

# ART & DEAL

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# ELEMENTAL

## An interview with JOANA VASCONCELOS

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^ Joana Vasconcelos, *Solitaire* (2018).  
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

< Portrait of Joana Vasconcelos, Image courtesy: KentonThatcher



In his day Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung introduced the idea that “the creation of something new was not accomplished by our intellect, but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind playing with the objects it loves.” And that reflex to rally together objects as the essential elements of an idea is what Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos does with great aplomb. Unashamed to see a casserole dish in a gallery setting, and as easily able to exhibit commonplace consumables as the pieces of a modern memorial to our lives; Vasconcelos sees our belongings as reasonable readymades for a public setting. As French-American conceptualist and chess-player Marcel Duchamp said of his choice of object as art, “my idea was to choose an object that wouldn’t attract me, either by its beauty or its ugliness. To find a point of indifference when looking at it.” Thus his choice of object was decided by its degree of dissolve, of how invisible it had become as an article of reality. That once removed from their everyday setting, and access to their contents denied, that the object’s facade function as a reference to reality, whilst serving to explain a new visual scenario. For Vasconcelos that softening of something’s original utilitarian meaning isn’t what proves her priority, it is that the object is allowed to retain its identity, whilst at the same time, the item is employed to explain anew situation that she sees as significant - as the object in the artist’s hands becomes a signifier for a swell of sensational ideas.

And like Duchamp, or (Andy) Warhol in his day, Vasconcelos seeing something in the ordinary object, looking no further than the side cabinet or kitchen sink for the props, that already have a utilitarian setting, labelled and located as such, that she, like Warhol with his Campbell soup cans and Brillo boxes, removes from their rudimentary relationship to reality, relocating and reintroduced them as the body parts of her artworks. Which for Vasconcelos involves transforming the private and personal, into these astonishing public





monuments. Seeing the domestic space, and the objects that operate there as being available to art and open to new possibilities. Duchamp goes further to explain how the creative act “is not performed by the artist alone.. the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications, and thus adds his or her contribution to the creative act.” Duchamp's acknowledgement of the individual as essential to art is something that Vasconcelos expanded even further, seeing the artist under the influence and involving so many others, besides her studio, of her not being able to exhibit if an institution had not invited her, and of her remaining unknown if she hadn't initially been talked about. And instead of seeing herself as central, as we would expect, Vasconcelos explains everything as being about the relationship of individuals and institutions in allowing her work to be sited and seen by an audience. Which is best explained as an inclusive philosophy, of seeing everyone and everything as elemental and integral to her work.

For their exhaustive choice of colours and inventive virtuosity, Vasconcelos' works appear as an assault on our senses –asking us to see, to touch and to hear them –as they illuminate in the natural light, as much as they glow in a gallery setting. And it is as if the artist sees every kind of object, that we likely ignore, as having the potential to alter into art, and as well for the artwork to still have those associations as central to the work. That spirited

*I have a very symbiotic personality, so that means that because I can read frequencies, I can read space, and I can read energies, which means that I can adapt to a situation.*

^ Joana Vasconcelos, Family Resources.  
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

exchange between object and art has acted as the elixir for Vasconcelos' remarkable body of works. Jung's understanding of creating something new by means of spirited playfulness reads as a reason for how Vasconcelos withdraws something from reality, stealing it almost, to relocate and repeat its unit forms on an unprecedented scale, as the bones or brickwork of a delirious artwork at the entrance to a museum.

In a matter befitting American sculptor Claes Oldenburg, who explained of “being preoccupied with the possibility of creating art which functions in a public situation without compromising its private character of being antiheroic, anti-monumental, anti-abstract and anti-general. A paradox is intensified by the use on a grand scale of small-scale subjects, known from intimate situations – an approach that which tends, in turn, to reduce the scale of the real landscape to imaginary dimensions,” is something that Vasconcelos acknowledges as the alchemy of her work when talking about the ordinary object taking on a greater dimension. But as well it is Oldenburg's vivaciousness, of the ‘art of underwear and the art of taxicabs, and the art of ice cream cones dropped on concrete,’ that appears as active in Vasconcelos' art. Beyond Oldenburg's scale, Vasconcelos' choice of objects feels for a feminist understanding of the role of women in and outside of the home, as the soul of society.

