

Joana Vasconcelos: the re-enchanted art

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A troubling strangeness? Or rather, a joyful and familiar oddity. This is our instant impression of Joana Vasconcelos' work, a work for which we feel we have yet to unlock, but which, nevertheless does not seem entirely obscure. Everything here seems to bear the hallmark of paradox. The works are imposing in their size, yet their intrinsic attention to detail reveals refinement, delicacy and an art of the infinitely small. Trivial banality draws its inspiration from the most common subjects and shapes and yet radiates intense poetry. The asserted presence of tradition, land and custom in no way excludes overt contemporaneity, an art of today, a contemporary vision of the world in its fully cosmological dimension.

This duality of a Janusian work, whose ambivalence gives rise to a sentiment of simultaneously disturbing and exciting ambiguity, speaks of the essence of an approach, which can be captured within the very diversity of the creations the artist offers. Indeed, her work is multiple, varied and complex, blending styles and shapes, figures and topics. Far from any school or even influence, but drawing on what appeals to her wherever she finds it, she bears witness to an artistic attitude where we can identify some of the fundamental traits of hypermodernity: pluralism, eclecticism, hybridization.

We can also recognise there an aesthetic conception, which, in the founding relationship each creator maintains between the single and the multiple, comes fundamentally from a Baroque vision, from this "permanent Baroque" of which Eugenio d'Ors spoke. This is not to be confused with the "multiple unity" by which Wölfflin defined classical work in his *Fundamental principles of history of art* (1915) whereby classical work harmonises parts that remain independent and autonomous within a whole and are thus divisible. It is, however, what he called "global unity", that is to say marked by complexity and in which the diversity of its elements converge in one common motif, which unifies them and renders them undivisible.

These are formal principles which do not, however, follow the path of classical avant-garde formalism glorifying the idea of a pure essence in art, this "art for art's sake" theorised by Clement Greenberg where "content becomes something to be avoided like the plague". On the contrary, for Joana Vasconcelos, art speaks of its time and era, expresses the present world, integrates what avant-garde modernity had deliberately excluded, plays with antinomies and mixes opposites without tragedy. She is thus purely, radically and intrinsically *hypermodern*.

The past revisited

Paradoxically, this work which brilliantly flaunts its hypermodernity has been elaborated from a strongly asserted past. This is not however a real paradox if we consider the socio-historical issues of hypermodernity according to the meaning given to it by theoreticians, who speak of a "second modernity", that of the "hypermodern era", the "hyper-consumerist society" and "the culture-world"; and also that of "hyper-art", of which Joana Vasconcelos' work offers a particularly revealing illustration.

Each creation's ultra contemporaneity is woven with a thread, which links it to the times of old, either lost or becoming so. Hypermodernity does not refute these links, does not deny the past, but it invests in it in order to reinvent it. This appears at the very start through the traditional techniques Joana Vasconcelos calls on and to which she gives back a second life: this particularly applies to lace-making, sewing, knitting, these intricate activities reserved for the expert hands of women since forever. This point does need clarifying: we are not dealing here with reconstructing the past, like a revival, but with the development of a totally original and contemporary creation. Because here the rehabilitated past takes on the appearance of a *past rerouted*. In bygone days, lace protected and enhanced according to traditional rules; now it envelops, tames and captures like a sweet trap, like a free and creative aesthetic game. The lions of *Vigoroso* and *Poderoso*, caught in stitches of crochet whose black perforations display hints of eroticism, are no longer wild beasts mounting the guard and instilling fear as they might do at the entrance to old aristocratic homes, but are instead welcoming figures whose vigour and power are now mere seduction and grace.

There are also many materials which come from the oldest Portuguese traditions, (faience, azulejos, ceramics, wrought iron) and are reemployed in arrangements which enrich them with new meaning, opening wide the door to our imagination. The earthenware and ceramic animals, which Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro made into familiar decorative objects in the 19th century, become, once coloured and dressed up in lace, a prodigious bestiary, in which lobsters and lizards, crabs and frogs take the names of mythical figures, *Calypso*, *Cleópatra*, *Salomé*, and stars of the modern era, *Kubrick*, *Bowie* or *Capote*. Old azulejos are used to form the famous Nike logo: *Luso Nike* thus humorously blends the most authentically Lusitanian tradition with the hypermodern universe of global trademarks.

To which we can add a number of pieces, referring to shapes drawn from a life of yore, as it was once lived out in the countryside and homes of Portugal. The ample wrought iron demijohn of *Sr. Vinho* is none other than the old small decanter which was used as a recipient for wine; the imposing chandelier of *A Noiva*, even though it is

made from tampons and not crystal, adopts the traditional shape of the central lights of noble homes of the past. As for the *Coração Independente Vermelho*, the red of passion, *Dourado*, the gold of luxury, or *Preto*, the black of death, their extraordinary apparel of 4000 items of plastic cutlery is arranged according to the traditional shape of the pendant which the Portuguese filigree jewellers still make today.

This reinvestment in tradition is characteristic of what we have called the post-modern aesthetic since the 1970s-80s but which in fact comes more appropriately under what we would nowadays call hypermodernity. As opposed to the avant-garde movements, whose intention is to make a clean slate of the past, here the past is no longer annihilated but revisited. Joana Vasconcelos precisely re-enacts tradition, where she finds it, both as Portuguese and as a woman: in the little villages and handicrafts of her country, with women who pass it on in the representative symbols, materials, traditions and techniques of a rediscovered past. Her entire work is founded on this hybridization of the past and present, the traditional and contemporary, and the particular and universal, which constitute the typical fusions of hypermodernity.

