Empowering Textiles: Joana Vasconcelos

Description

Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos makes vast, all-encompassing sculptural installations that embrace the wonder of textiles in all their glory, from crochet and embroidery to needlework and knitting, which she often incorporates with every day, found object including pianos, sinks, and computers, creating unlikely but strangely celebratory juxtapositions. She is now known worldwide for these vivid, evocative works which pay tribute to the joy of texture, surface, pattern and colour, and invite us to consider the relationship between hand-crafted, traditionally feminine practices, and mass production. She says, â??The result of my work is the combination of my experiencesâ??itâ??s the result of my personal life, my family heritage.â?•

Material Girl, 2015

Vasconcelos trained in craft and design, with a focus on jewellery, and the practice has gone on to inform much of her mature art practice, as she explains, â??I studied glass and ceramics, but I studied jewellery most seriously. I was able to experiment with all those mediums in school. It was quite a privilege because I got to work with materials that I continue to use in my daily practice. I draw a lot, too. I use my background in drawing, and the rest of the work is pretty much built like a jewellery piece.â?• She adds, â??The only difference is the scale of the work. The construction of my sculptural projects comes from my jewellery background. When you are constructing jewellery, if you donâ??t get it right you have to start over. Itâ??s like glass. When it breaks, it breaks.â?•

As well as being trained in constructing three-dimensional objects, she insists the skilled crafts of textile making are at the core of her work, noting, â??I know how to knit, crochet, and sew. I spent many hours knitting or crocheting.â?• As her career has expanded, however, she has realised the efficiency of recruiting skilled craftspeople to assist her, particularly when the scale of her projects has continued to grow. She says, â??I thought, if I spend eight hours doing everything, I will only produce one piece at a time. So, I decided to try something else. Letâ??s have more people working.

Instead of knitting all day, I can make multiple pieces at once. Of course, Iâ??m not as masterful as my artisans; I just do it from time to time. But in the beginning, I had to do it all.â?•

Valkyrie Marta, , 2022-2024

Working closely with craft traditions from her family history has allowed Vasconcelos to embrace her Portugues heritage, building a personalised language which is rooted in the past, yet made contemporary through experimental shapes, forms, and colours. She observes, â??I believe that fabrics are part of the identity of a country. If you think about China, you think about silk. If you think about Africa, you think about capulanas. So related to cultural identity, you always have a fabric thatâ??s associated. I really like to create that link with the local history and heritage of the place. Working with fabrics is one way to create that connection.â?• References she incorporates include Portuguese lace, and the seven skirts of Nazare.

Valkyrie Marina, 2024

Within many of her works of art Vasconcelos also draws on feminist issues, and the importance of raising the status of crafts once associated with domesticity, rather than gallery or museum quality. The objects she incorporates with these skilled practices are often those associated with domestic labour, such as pots and pans, or kitchen sinks, a nod towards the unspoken labour of women who have so often also carried highly skilled making practices from one generation to the next. In her recent â??Valkyriesâ?? series, Vasconcelos makes monumental sculptural creations that pay homage to the all-powerful female warriors from Norse mythology, sharing a potent message of female empowerment, at a time when women are still fighting for their rightful place in the realms of contemporary art. Vasconcelos says, â??The art world remains very male-oriented and, therefore, while there will be women artists who donâ??t earn as much or are given the same opportunities as men are, we need to continue to pursue the feminist fight. But first and foremost, I do believe in equal human rights for all human beings in the world.â?•

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