In Machado de Assis's *The Mirror*, the Brazilian poet and playwright envisaged, “the human creature carrying two souls: one that looks from the inside out, and another that looks from outside in.” And goes on in his novel to explain how “the external soul can be an object or operation, a card game, a book, a machine, a pair of boots.” Suggesting, “that it is clear that the task of this second soul is to transmit life.” Which offers us an alternative way of looking at Vasconcelos' art, more befitting of belief systems, existence and experience, and of the energy that explains itself as life on earth. De Assis identifies the object as our eternal soul, in the same way, that Vasconcelos employs objects as the body and soul of her work. And far from being inanimate, that those objects have a residual aura. Something that Vasconcelos is convinced of, when rationalising, “everything has its own frequency, a glass of water, a pen, the frequency of wood is different from glass, so we would say the vibration of one material is different from another, and the same thing happens with people, and the same with trees. Everything is about energy, and the energy of wood is different from glass. And that happens with spaces too, every space has its own energy. If you can read that energy, and be able to connect with it, then we can go further, and actually interact with it.” Every single discussion and design is based on Vasconcelos ‘channelling’ her energy into receiving and then acting on information. That sees her as a metaphysical repository, from within which the artist draws clear

and complete ideas, as she explains, that are intended for real-time and space. All of which affirms a great deal about how Vasconcelos works, of looking into herself, as much as out onto the world, for the objects and elements that serve as the material matter for her autobiographical works.

With an idea decided, everything becomes about the space in which it is located. Of the site-specificity of works outside, against the negotiation of sculpture against space inside, that for Vasconcelos is about seeing space as manageable, even malleable. Reasoning it as her mission “to open spaces up, for a new way of seeing the world, and to connect you with your unconsciousness.” That explores its plasticity, in a way that American architect and design theorist Christopher Alexander explains space as a living organism, when he argues, “all space and matter, organic or inorganic, have some degree of life to it, and the matter is more or less alive according to its structure and arrangement.” The invitation to enter into a space, to embrace and occupy it, has Vasconcelos see it as a stage for her works that leads her audience into and out of reality, for something akin to an amusement park of modern emotions.

#### Interview

**Rajesh Punj:** *What do you feel about the artist interview, as somebody who speaks eloquently, and very often?*

**Joana Vasconcelos:** I have thirty-five to forty shows a year, and I can't attend all of them of course. But I do go to a few, and the truth is after a while the interviews I have to sit in on are pretty much the same, and the questions are always the same. So you only remember some of the interviews you do, but I can remember as well the person interviewing me because they are there at as many of my openings as I am. Which is important, because you can develop a relationship with them.

**RP:** *Which is something that interests me, of the idea of the interviewer and the interviewee becoming better acquainted over time, in a way that develops a deeper, more meaningful relationship.*

**JV:** That way they get to know your work (and to understand your motives).

**RP:** *Ah what is this –as Joana is handed a wooden tray with plain paper and colour pencils – so this is what you do whilst interviewing?*

**JV:** Yes, when I interview, I draw at the same time.

**Manuela Costa:** In meetings.

**RP:** *I thought you were pretending that this was something you did when speaking with someone.*

**JV:** No, this is real.





**RP:** So this can become an idea for a work? Or is it more an opportunity for you to see your subconscious in colours?

**JV:** Sometimes yes, sometimes it is just a way (of occupying my hands whilst I am talking).

**RP:** You are incredibly dedicated.

**JV:** I am. So tell me. Initially remind me of where you have interviewed me previously?

**RP:** I interviewed you very briefly at Manchester City Art Gallery, in 2015, for your exhibition of works as interventions. To return to where we are now, here at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, yesterday you spoke purposefully about the inside coming out, of the private and personal becoming public, and of the need for that to happen, as distressing as it might sound. I want to understand how you explain that as a motive for your work?

**JV:** When you have no shame of exhibiting your private life, in the sense that there are many things we are ashamed of. People are sometimes uncomfortable with their bodies, of their past, of their traditions, especially women, who can try to hide all of those things from everyone else. So crochet, for example, was made and used by many houses across many cultures around the world, but women have always hid that from public guise, because they wanted to conceal the fact that the women before

them, their mothers, their aunts, their grandmothers, didn't have anything other than crochet to keep them occupied. Which meant that they didn't have access to other forms of learning or activity of any kind. So one of the few expressions women were allowed besides domestic tasks was through crochet and knitting. And it is impossible to get rid of, or even to hide away these things, because would adorn every single house in Portugal, and be very personal. But they are not used or have the same value anymore. So much of it is hidden away in cupboards and at the back of a chest of drawers. People have decided not to use them because they don't want to see them, why? Not because they don't like their own handy-work, but more because they are ashamed of the fact that so many women were stuck in a reality that no longer exists. So women don't wish to be reminded of that or to ever go back to that moment. So they skirt over