She even invests this hybridization with a sort of super-hybridization when she derives tradition from not only Portuguese craft and custom but from beyond, from ancient mythology, the very roots of Western civilisation. She then combines these two references to the past in work that blends them with the most revealing aspects of contemporary society. The same lace straight from the hands of the Portuguese lace makers covers both the statue of *Minerva* crowning an ancient column, whose stone is also enveloped in lace, as the modern television set of *Euro-Visão*, which also sits on its very contemporary stand sewn with white threads in the same fashion.

It is worth noting that what Joana Vasconcelos particularly retains from the past are not the high art forms, the grand style of world patrimony. There is no reinvestment in the most canonical shapes and immortal styles consecrated by the *Musée Imaginaire*. What is re-enacted here are the techniques, materials and motifs of ancient folk art, known as the decorative or minor arts. It is no longer craft, which copies forms of art, but art, which revisits traditions of craft in order to do something quite different with them: an art of hybridization where creative, individual freedom reinvests local sources of custom.

The factory studio

The rapport with tradition is also expressed in the very way in which the work is carried out. A good illustration of her approach can be seen in a highly symptomatic piece such as *Varina*. By dressing a bridge in Porto in lace, she asserts the irreducible role of the feminine in the face of a construction which is the product of man's engineering, and the equally irreducible role of the hand-crafted when faced with the iron and steel beams forged by heavy industry. Lace, an art of manual dexterity reserved for women, is the means by which the virile scrap metal is feminised. The idea, the concept and the design were developed by the artist, but when it came to the execution, she summoned 1000 women who worked for six months to make a 35 by 15 metre crocheted lace cloth to be stretched over the metal arch. The creation, conceived and accomplished by a woman visual artist was fabricated by the artisanship of other women in a studio that expresses the very nature of the artist's practice.

While Joana Vasconcelos does not exclude modern materials and factory made items including some knitting and industrially woven cloth from her work, they are always combined with homemade materials. The basis is handcrafted by a series of regular or casual collaborators who specialise in the old or new crafts required: lace-makers, knitters and tailors, but also potters, locksmiths, engineers, architects... Each work's complexity is linked to its uniqueness: even in the variety of forms of a series on the same theme, no two are identical since they are handmade. We are not dealing with the repetitive and mechanical procedure of serigraphy as with Warhol: this is a studio which produces one-off pieces that are always unique.

This notion of a studio is fundamental. Not a *factory* like the one where Warhol gathered together artists in every field – painters, graffiti and visual artists, photographers, film-makers, musicians, singers – to elaborate their work in a pop, underground atmosphere, a sort of acid hive with perpetual happenings. It is more like a traditional factory, a little company equipped with a creative studio where some twenty permanent collaborators work. In a way, this is a revival of the creative organisation of the Renaissance painters or the Baroque age. When Michelangelo painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he worked in the same way, surrounded by a small team: assistants preparing the colours and varnish, carpenters putting up the scaffolding, plasterers spreading the fresh coating where the project manager outlined the *sinopie* or staked out the preparatory drawings by *spolvero*, before painting the principal motifs *a fresco*. His pupils would be in charge of painting the backgrounds and the secondary motifs and then carrying out the finishing touches.

Joana Vasconcelos revives this craft conception of the artist's studio. Far from the romantic image of the solitary artist, she gives concrete expression to the idea that a personal piece is the fruit of collective work. In doing this, she asserts the mixed character of a typical creation of hypermodernity where complexification has be-

come the rule. It is the same type of artistic definition as in filmmaking where the author creates a work of collective components requiring the support of multiple different trades. Other visual artists operate in the same way. However, whereas the logic of Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst in a way resembles Hollywood because of the size of their companies and the way they function, Joana Vasconcelos has remained true to small-scale craft production.

It is true that she is not the first, with her illustrious colleagues, to work in this way. It is indeed because of this that she comes up against one of the major concerns of “contextual art”, requiring the intervention of the other, the spectator and public in the artistic creation. However, she distances herself from others in the way in which she envisages this collective component. What matters in contextual art is the procedural dynamic, the experience in progress, not the object or final form. The concept gives rise to a work – events, public happenings, manoeuvres, street art performances... which is unpredictable, difficult to control, more political than visual; a work which, in its evolution towards increasingly open processes, intends to empty the work of its traditional meaning. In a sense, according to Stephen Wright, it “un-works” it.

Nothing like that takes place here but, on the contrary, there is a “re-working” of the piece, which is in no way compromised by the work and the specific contribution of the collective. When Joana Vasconcelos goes in search of hundreds of women in their homes and in villages to make lace and to knit, she does not do so in a random manner with the aim of making a work emerge out of something unexpected. She goes with the precise aim of continuing a craft that has been passed down from mother to daughter which she endeavours to embellish into a personal issue and materialise into a “finished” work to be looked at and contemplated. This dimension of control by the artist is sometimes reduced as with *Contaminação*: but it never disappears entirely. From the work of the group emerges an invented, mastered and eminently singular piece.

In situ

Here we encounter this other variant of contextual art, which concerns works *in situ*, as, for example, the way Daniel Buren elaborates his pieces. For Buren, *in situ* creation in some respects replaces the studio: he himself recalls that it was the loss of his studio that made him resort to a new form of expression, which took place right there and then. The spatial context is obviously important but, without a studio, what he finds takes precedence over all else is the general obligation to create works using simple materials which are quickly completed, do not require heavy logistics and have no problem adapting to the terrain: his 8.7 cm wide plastic strips may be produced in a series and adapted to the nature of their location.

Joana Vasconcelos’ approach seems very different. A very important part of her work is characterised by reinvesting places chosen very precisely because of their emblematic or symbolic nature and by applying to these elected places aesthetic elements determined by the creative techniques particular to her studio. Her approach is neither improvised nor her procedure unpredictable: in some respects, the location is a simple continuation of her studio. There are sometimes even outdoor studios, as the knitters of *Hand-Made* demonstrate, sitting on chairs in a circle stitching and crocheting as they go from Queluz Palace to Batalha Monastery, from the Roman temple in Evora to Belem Tower, and from the gold and gilding of the Mafra Palace to the ancient lined-up stones of the Almendres cromlech. Not only do they reinvest historic locations, they also take part in the creation of a new work conceived, scripted and filmed by Joana Vasconcelos, who etches the path of women today into a past where they only existed in a subordinate role.

