

M Material Girl

“Vast” is one way to describe the installations of JOANA VASCONCELOS, which range from stilettos made from cooking pans to a massive embroidered sea creature. She talks about her work with PAYAL UTTAM

JOANA VASCONCELOS IN HER LISBON STUDIO



JOANA VASCONCELOS HAD just finished hanging a striking crochet installation from the ceiling of an art space in Austria when the whole piece collapsed just minutes before the opening. "The cleaning lady was vacuuming and she brushed against the piece, and it went 'pow' and fell to the floor," exclaims the Portuguese artist.

She'd tried warning the gallery

that the roof wouldn't hold but they assured her otherwise. Thinking on her feet, Vasconcelos rushed to the bathroom, applied some lipstick and changed into a T-shirt before the crowds arrived. "We faked that it was a performance work and we reinstalled it in three hours and everybody loved it," she says with a laugh.

While there weren't any theatrical mishaps in her recent show in Macau, there was certainly no shortage of drama. Exuberant, chaotic, intricate and unexpected, her *Valkyrie Octopus*

installation in MGM Macau's central plaza is a spectacle of gargantuan scale. One of her largest works to date, the sea creature – 20 metres high and weighing 1,200kg – dangles above the hotel's cylindrical aquarium. Its swollen tentacles are enveloped in thousands of square metres of fabric, and the entire work is adorned with colourful crochet work, sequins and LEDs woven together in a complex patchwork.

"The truth about this work is that it's a domestic piece," says the artist. "[The fabric references] skirts, dresses, pillows and tablecloths, and comes from [places like] your bathroom, living room and bedroom, but this domestic environment is transformed into something new." In Vasconcelos's hands, innocuous fragments of fabric are turned into a formidable beast of a sculpture. Part of her *Valkyrie* series, the sprawling work is inspired by powerful warrior goddesses in Norse mythology who flew over battlefields and determined which soldiers lived or died.

Vasconcelos has long been celebrated for her subversive sculptures and installations that question the ever-changing roles of women in contemporary society. Easily one of the biggest artistic names to emerge from Portugal, she was the first contemporary female artist to be given free rein of the Palace of Versailles. Exhibiting in 2012, after Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami, she filled the palace with a menagerie of fantastical creatures and objects.

In the Hall of Mirrors, for instance, she placed *Marilyn (PA)* – giant stilettos composed of stainless-steel pans that evoked a warrior's armour. Meanwhile, in the grand entrance suspended above



FROM TOP: INSTALLATION VIEW OF GOLDEN VALKYRIE AT THE PALACE OF VERSAILLES; VALKYRIE OCTOPUS IN MGM MACAU

OPENING PAGE: ALFREDO CUNHA; LEFT: LUIS VASCONCELOS / UNIDADE INFINATA PROJECTOS; ABOVE: LUIS VASCONCELOS / UNIDADE INFINATA PROJECTOS AND CHATEAU DE

the staircase was *Mary Poppins*, a multi-limbed creature made from a carnivalesque array of fabrics. Inspired by the film character who some consider a modern-day angel, the work was also a reference to the architect Ange-Jacques Gabriel, thought to be the guardian spirit of the location.

Born in Paris in 1971, Vasconcelos grew up in a creative family. Her father was a photographer, her mother studied furniture restoration and her grandmother – who lived in Macau – was an artist. While it seemed only natural that she'd end up in the arts, that wasn't her first inclination. When she was very young, she began karate classes and she had her heart set on a career in martial arts.

"My life was pretty much going to school and doing karate – I loved it." Yet just when she was planning to start teaching, she injured her knee. "I was already 30, that's when I decided I could give it a go to be an artist." Her family was instantly supportive: "My grandfather used to say that it takes many generations in a family to produce a successful artist. It meant that a lot of us had tried but none had succeeded yet."

She began studying jewellery and drawing, but quickly discovered neither art forms were her calling. "I was not a very good student," she remembers. "I never did jewellery and drawing really, I was always doing sculpture." She couldn't help but amplify small forms and began working on a large scale using fibreglass. Gradually she started to experiment with different materials.

Her first major breakthrough was *A Novia (The Bride)* a six-metre-high chandelier made of thousands of tampons, which she showed at the 2005 Venice Biennale. "Suddenly the whole artistic world understood that I exist. Everyone said: 'Who is

"Women are not allowed to be free on their wedding day"

this girl from Portugal with this crazy piece?" she says with a grin.

Despite having very few resources, Vasconcelos toiled away in her studio to make the sculpture with the help of a few friends. "We worked for four or five months to make it. You know, it really depends on how much you believe in your work," she muses.

The piece was inspired by a friend of hers who was about to get married and was deciding what she would wear on her wedding day. "I said, 'Why are you wearing a white dress? You're no longer a virgin,'" she recalls. "It's really stupid, because women are not allowed to be free on their wedding day. I think white is an imposition of the system. But tradition can be redefined, and so in a way the piece talks about the contradictions that contemporary women face."

Over the years Vasconcelos' works have grown in scale and complexity. She now works in a 32,000-square-foot warehouse studio in Lisbon, and though she's aided by a mini army of assistants she not only remains deeply involved in creating her works but her art also retains a handmade quality. Her piece in Macau, for instance, has intricate embroidery from Nisa in the Alto Alentejo region of Portugal. The entire installation took a team of more than 50 people almost 10 months to complete.

Handicraft work from Nisa is an increasingly rare art form and it wasn't easy for Vasconcelos to strike up a relationship with the embroiderers. When she first travelled to the region and rallied several specialists – elderly women whose ages ranged from 60 to 80 years – she explained that she was an artist and wanted to collaborate, but was met with blank faces.

"They looked at me and they said, 'What's the point? You come from the city, you think you're an artist, but who cares?'" she says, explaining that they were unimpressed by her work. "I said, but I have money, I'm going to buy your work, and they said, 'We're not going sell you anything,'"

Undeterred, she enlisted the help of the local mayor, who booked a bus and the women piled in to go visit the artist's studio in Lisbon. "When they arrived in my studio, they saw there wasn't such a big difference to theirs," she says. "Both have a bunch of women doing things. And so from there, they understood that we were serious, that's when I gained their trust." Today, she has become friends with the women who continue to work with her remotely from their village.

Vasconcelos may not have made it as a karate teacher but she has the demeanour of a martial artist – calm, determined and steely. In many senses she stops at nothing to achieve her works. For her installation in Macau, for instance, she and her team put in several overnight sessions as this was the only time during which they were allowed to bring in a crane.

For all of her successes, she remains humble and continues to be as hardworking as she was when she first began her career. "It doesn't matter if you have money or [the support of] galleries. What's important is the work itself. So if you believe in your piece you do it till the end, if you have an aquarium [like MGM Macau] or if you don't. If you have a very fancy, chic place or a poor house. We can go from being here in a luxury ambience or go to a small garden or whatever," she says, gesturing at the MGM lobby.

"The environment doesn't really matter. What matters is the truth, your originality and the identity of the work."

In many senses Vasconcelos isn't so different from her flamboyant creations. As she's about to rush off to catch her flight back to Lisbon, I ask out of curiosity: what did she end up wearing on her own wedding day? Vasconcelos smiles and replies, "Yellow." ■