^ Joana Vasconcelos, *Call Center* (2014-2016). *Vista Interior* (2000). Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

> Joana Vasconcelos, *A Barroca* (2014). Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde







those objects made by their family, and they don't want to assume them anymore. Which can still lead to beautiful moments, because if you ask a family if they have crochet from their grandmother, they will likely reply, 'yes, we use it, or oh no, we have it put away in a draw'.

**RP:** But then do you feel that you are having to change an entire psyche, a cultural attitude, to celebrate what might otherwise be regarded as ruinous, or not worth looking at, unless in the way of a tablecloth or hairdryer, as the most basic of objects, and to admit to having that in their homes?

**JV:** I am not ashamed to use it as a technique, and at the same time I feel quite privileged to honour it as a way of working. Which is not only about recognising it as a way of working, of using it, but as well of giving it a new life, a new position and perspective. So that way you can assume and be proud of what all of those women did and were, without being ashamed. It is about turning its angle. So a pen, a casserole dish, a rice bowl, has no intrinsic value, other than its utilitarian one, but it can in the right context, be seen as a significant thing, as something luxurious. Which is what I did with Marilyn 2009 - stiletto shoes made up of steel pans and their lids. We had a pair of shoes made up of something in no way lavish or valuable.

*It is not for me to solve people's problems, but I can open a window that allows the audience, everyone, to look upon the world and to look at themselves differently, and to do that you have to create a template that opens up the space that enables them to look into themselves, and out into the world.*

^ Joana Vasconcelos, *Diana* (2020), *Conselheiro* (2014), *Mustang* (2014), *Destemido* (2019). Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

> Joana Vasconcelos, *Finisterra* (2018). Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde



So you can look at your everyday life, your domestic life, and take it to a new dimension.

**RP:** And it really feels like that, that you take the simple, the banalest of things, and you celebrate the object for its visual value if you like - that which you then multiple.

**JV:** It becomes something else entirely, by abstracting the object by means of repetition and serialism. When you repeat the same elements you create a new dimension, which goes beyond the original object. I use a technique from the pointillist movement relating to realism, but in a very different context and with a baroque twist. I pick a readymade object, which works to a point and when it is repeated it creates a completely different image. For instance, with the wedding ring, *Solitaire* 2018, I repeat the rim-wheels in a way that after a while you don't see a rim-wheel anymore, you see an enormous wedding ring.

**RP:** A double-take, of your wondering 'what it is' and 'what is it made of?' In that sense, you have objects creating objects.

**JV:** The glimpse, the first look, is 'what is that?' and you will initially see a wedding ring, and then when you zoom in you can make out the rim-wheels and whisky glasses, and again when you zoom out you will see a

wedding ring. So which of them are you looking at?

**RP:** You manage to create objects from objects, as I say, that suggests that everything has an aesthetic value, besides its less impressive functional worth. And then how is it, with the objects that you choose, how is it that you come to select those objects over other objects, as the elements for a sculpture?

**JV:** Every element has a symbology and a concept behind it. So it requires combining objects that make sense and can go on to generating something new. So if you were to put a very strong element with another element that is as strong, side-by-side, immediately it becomes difficult because they both have their own significant symbology.

**RP:** Objects cancelling one another out.

**JV:** So to change the symbology, it is often better to use lesser objects, or you can use strong elements, it depends on the work.

**RP:** I think of Marcel Duchamp, and of his process for selecting readymades, and as well I think of how you look at objects in the world, on a day-to-day basis. When I look at things, the most basic of things, I am inclined to ignore them, as do the majority of us, but you clearly look at them anew.





JV: I do.

**RP: And then are you collecting objects, both physically and mentally?**

JV: Yes. I collect objects mentally, and I have a museum of ideas where I store all the necessary information, so when the time comes - it is like storing to be able to remember things - and you either collect them or you don't. I channel my ideas that is the truth.

**RP: And do you have many ideas, more than you can work with?**

JV: No, in fact, what you have to do is to clear your mind as much as you can, and also be as accessible as you can, and with all that space then allow yourself to store information. And then you can challenge it, and when you do that, concrete it, the idea becomes very clear.