The result is a specific work produced through a dialogue between the location and the created element that reinvests it. The bridge in Porto of *Varina*, with its lace tablecloth stretched over the iron side of its deck, is an example of this dialogue, as is the Belem Tower in *A Jóia do Tejo*. In this last example, it is not lace which adorns the building, but a necklace of buoys that refers back to the building’s past links to the sea, its role as a tower to guard against pirates and then as a permanent safe to secure the riches of the town. The finery which it is attributed here, made of gleaming plastic – present-day fake luxury – while recalling the former treasures brought back in the ships’ holds, takes away its sacred aura, rids it of its patrimonial restrictions in order to give life back to it, in a present day of both playfulness and discreet disrespect.

Thus, the works *in situ* transform their locations while still maintaining a strong link with the studio from whence they came. The severity of the Castle of Santa Maria da Feira, where the grey stone of the high, blank walls and the threatening battlements are scarcely refined by the pointed cones crowning the corner turrets, suddenly finds itself softened as in *Donzela*. The lace doily which hangs over the battlements and whose shape, once more as much as the material, evokes, as in *Varina*, the feminine cache-sex, and in its way knocks down the wholly virile walls of the fortress. This play on the masculine and feminine which the title pleasantly emphasises is repeated in another, urban context, the *Donzela* of Venice, where the facade of the Palazzo Nani Bernardo Lucheschi was decorated with the same lace finery, giving the palace’s rather pompous richness a novel lightness and infusing a

sort of femininity into the architectural space.

Poetry and beauty cast a spell over the buildings, places of war, commerce and activity and pluck them away from their purely practical or solemn destiny. An installation like *Vitrine*, the one in the Rua do Alecrim, where a knitted and crocheted composition over 25 metres high takes the shapeless form of a sort of jumping jack streaked with bright colours of pompoms and patchwork, a friendly serpent with its entrails and tentacles hanging out over the facade of a bourgeois building, brings the colours of dreams, childhood imagination, the cuddly toy aspect of a joyful world of play, to the sad and busy street.

Joana Vasconcelos' installations are not in fact solely reserved for works *in situ*. All her work calls for a spatial setting, the big pieces are only conceived in relation to their future surroundings: the great monster *Valquíria Excesso*, a wholly unaggressive Valkyrie which more resembles a suspended multicoloured monkey doing acrobatics, can only take shape and meaning if it is hung from the ceiling: and the spectator must raise his head to discover the medley of colours and variety of shapes of this particular critter.

The location is part of the work. The knitted snake in *Pantelmina* can only unfurl its coils if the wall he slithers over, shackled by the straps which hold him there, is entirely white so that its daubed colours burst forth displaying the chromatic diversity of its folds and curls. Even beyond the works that are specifically made for emblematic locations - a filmed trip where, in *www.fatimashop*, Sulpician statuettes of the Virgin are transported in a street vendor van is obviously made for a sanctuary like Fatima, a place of pilgrimage and, consequently, of trade - each work will only take on its full meaning in the location where it is set, however banal it may be, with which the simple presence of the work will resonate. Installing the *Trianos* in a garden, even though they are giant mosquito nets with white or multicoloured strips made of PVC, in a way goes without saying. However, setting *Priscilla*, Marilyn's giant, silver court shoe in the heart of the Tuileries Gardens in Paris, undeniably creates both a sensation of familiarity and great surprise for the passers-by.

The spatial setting not only changes the meaning and perspective of the location, but also invites us to consider the work's relationship with the location where it is displayed. Whereas the radical difference ostensibly conveyed in the confrontation between the work of artists like Jeff Koons or Murakami and their surroundings, when exhibited in the great rooms of the Château de Versailles, could seem aggressive, Joana Vasconcelos' work is open to dialogue with its location. While the objects maintain their shapes, but when presented under their veil of lace or composed of unexpected materials, they speak differently about what they represent. Even within their casing and surprising structure, a piano, faience dogs, a brilliant centre light can easily be admitted into the noble decor of this palace imbued with history. The statues in *A Ilha dos Amores*, with their forms from antiquity caught in lace and carrying over their heads an enveloped globe whose perforations diffract and scatter their brilliant light, seem destined to illuminate the ancient stages of a Neptune's Basin or Grotto of Thetis with a splendour which will electrify them. The artificial labyrinth formed from the plastic, phosphorescent plants of the *Jardim do Éden* quite naturally take their contemporary place in a 17th century garden. There is no aggressive clash here: the techniques' past echoes the past of the site and allow the historic masterpiece to dialogue with signs of the present.

This is the antithesis of an approach such as Christo's, who wraps up the location, making it disappear under fabrics and bandages, which in some ways resemble a shroud, in a type of violent radicalisation carrying death. Conversely, with Joana Vasconcelos, the finery revives and poeticises the location. Nothing shocks: despite the enormity of some of the pieces, the manner remains modest. If she attacks, she does it gently, adding to the location rather than opposing it, transforming the space to instigate Le Bernin's famous *meraviglia*.

A hyper art

This enchantment is characteristic as it carries the very marks of our hypermodernity. Not a post-modernity whose very prefix signifies an afterwards, a break with a modernity decreed dead, but a hyperbolisation, an extreme perfecting of values and processes which constitute modernity itself. An exacerbated modernity now investing right into the past to incorporate it in turn into a movement of openness and creative autonomy. After the modernist exclusion of tradition, it is time for its hypermodern inclusion, its recycling into the orbit of "nothing is forbidden". In the manner in which Joana Vasconcelos aims at the total work, in her will to conciliate the past and present, the individual and the collective, big and small, architecture and sculpture, feminine and masculine, local and global, an era is expressed which blurs the frontiers and appears under the paroxystic sign of blending, of "multiplexity" and deregulation.

