to a given narrative or iconography. Having been ingeniously and carefully altered through different techniques, among which stand those inscribed within female working practices, these materials are transformed into conceptually complex and formally seductive objects.

An interpretation of Portuguese intellectual heritage and historical patrimony underlies an important part of Joana Vasconcelos' production. Several works incorporate elements from tradition, quoting the past. However, the treatment she subjects them to – in altering their scale, combining them with other components or reconfiguring them – brings them towards the present, converting the works into resonance chambers of the state of things. As an illustration of this one should mention her employing of painted tiles, a product associated to Portugal. Works like *Barco da Mariquinhas* [Mariquinhas' Boat] (2002) or *Lusonike* (2006), which allude to a vessel and the logo of a company, take on new layers of meaning through the utilization of painted tiles in their making.

One thus sensed that sooner or later Joana Vasconcelos would find a sort of double in Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro. He was one of the most well-known artists in Portugal in the second half of the XIX century, standing out particularly as a caricaturist and becoming recognized through the depiction of "Zé Povinho". This was a pure, harsh depiction of the Portuguese layman of that period – in the style of John Bull or Uncle Sam – and became one of the fundamental allegories of Portuguese ideology. His personality, which was marked by a free and independent spirit, disturbed the powers-that-be at the time and became the object of projects without equal on the Portuguese scene, such as that which was brought about with his Caldas da Rainha Faience Factory, founded in 1884. The body of work that Joana Vasconcelos has dedicated over recent years to Bordalo Pinheiro stands as a gesture of homage that emotionally unites two eras and voices.

The artistic faience pieces that Bordalo Pinheiro conceived, both with functions of use and as decoration, covered an immense number of characters and motifs. Lasting on the collective subconscious are, on the one hand, the picturesque figures that ironically embody the Portuguese condition and, on the other, the many representations of nature, of special note among which there is a bestiary. Indeed, from the cat that stretches itself out at his side in a famous self-portrait to the hopping, smoking frogs on the panels of the Monaco Tobacconists in Lisbon, there is an infinite number of

works to prove Bordalo Pinheiro's attraction for Portuguese fauna. This is shown perfectly well by the presence of many images of animals in the awarded Portuguese Pavilion at the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1889, the interior design for which was carried out by Bordalo Pinheiro.

The human being's fascination for the animal universe is timeless, and the origins of the bestiary date back to Ancient Greece, although its generalization, through religious channels, comes from the Lower Middle Age. From the *Physiologus* to the Bible to the writings of Franz Kafka or Miguel Torga, passing through the XVII century fables of La Fontaine, several different cultural expressions acknowledged by their anthropomorphism have defined Western civilisation. Due to its roots in imaginary, this subject matter has been of great interest to Joana Vasconcelos. So in 2005 she began a series of works around the common porcelain guardian dogs that populate the gardens and doorsteps of many houses throughout Portugal. Out of this nucleus one may highlight *Matilha* [Pack] (2005), made up of ten of these pieces wrapped in coloured doilies.

The coating of objects with hand-made crochet, the multiple patterns and tones of which hark back to different periods and tastes, is one of Joana Vasconcelos' trademarks. This technique is based on the typical indoor decoration for rural and suburban houses, and she has used it in many works, from *Mesa 111* [Table 111] (2004) to *Piano Dentelle* (2008), inscribing popular experience and skill within the sphere of erudite culture. So Joana Vasconcelos' approach to Bordalo Pinheiro's legacy would logically be set upon this stylistic resource, due to the aesthetic affinity existing between the references they both conjure up. The focusing on the images of animals idealized by Bordalo Pinheiro echoes her attention already granted to the bestiary.

Joana Vasconcelos adopted eleven works from Bordalo Pinheiro's bestiary in accordance with their physiognomy and psychology. The doilies that ornament them, paradoxically oscillating between a protective, second skin and an imprisoning net, stress those characteristics. Thus the startled cat is counterpoised to the solemn horse's head, which forms pairs with those of the donkey and the bull; the haughtiness of the wolf is entwined with the ferocity of the lizard and of the crab; the melancholy toad contrasts with the slender snake; the delicateness of the lobster confronts the authority of the wasp. The titles of the works enunciate other tips of the skein of signs proposed by the artist: for example, the wasp is called "Cleopatra", the most sovereign of queens, while the lobster answers to "Calypso", the sea-nymph in Greek mythology.

Finishing off this body of work, Joana Vasconcelos for the first time brings together all the images of animals with which she interpreted Bordalo Pinheiro's bestiary. The wasp and the lobster, which were made only after the recovering of the original moulds prompted by the artist, as well as the other pieces, rest on plinths or hang from the walls, waiting for the magic moment when they take on life and leave in search of their natural habitat. With the liveliness of the black, red or white of the doilies captivating one's gaze, and the sensuality of the paintings and the ceramic glazing exalting the other senses, in this exhibition one feels the relevance of the projects and the excellence of the creative genius of Bordalo Pinheiro and Joana Vasconcelos.