**RP: So the idea becomes simplified for it to be channelled, into and out of you.**

JV: Not necessarily, but yes it is about how it is channelled. When I see the pieces in my mind, I see them completely done. The task for me is to make them in this dimension.

**RP: And does that come naturally to you? Have you**

**had that about you from the beginning, or has that way of working developed over time - as an action and intuition?**

JV: It is much more than a feeling. Channelling is that you receive information from another dimension, and it is incredibly clear in your mind. So you don't see shoes made up of pans, I do, and I do see valkyries. If you say 'okay, create a valkyrie for this room', I would organise myself, focus, and I will come here and design it.

**RP: Yesterday you talked of how each of the valkyries is intended for a specific place or space.**

JV: Yes, because I can connect objects to spaces, and I can connect the objects to each other. It is a capacity that I possess, and I can see things.

^ Joana Vasconcelos, *I'll Be Your Mirror* (2018).  
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

> Joana Vasconcelos, *Big Booby #4* (2018).  
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde







^ Joana Vasconcelos, *Marilyn* (2011).  
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

< Joana Vasconcelos, *Eggnetic* (2016-17).  
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

**RP:** *And when you enter into a space, do you feel the urge to occupy the space entirely?*

**JV:** It depends, if I am asked to relate with it I can design a piece for the space or I can make an installation, it depends (on many things). It is never the same.

**RP:** *And as well, I assume, it is not always about being on a big scale.*

**JV:** No.

**RP:** *I saw your work at the Guggenheim Bilbao last year, whilst at the museum for a retrospective of Lucio Fontana. And I can recall coming down from the upper floors, and seeing an enormous valkyrie hanging like an alien entity from the glass and titanium frame. And it was, unlike many other works, as if these organic instruments of colour were intended for that elevated space.*

**JV:** Exactly, and they were.

**RP:** *And I wished I had had more of an opportunity to see them in their entirety.*

**JV:** They do for that time belong there, because when I go to a space like the Guggenheim, and it was asked of me to introduce something to the entrance space, I arrived at the entrance and thought okay, and with





the intention to do it, I 'channelled' the piece, I design it, and then I had to produce the work.

**RP:** *And were you not overwhelmed at all by the sheer scale of the space, and of the interruptions of architecture and artworks?*

**JV:** No, the scale of the space isn't important in that sense, what matters is what the space needs.

**RP:** *it is interesting to see it that way, of it being about the space needing something at that moment, and not that the volume or vastness of it determines everything for you.*

**JV:** All of the spaces I work with need something. If you can connect with a space you can envisage what it needs.

**RP:** *That isn't curatorial, that is entirely intuitive.*

**JV:** What is there that should go into that space.

**RP:** *And so if we think about where we are, surrounded here by your sculptures in Yorkshire, how have you gone about deciding of the location of works? And is that something you have done independently of the curator?*

**JV:** This was a different situation that didn't involve

*Many people don't feel the need to go anywhere, and I understand that because if you travel within yourself, there is so much to discover.*

^ Joana Vasconcelos, Pavillon de Vin (2016), Pavillon de Thé (2012). Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

> Joana Vasconcelos, Pavillon de Vin (2016). Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

site-specificity, I was able to recall works that I made elsewhere in that way, and it is always surprising when they come out of their original setting, and connect with a new space. Here I worked a great deal with Clare Lilley, because she knows the spaces better than I do, and we discussed locating the works individually. So in that sense, this is a curated exhibition, and not, as at the Guggenheim Bilbao, a site-specific show. Although Clare and I did think very carefully about which works should go where, in order, they could easily relate to the landscape, and as well with the ambience, and of how the audience visit the sculpture park. Which again is the knowledge of the curator.

**RP:** *You are here for a brief moment if we consider time, and the park and the light naturally alter with the seasons.*

**JV:** But that doesn't matter as much. I just did a show in Boston, where I was asked to do something site-specific, like the Guggenheim, Bilbao, and I chose to produce another valkyrie, and for that, I was there for three or possibly four hours, and whilst there I designed the piece, and that was as much as I needed to be there for. I was there to decide what I wanted to do and came back to install it.