The size of the pieces bears witness to this. From the lower case detail, aware of the intricacy of the crochet stitch, the work rises up to a gigantic capital. A number of pieces demonstrate this: here, the delicate, lace-like framework of the plastic cutlery, which, as the components of work, draws a whole heart of more than

3 metres in height; there, the pendants made of tampons whose small size is their first characteristic, transform themselves into an imposing centre light whose height of almost 6 metres entirely fills the room; as for the hundreds of assembled saucepans and lids, which can initially be measured in centimetres, they end up as a shoe nearly 4 metres long, leaving us to imagine the vast shoe size of the hypermodern Cinderella for whom it was made. Reality thus becomes exacerbated, multiplied, caught in an expanding spiral where you can see the very movement of the hypermodern world.

There is an enormity that can become tentacular. Various pieces appear as monstrous figures escaping from form and norm. The sensations they arouse can be varied, even contradictory: they can terrify and amuse, but they all share this overflowing, shapeless, proliferating character. It can be black humour, as with the curious figure of *Victoria*, which unfurls its perforated coils and crow-like pompoms on 'velvety' paws, bat wings, heads of extraterrestrial creatures and a tail of a vast reptile. We find here a blend of Buñuel and Spielberg, surrealism and the fantasmatic, fascination and horror, with the sentiment that the thing could continue to grow, to spread and unfurl its monstrous appendages.

The same proliferation is found in *Turbo*, *Joujoux*, the *Valkyries* series and *Contaminação* where the forms propagate, inexorably gaining terrain, encroaching on the least opening, penetrating through windows, stretching their ramifications along the stairs, reaching the upper floors: a rampant contamination, a cancer, but joyful here, coloured, where the metastasis adds increasing riots of colours, fantasy to fantasy. Everything can mix with everything; everything is possible and no element imposes its style or taste. Nothing is homogeneous, unilateral or univocal; nothing is limited, defined, neither heads, nor arms, nor torsos nor limbs. Literally every taste and colour are catered for. Baroque in its purest form, perpetual transformation as the monster continues to proliferate and, resembling the Palace of Fortune written by the 17th century French Jesuit poet, father Le Moyne, "He receives each day different figures, / but each lacks purpose, order and moderation".

The hypermodern world is reflected in these proliferating figures: a frightening metastasis out of control, or perpetual, exciting activity constantly surpassing its limits, both are the metaphor of globalisation. Joana Vasconcelos' work, without hiding the distressing side of this exponential expansion – the dark side of *Victoria*'s force – shows what is also exalting, lively and even playful in this culture of excess, eclecticism and blending. The excess does not resemble here the uncontrollable unfurling of brutal forces; it is expressed in the *petit mains* of the lace-makers and knitters, each of whom sews or embroiders their piece of fabric or their bit of cloth. They make the disturbing side disappear, diluting the totality in their medley of colours and soft, silky textures. One could almost play with them, and children are right to run around them, grabbing at them, befriending these clown-like cuddly toys, walking amongst the fun E.T.s as if they were in a toyshop.

You have to admit that there is a lot to see. Because another important characteristic of hypermodernity is the spectacle the work puts on, and this one puts on a great spectacle indeed. Because of its obvious size, it becomes spectacular, a hyper-visual force which, like a zoom effect, vastly enlarges reality. The eye is in a state of shock, subjugated by this aesthetic of immediate impact, which is specific to all the forms of super-shows in the hypermodern world, from the Hollywoodesque 3D special effects to the fun fairs, from the immense urban towers forever growing taller to the grandiose staging of operas or stadiums. Cinderella's slipper has entered the world of Gulliver. The amazement evoked is equal to a spectacular show.

A visual shock which, nevertheless, is not aggressive. This is probably solely specific to Joana Vasconcelos' universe. With a certain number of artists, the excessive dimension is expressed not only by the size of the works but also by their themes, which exhibit death, sordidness and horror. A trash aesthetic developed from 1990 to 2000, which accumulated images of sex, violence, decomposition, putrefaction, pornography and excrement. The overstatement with which these imaginary universes developed conveyed an eminently provocative, aggressive and scandalous will. Yet nothing could seem further from Joana Vasconcelos than the trash aesthetic of torture scenes by the Chapman brothers, the morbid plastinations of Gunther Von Hagens, the artistic cannibalism of Zhu Yu or the autopsied and re-sewn corpses of Savadov. Nothing in her resembles the provocation, overstatement of extremism, the display of blood, the macabre gore of mutilations, which have been in vogue over these last years.

Here is an art that does indeed play with sensation, but refuses sensationalism. You would not find Joana Vasconcelos immersing a cow and its calf in formaldehyde like Damien Hirst and then quartering bodies and cutting them in two to create an event, in an almost media-like logic of scoops and advertising. With her, the most violent elements, the wildest and cruellest, are softened by artistic gesture: it is almost as if the howl at death of the *Blue Knight* wolf has its scream enveloped and retained by the blue thread which tightly hugs it, and the *Giallina* snake or *Calypso* lobster become, caught in the crocheted stitches, almost domesticated. The undeniable visual impact of her works, whose force is comparable with those of Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and other major figures of hyper-art, is nevertheless fused constantly with tact, discretion and a certain gentleness. Joana Vasconcelos has invented the hyper-paradoxical, without radicalism or extremism. Her work shocks without ever being shocking...

