

VANITY FAIR

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ON ART

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— BY GARY HUME

IN ASSOCIATION WITH CHRISTIE'S



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COVER: Gary Hume, 2014. THIS PAGE: Joana Vasconcelos photographed in her studio in Lisbon surrounded by works completed and in progress (top); Sturtevant, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres America America*, 2004, from *Art Lovers* at Grimaldi Forum Monaco (bottom).

PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

Joana VASCONCELOS

By KATHARINE ARNOLD

Bursting with colour, brimming with jewels and tassels, adorned with webs of crochet and covered with plumes of feathers, Joana Vasconcelos's art, like her imagination, is larger than life. Fired up by the history of her country, Vasconcelos gives remarkable form to the sights, sounds and textures of Portugal, where she lives and works. From the vast, handwoven tentacles of *Mary Poppins* (2010), to the glistening *Red Independent Heart* (2005), crafted entirely from plastic cutlery, to the giant stiletto sandals of *Marilyn* (2009), made of saucepans, Vasconcelos has created extraordinary sculptural objects that play with notions of past and present, private and public. Stepping into her world is like turning up in Alice's Wonderland.

It should come as no surprise that Vasconcelos was the youngest artist, and the first woman, ever invited to hold a solo exhibition at Versailles in 2012. For her the opportunity to present colossal sculptures in this context was a breakthrough into "a very specific, very male world of monumental culture". A powerful female voice in a country where tradition prevails, Vasconcelos uses her unconventional materials and subjects to challenge preconceptions about gender and domesticity. As she explains, "I choose objects that everybody recognises from their domestic environment, turning them into something completely new. I decontextualise the object so that it gains a new identity and a new life. I turn intimacy on its head."

Vasconcelos's use of everyday materials reveals an unexpected beauty. Transformed into giant, jaw-dropping sculptures, they become rich and opulent. "When you go to a church, to a palace in Portugal, there is a kind of baroque that I find very interesting. I use that feeling, that movement, the beauty of the baroque as a starting point. I think that in the fabric pieces you feel that. Even in *Red Independent Heart* and the filigree ironwork of *Pavillon de Thé* [2012], all of that comes from our local culture and the way the baroque has evolved and developed itself here in Portugal."

Last year, Vasconcelos was chosen to represent her country at the Venice Biennale, a distinction she describes as "the biggest honour of all". This awareness of nationality and the significance of history was deeply apparent in her commission. Creating the very first floating pavilion, *Trafaria Praia*, Vasconcelos brought a *cacilheiro*, or Lisbon ferry, to dock in Venice. For her, the boat drew a parallel with the Venetian *vaporetto*—two great cities with past lives; former world powers founded upon their dominance at sea. The concept was typically radical—a tribute to the great waterways of Venice that also situated her country at the heart of the festival. Preparing for more major projects of massive sculpture in Shanghai, Istanbul, Macau and São Paulo, Vasconcelos is a woman of great imagination, ambition and stamina. I can only marvel at what is yet to come. □



LION QUEEN

Joana Vasconcelos at her studio
in Lisbon on July 8, 2014
with her twin pieces
Vigoroso e Poderoso, 2006.