**RP:** *When I hear you speak you appear aware of not overwhelmed by space, entirely at ease with the idea that your works will live as an exhibition within*

*a space. When for the majority of us the idea of taking on such a vast space, requires of us incredible confidence that possibly we don't all have. And possibly it is to do with personality as well.*

**JV:** No, it is to do with frequency. Everything has its own frequency, a glass of water, a pen, the frequency of wood is different from glass, so we would say the vibration of one material is different from another, and the same thing happens with people, and with trees. Everything is about energy, and the energy of wood is different from glass. And that happens with spaces too, every space has its own energy. If you can read that energy, and be able to connect to it, then we can go further and actually interact to it. I can interact with you because I can read your energy, and through my work, you can read mine. Everybody knows how to do it, some people are far more conscious about it, and others less aware of it. And some people know how to use it, and then others are not able to use it at all. In the same way that some people can speak five languages, as I do, and some of us manage with one. That can be explained as a connection that you have with your brain that is different from other people.

**RP:** *When I heard you speak yesterday, and all of the conversations that I had and heard about you, everyone reiterated how remarkably open you are and of your generosity of spirit. And I can feel now in your presence when you explain everything in*







*such simple terms, as though what is meant to be will be. How do you create such clarity, and is it a commitment you have with yourself?*

**JV:** I have a very symbiotic personality, so that means that because I can read frequencies, I can read space, and I can read energies, which means that I can adapt to a situation. Some people can read those energies and adapt, and some are not able to do that. So I adapt very easily to people, to spaces, and I also connect with the essence of things. And when you connect with the essence of something, everything else around it becomes less important. I see the essence of people and things, and seeing and feeling that way, allows you to interact and communicate with a lot of things, and as many people.

**RP:** And that appears even more relevant now when we are all so easily distracted by many different things that are irrelevant to us.

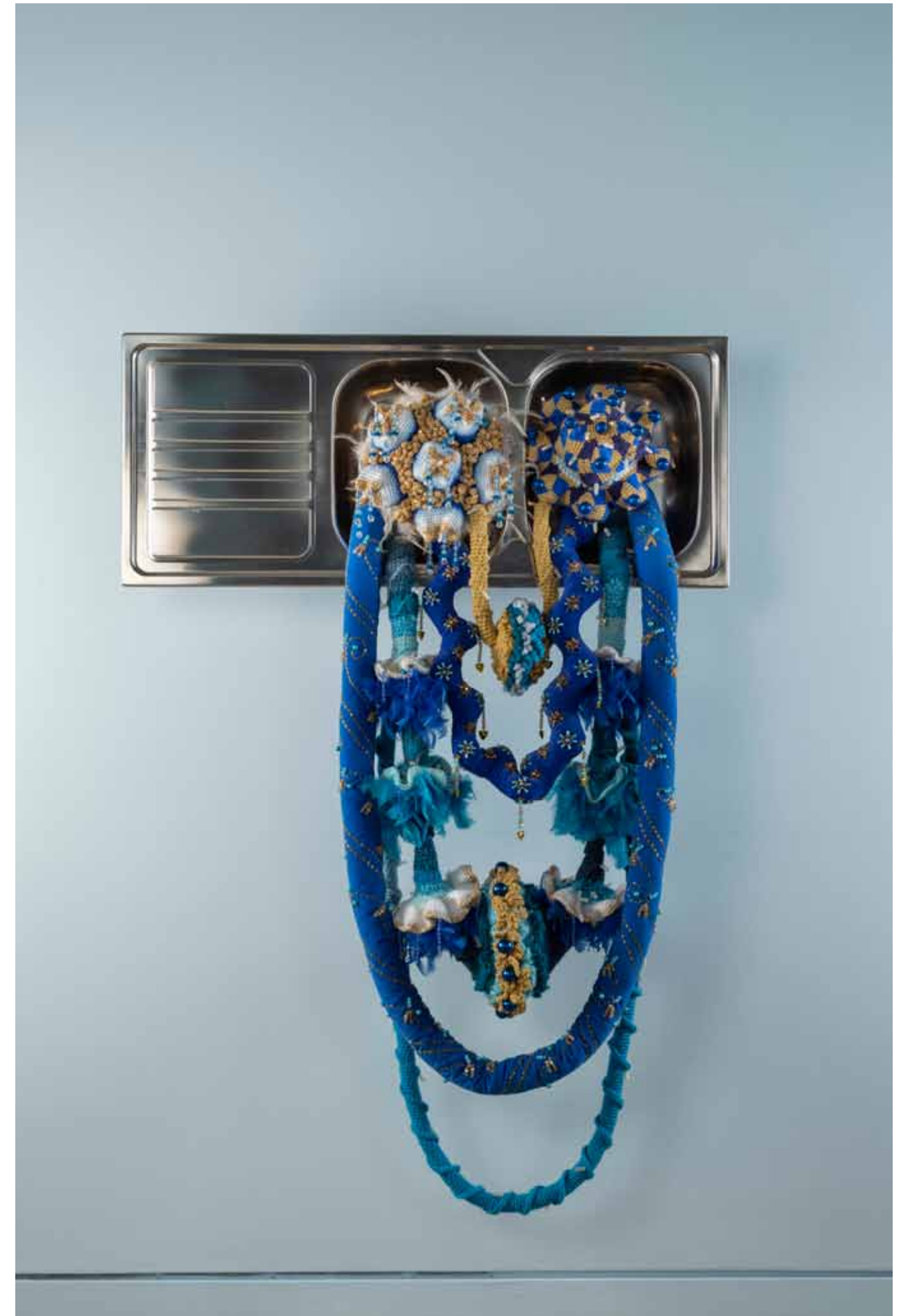
**JV:** Yes, exactly. When I spoke to everyone here at YSP (Yorkshire Sculpture Park) on Friday, it was a wonderful moment, and when I saw the group I instantly understood what the group needed, so I talked of my works in a certain way, to allow them all into my works, and me into each of them. When so many of them ended up crying.