The artificial paradise of consumption

Joana Vasconcelos' work is resolutely about the here and now. It is very telling of our time, through its objects and its products, this multiplicity of consumer goods that fill our contemporary daily lives. Besides diverting everyday objects and subverting them so that they can serve as raw materials in her pieces – plastic cutlery, tampons, saucepans – or act as compositional devices in her work, like champagne bottles, funnels, a guitar or a television set, she also chooses to stage many common household objects in her art, such as lamps, chandeliers and arm-chairs. Her work is full of consumer goods (*Bundex Car; Vista Interior*), of all the supermarket products supposed to make modern man content. This is evident in *Small World*, which presents a series of smaller-than-life objects with the colourful and reassuring forms of children's toys: the telephone and racing car, guitar and drum, wheels, balls, baskets and other varied utensils children play with, which appear as miniatures of the adult world of consumerism. Everything is shut inside a low cabinet in the shape of a mobile glass cage activated by an electric motor. This represents human activity in a busy clockwork world, from an angle that brings out its bright, futile and childish nature.

Joana Vasconcelos is certainly not the first to make consumer society a theme for artistic creation. Since Warhol and Pop art, the consumer universe has established its legitimacy in the aesthetic domain, and is one of contemporary art's favourite subjects. Every biennale, exhibition, art fair or other art event offers its fair share of artworks staging the consumer "Grande Bouffe" – either to glorify it, as with Jeff Koons in whom there is a kind of innocence, a flashy and emphatic celebration of the industrial mass culture – a department store aesthetics – or to denounce it, as is usually the case, the distinction between artists is generally made evident by the level of virulence of this condemnation.

Joana Vasconcelos rejects both a euphoric and a promotional view of consumer society as much as the demonisation of the consumerist universe. Instead, she chooses to carefully observe and show what consumerism does to her. The fridge doors of *Menu do Dia* are empty: hanging here and there, like junk, nothing remains but furs, insignificant remnants of animals, from which we have eaten the meat, dismissing the skin. Because, even though we may empty their pantries, we do not consume everything, we waste. And what we consume is not guaranteed to satisfy us, as the object she has designed shows, providing something very different from what it purports to offer. The bed in *Cama Valium*, which should offer calm and rest, is made of blister packs filled with tranquilisers, as a symptom of the stress and sickness in society. The *Sofá Aspirina* armchair is entirely made of pills for headaches. Heads are empty of thought as shown in both pieces; the glass pane acts as a bed head in the former and as a seat in the latter: it is not about blooming and wellbeing, but instead about the exhaustion and physical and psychological fragility of *homo consumericus*.

All sources of satisfaction, even the most basic and immediate ones like food, are explored in her work. All the drawings in the background of her series *Consumo* offer a seducing beauty in their lines and colours, but through transparent plastic boxes, the ones in which supermarkets display food products in an attractive way that nonetheless prevents us from smelling, touching or tasting them. This shows how we consume through our eyes and not our taste. The drawings with abstract geometrical forms suggest that we choose "disembodied" objects when we shop. We buy signs (packaging, logos, graphics, brands) rather than things, as spectacularly shown by *Delícias* – two colourful compositions that represent a cone with three scoops of ice cream and a cupcake... made of plastic! The consumer's pleasure then depends less on the product itself than on its exterior aspect and packaging. Essentially, an aesthetic pleasure.

Subverting the ready-made, Joana Vasconcelos recycles consumer objects into works of art. The empty bottles in *Message in a Bottle, Pop Champagne* and *Néctar*, that hang on a bottle drainer are not chosen for their perfect aesthetic neutrality and thus decreed artworks, as with Duchamp's objects. Instead, they become art pieces themselves: these luminous sculptures, precious carafes or statues of reflecting transparency seduce us not for what they are or contain (they're upside down, therefore empty) but for the pleasure their beauty produces. Duchamp's bottle drainer or urinal remained neutral objects with no aesthetic intent whatsoever; signed and exhibited as art, they also claimed their non-art status in a mocking and denunciatory way. Joana Vasconcelos' bottle drainer or urinal are treated as objects sublimated and metamorphosed by her artistic work, which is explicitly aesthetic. The object itself disappears and is reinvented through arrangements and ornaments (the very ornaments that Duchamp rejects) which turn it into a different object, but without modifying its nature. Far from the ready-made and neither like the pop version of Warhol's Campbell box serigraphy reproduced in all colours but which remains a box. It is a mix of reality and aesthetic re-creation, producing an artwork that is hybrid in essence.

Revisited thus by artistic work, can hyper-consumerism make people dream? Yes, definitely, but it is also a source of disappointment. The superb sofa in *Brise*, entirely made of fake roses with unbelievable colours, catches the eye and suggests dreams of cosy fragrant rest, as if on a bed of roses. But the flowers here are made of plastic and stink of mothballs. Disappointment is as great as the initial attraction, and the work tells us that we

consumers are attracted by the appearance of products, are sold a sign rather than substance; the attraction for the product more than the product itself, its attractive value rather than its usage.

Consumerism and seduction are linked most closely in the world of fashion. What about its victims? Aren't they similar to those *de luxe* dogs hanging from the mobile racks of *Passerelle*, which spectators can hit and break by means of a control mechanism, just like fashion accessories that get thrown away when their owners don't fancy them anymore? *Fashion Victims'* reply is explicit: at the top of the work, a doll with a child's head and a teenager's body conveys the idea that the addiction to fashion starts very early. Below, a mechanism unrolls reels of multicoloured thread and assemble them into a weave that gradually dresses up the doll, in four days, the doll is fully dressed. Then the attire is cut off and falls in a heap on the floor, then the mechanism starts all over again... like fashion in constant renewal, dressing up these posh dolls or ladies-on-show only to undress and dress them up again, over and over. The ones we see in *Portugal Offashion* are agency models aboard a funny catwalk - a podium ironically built on a no-man's land and surrounded by sheep grazing what little grass is left among the rubbish, metal sheets and wooden planks. Dressed in colourful clothes super-posed with various materials, the girls walk along the catwalk carrying not a bag but a radio set labelled DeWalt, the leader in electro-mechanical tools and builders' favourite tool brand! Behind the fairytale-like fashion scene lies a totally different world: the world of hard labour and poverty, a world of broken dreams.

Triviality mingles with glamour, banality with sophistication and misery with beauty. Art in this universe tells at the same time the inanity of the futile and the seduction of luxury. This hybrid and contrasted vision translates the paradoxes of consumerism, both deceptive and attractive, bringing as many frustrations as pleasures. The way Joana Vasconcelos considers over-consumerism is neither politically ecological nor apocalyptically critical - often the meat and drink of contemporary art. It is not like Andy Warhol who was dominated by fascination, nor is it like Sylvie Fleury for whom the expression of fashion's fairytale is inseparable from a climate of cruelty, drama, fetishism and sadomasochism. Joana Vasconcelos looks at the world of appearances with a critical eye but one that is never grating. Whether good or bad, consumerism is treated with irony and distance.

An art of the feminine

The way Joana Vasconcelos looks at fashion is also revealing of the way she looks at women. Symptomatic of this is *Marilyn's* mythical slipper, under whose silver elegance lie hundreds of saucepans that make up the composition. The kitchen, woman's elected and relegated place, breaks through the sublimation of the feminine ideal.

Yet the image she gives of women is equidistant from the two successive visions that have marked artistic representation; firstly, the secular vision of a glorified femininity carrying the very idea of beauty, be it positive or negative according to the symbol attached to it (virgin and saint on the one hand, temptress and sinner on the other); secondly, the more contemporary vision of women's condition, seen from a "realistic" and political angle, even more strongly connected to feminist revindication, which very few women artists have had the ability to convey.

Without being an aggressively militant feminist, Joana Vasconcelos nonetheless speaks of the female condition. She shows its martyr figure with *Burka*: an astonishing installation where a material dummy, draped in warm fabrics from all over the world with a blue veil covering its face and head entirely, she rises up into the air. But as soon as it takes on a feminine form, it falls down brutally on the floor and is crushed under the weight of this miserable veil, leaving a little shapeless heap deprived of any life. Woman is destroyed by a mechanism which crushes her inexorably.

The woman in *Esposas*, voluptuous and full of life, is chained in plastic and oppressed in a different way: her body does not conform to the modern standards of beauty. Some kinds of servitude are less brutal than the burka - and the tyranny of slimness is dictated by a very Western social model - but are nonetheless constraining. The women present in Joana Vasconcelos' work is there to soften and poetise the world, far from the brutal force that wants to subjugate her. To prove this, as she does in *Ópio*, the artist takes the goal posts of football, a very masculine sport worldwide, and transforms the net in which players try desperately to score goals. She opens the net up and attaches it to various posts to form a tunnel full of holes where no more balls will ever get trapped again. And to take it a step further, she has the net decorated with 3800 colourful rosettes resembling flower buds. These are handmade by several women for whom the art of crochet is a subtle opium and through which they turn football - a very virile opium itself - into something more humane, more feminine.

The luxurious chandelier of *A Noiva*, which is as white as the tampons that compose its transparent frame, shows the same soft and beautiful transmutation. The clarity of light is in stark contrast to the obscurity of intimacy; the white purity of the virgin bride cries victory over the stain of sin associated with menstrual blood since the dawn of time. The work is characteristically soft and non-violent: not a bloody scene but on the contrary a luminous whiteness that embellishes the world. Here, beauty and sadness go hand in hand.

The symbolism is, as always, very expressive without being militant or political. It is about a woman looking at other women and giving them dignity through the space she keeps for their needlework and the creativity they express, for the softness and delicacy of the materials they work with. This softness echoes the downy softness of the female sex. Full of erotic sensations, *Flores do Meu Desejo* makes this point, with its vaginal figure that is drawn and covered in soft lilac feather dusters. Joana Vasconcelos chooses not to show the woman as a victim or as a symbol of oppression, but rather takes pleasure in bringing out her rich creativity: all these *petit mains* knitting and crocheting away embellish and colour reality and offer a vision of Woman that is the antithesis of miserabilism.

Here is a world marked by women's brilliance: with its stars like *Marilyn*, *Carmen Miranda*, *Madame du Barry*, its muses, *Euphrosyne*, *Thalia*, *Aglaia* and its mythical figures, *Minerva*, *Calypso*, *Cleópatra*, *Salomé*. This feminisation of the world is more attentive to the ambivalence and the differences that are enriching for both sexes than to the social domination of one over the other. *Marilyn's* saucepans tell less about the household tyranny of the woman confined to her kitchen than the beauty, brilliance and refinement of her mythical slipper, associated with her star's image of dreams and eternity. There's a soft irony expressed in the *Wash and Go* installation where the spectator has to go through two washing rolls made of multi-coloured tights to enter the exhibition; gone are the traditional caryatids, like two Herculean figures holding the porch with their masculine muscular strength. Instead, the visitor receives a soft and silky polish from ladies' stockings.

Is it woman against man? Not at all. But women and men are considered the two faces of human nature, both susceptible to being studied with the same slightly mocking gaze. The two mannequins trapped in their lace net, white for *Top Model*, black for *Super Napron*, represent the two masculine and feminine principles with humour: a slight sway in the hip for her, whose sensuality and futility are ironically caricatured by the little dog she is walking; a self-assured virile way of walking for him, whose Superman's style is pleasantly contradicted by the black fishnet covering him. For the ladies there is *Spin*, a symbolic vanity mirror circled by hairdryers. For the gentlemen, there is *Airflow*, a rack of ties with varied colours and motifs, buffeted by a soft blow. Both of them convey the same futility of a very cosmetic and affected beauty. These vanities are without transcendence and very far from the mirror that gives Georges de La Tour's *The Penitent Magdalene* the reflection of a flame of divine light at night. They're nothing but the smoothness of the world of immediacy, futile and fun, where a breeze of pleasure, luxury and vanity blows.

This very personal vision nonetheless rejects obsessively soliciting intimacy, another strong tendency in contemporary art. For several decades, the emergence of women artists has been accompanied by a desire to use private life as a creative theme. Sophie Calle, Annette Messager, Tracey Emin use the most private aspects of their personal lives as raw materials for their art, just like writers such as Christine Angot and the autobiographical fiction genre, which reveals everything about the writer's intimacy. The artwork mingles art and life, public and private spheres, political and personal ideas, the other and the self. Compared with this narcissistic exteriorisation, Joana Vasconcelos appears infinitely reserved: for her art does not talk about the self but about the world. Through the feminine techniques she uses, the round and sensitive forms she creates, and the soft representations she gives, she expresses not herself and her own experiences but femininity. The eternal, in a Baudelairian sense, side by side with the modernity that signifies "the transitory, the fugitive and the contingent", this "other half [of art which] is the eternal and the immutable."

From Portugal to the new world

This eternal aspect of her art is nonetheless based on her culture and country. *Made in Portugal* raises a Portuguese national flag over the Belem Palace which is handmade and crocheted by lace makers, thus showing the unbreakable bond between national identity and the handicraft which itself is feminine and has also woven the country's history. Portugueseness is at the heart of Joana Vasconcelos' art: as a woman and a Portuguese citizen, she sees herself as an heiress to the long chain of Portuguese female ancestors who have made her and all the Portuguese women of today who they are. The present is rooted in history, just as what's global is rooted in what's local: belonging to the here and now renders the universality and timelessness of her work.

Thus, everything starts in Portugal and through Portugal: the places, techniques, materials and customs. It all comes from this people of sailors, fishermen on their little boats, conquerors travelling the world on their beautiful vessels. But the time of the high seas is over. The boat in *Barco da Mariquinhas* is covered inside out with azulejos, which are industrially made, through the mechanical repetition of the same uniform and single colour motif. The boat is thus loaded with the weight of industrialisation which marked the end of an era, the era of Portugal's great seafarers and adventurers eager to discover new lands and unknown horizons. Ocean immensities are now reduced in *Portugal a Banhos* to the surface of a holiday pool, wrecked on the promenade along the Tagus and in the shape of Portugal: a country cut down to size.

The History of Portugal is brutal, marked by a mid-twentieth century full of totalitarian tyrannies and a dictatorship imprisoning and closely surveying the Portuguese people. *Spot Me* represents a sentry box whose door opens onto an interior covered with mirrors, small mirrors that break the image and cut it into a multitude of fragments, making any complete vision impossible, just like a dictatorship that has broken all individuals, smashed their own selves and made them lose their identities.

The dark side of history mustn't be wiped out. On the contrary, it must be fully exposed to the collective consciousness. The flags, national emblems carrying a patriotic spirit, were subverted by the dictatorship and used for its propaganda: once the dictatorship was over, the people wanted to destroy all its traces and the first things they burnt were the flags. In *Tolerância Zero*, Joana Vasconcelos does the exact opposite: she takes the balls that used to top old flagpoles and exposes them in a way that explains the mechanism of the system. She places the balls in a series of funnels that suck them in and crush them, like the dictatorship that used to crush the country in its steel jaws.

As we can see, there is no nostalgia in this vision of a past that seems as oppressive as it is exalting, representing both a menacing retreat and a crazy expansion, of totalitarian oppression and creative traditions. Contrarily, she takes into account all the contradictory aspects that form roots and a sense of belonging to a country, an identity. Instead of being from nowhere in order to be everywhere, Joana Vasconcelos believes in being everywhere while claiming she's from Portugal: her work is supposed to speak to everyone, and its universality doesn't exclude its individuality. She celebrates well-rooted self-assurance that enables people to be open to others and to elsewhere.

The work opens up to a world that is not meant to be seen as a whole unit. It is about eliciting the lines of force of the violence it carries, however, without being deceived. Yesterday's funnel – dictatorship – has been replaced by today's funnel: globalisation. The impressive piece symbolically entitled *O Mundo a seus Pés* is rather symptomatic of this: a metal staircase leads the way to a platform from which the spectator overlooks a huge frame made of huge grey metallic netting, thus dominating the whole world, represented by a series of luminous globes hanging on the side of the sphere, like balls hanging from a giant basketball net.

This represents the domination of today's world of communication, news, the web and networks as the choice of title – the Portuguese translation of *Citizen Kane* – suggests. The media empire depicted in Orson Welles' film has spread to today's world, spinning its own web: the planetary globe has caught itself in its own trap as Joana Vasconcelos underlines, not without humour. In *Netless'07*, she wraps a computer, the first instrument of cyberspace globalisation, in fine lace. Similarly, in *Euro-Visão*, she weaves a very delicate and feminine spider web of lace around a television set.

With the Internet and other social networks, a new age of privacy has arrived. In *WC Colours* or in *Blup*, a flow comes out of an unplugged screen, running out into a bubble that swells up with the weight of its own flux. This knitted bubble is menacing by the size it reaches and its uncontrollable movements, but it is also attractive due to the imagination and vivacity of its multicoloured patchwork, which offers a soft feminine roundness and the image of a planet where privacy, a patchwork of everyone's individualities, fancifully colours the world. In the new universe of transparency, all is said, all is shown: no more secret walls, we live in a world of uninterrupted flow. Facebook is thus represented by sewing with all its intimate content.

But this globalised world is a hard place. Men and women who take seats on the office chairs of *Ponto de Encontro* are sitting on a circular structure that turns out to be a sort of merry-go-round which they have to pull to make it turn and which pulls them into the infernal spin of its centrifugal force. It is a vision of the business world full of fun and fear, it offers the pleasure of intense activity, movement and speed but it also imposes mobility on workers who can be ejected at any time.

Yet we mustn't be scared of this world. When Joana Vasconcelos expresses the harshness of our world, she creates a huge *Cactus* made of fibreglass but whose thorns are like colourful tentacles, resembling round outgrowths, which when exposed in a shopping mall, transform the consumer temple into a joyful and colourful universe. The lively shiny colours of the artwork, along with its playful and exciting aspect and soft and pleasing forms, and despite its monstrous look, take away the spikiness and transform it into a soft cactus.

Far from a very political or ideological view, Joana Vasconcelos rebuilds the world with materials, forms and techniques that speak to the senses. She doesn't offer a reading of her work that is full of demands or aggressive but prefers to propose a different way of looking: and the magic of old knitted pieces and fine lace provide a solid anchor to her overtly globalised art process.

The re-enchantment of art

In this artistic universe, the world is at the same time hard and soft, as in *War Games*, which, like a video game, travels the roads of a hypermodern imaginary *Mad Max*-like world. On the outside, this terrifying car is bristling with rifles, whereas inside it is packed with downy, tender soft toys that resemble a cosy cocoon.

Joana Vasconcelos' art appeals to our sensations and sensitivity, not to dry intellectualism. As the title of her work *Coração Independente* suggests, she targets the heart. Using the most humble, traditional and trivial raw materials from past and present, such as wool and plastic cutlery, ceramic and electric circuits, feather dusters and wrought iron, she composes a sparkling colourful universe. Her art is *arte povera* but an *arte povera...ricca*, and unlike some Italian artists who use poor raw materials as part of a drive to voluntarily deprive themselves of and reject consumer society, she transforms trivial objects into poetic riches. She sublimates all that is prosaic and turns it into a spectacle of luxurious charm. Luxury, the real luxury, the one sung by Baudelaire: "There, all is order and beauty/Luxury, calm and voluptuousness."

Is this green paradise of childhood and innocent bliss lost forever in our world of deregulated consumerism and fast globalisation? *Jardim do Éden* gives an answer to that question. Its raw materials are all extremely modern: plastic, synchronous micro-motors, fluorescent compact lamps, acrylic transparent disks, electrical systems, *Lycra* and PVC. From these elements born from technology and industrial production, an imaginary garden of wonder emerges in shades of green and dark red, serpentine and circle-shaped flowerbeds, whose vividness shines under thousands of lights that exhale a dazzling fragrance, like a perfume of light.

It is a transmutation of the raw and graceless into a show of sublimated beauty. Joana Vasconcelos creates nature using technology, dreams and industry, with both luxury and ordinary things. Thus she transforms a urinal- the accessory of the most trivial dejection – into *Lavanda*, magnifying its colour and scent with a cover of lavender crochet, or in *Jamaica Land*, with lace whose stitches and motifs recall an exotic fragrance. Whoever enters the wash basin of *La Pareja* is struck by dazzling colours, forms and lace which cover the floor, creep along and invade the basins, and turn the most vulgar toilet into a sumptuous showroom. The same goes for all these joyful monsters of our daily life: their textures, colours and shapeless forms, their puppet show aspect, like tender soft toys, and their smooth structures change the surrounding monotony into a happy, playful soft world.

Recalling the art of the oxymoron, the surprising union of opposites suggests a Baroque resurgence, a neo-kitsch in step with the spirit of a generation that refuses barriers and which mingles and globalises, crosses cultures and connects. This hypermodernity pushes back the limits and its art expresses movement, excesses and tensions, but it integrates them into a vision, which, unlike Jeff Koons, goes further than the hyperbolic glorification of consumer goods. This kitsch is not the rehabilitation of bad taste and tackiness, but a way to give ornament its due place, without falling into over-the-top Rococo style. Joana Vasconcelos' work finds a balance between decorativeness and meaning, theatricality and modesty and the proliferation and elegance of style.

She keeps on an even keel no doubt thanks to a kind smile of complicity which accompanies her work and guides the spectator. Joana Vasconcelos does not have that supposedly ironic - somewhat haughty - distance with which the big zealots of kitsch pretend they are not taken in by the use they make of it. The animals she traps in her nets are not the same as those of Jeff Koons. When he puts his magenta stainless steel dog in front of the Palazzo Grassi, or another twelve-metre high dog covered in flowers in front of Bilbao's Guggenheim museum, the titles he has chosen – *Balloon Dog*, *Puppy* – betray their origins: cartoons, comic strips, beasts from Disney-world where children, but mostly adults, whose childhood has been repressed, find a familiar mass-mediated world. Joana Vasconcelos' dogs are covered in lace and belong to another imaginary historical universe, one that evokes ancient statues, mythical figures trapped in her net. Her artwork both refers to a hypermodern collective sensibility, which plays with representation, and claims very personal roots as well.

Joana Vasconcelos' work reshuffles the cards of the contemporary art game. Without denying the harshness of our time, she brings a happy concoction of softness, harmony and grace: she hasn't given up on purely aesthetic values, thus contradicting the great de-aestheticisation and "de-definition" of contemporary art since Duchamp, which Harold Rosenberg mentions. The elegance it conveys, scotching all suspicion of bad taste, transforms the raw and brutal into the finesse of the spider's web, cooking saucepans into silver slippers, the pumpkin into a carriage, the world of hyper-consumerism into an Eden of luxury and pleasure. Timeless art hasn't uttered its final word as it incessantly looks for new ways to unite the meaning and form, concept and beauty. Far from the repetitive cascades of "an-artistic" deconstruction, Joana Vasconcelos re-enchants the world. She re-enchants art.