**RP:** And how do you feel about that, of having such an effect on your audience?

**JV:** I felt the need to talk about ideas and issues that were there in the room. I felt I connected with them, and through my work, they could process their own feelings, which I won't be aware of. It is not for me to solve people's problems, but I can open a window that allows the audience, everyone, to look upon the world and to look at themselves differently, and to do that you have to create a template that opens up the space that enables them to look into themselves, and out into the world. And that is the goal of the art world to create templates as artworks, where you can re-evaluate who you are, and of the world in which we exist. Some of us do it by being crazy, intense, or incredibly negative or positive even, it depends, and what matters is the procedure you have for dealing

^ Joana Vasconcelos, *Pop Galo* (2016).  
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

> Joana Vasconcelos, *Precious* (2018).  
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde







with those sensations. And if you then think about your life, of your family, and of who you are, then it is done. But you can synchronise with the frequency of a group, with a space, or with an individual person.

**RP:** *That is where it becomes incredibly interesting, beyond the boundaries of art and into reality.*

**JV:** You can learn to do that. I have it naturally, but I also learned some techniques, and have been learning about that for a while now. So initially I was doing it without knowing or being conscious that I was able to read energies and frequencies. And if you think about the power in the world, leaders don't rule countries without knowing how to do that, they do know how to do that.

**RP:** *Which has me think of charisma or control. And with your exhibiting in so many spaces and places, and going to so many different countries, do you always feel a different level and intensity of energy everywhere you go?*

**JV:** Yes, of course, always completely different. What has been very interesting with my own journey, of learning so much from different cultures and countries, is that the vibrations have always been completely different. I just did a trip to New Delhi, which was quite striking, for a week, and whilst there went to Agra to see the Taj Mahal, and then from

there, I went directly to Boston. So I went from Agra to Boston. I was in a car in the morning, saw the Taj Mahal, back into a car for the airport, and flew to Boston, and arrived there and wondered what had happened to me, 'what is this?' The vibrations of Boston, and of the Americas has nothing at all to do with India.

**RP:** *It must be quite incredible that kind of displacement and temporary placement that sees you see such extreme cultures so quickly.*

**JV:** I think 'oh my god', and it is interesting because the world offers you many ways of existing. There is not only one way, but there are also many cultures, many religions.

^ Joana Vasconcelos, *Purple Rain* (2017).  
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

> Joana Vasconcelos, *Red Independent Heart #3* (2013).  
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde







**RP:** Which has me think of the architect Renzo Piano, who talks of the need to travel.

**JV:** Yes, but you also don't need to go anyway, because inside each of us there is an entire universe we are unaware of. So you don't necessarily need to travel, you only need to go deep into yourself.

**RP:** But I would say travel allows us, forces us even, to go to those places inside ourselves, whilst physically going from one place to another.

**JV:** Many people don't feel the need to go anywhere, and I understand that because if you travel within yourself, there is so much to discover.

**RP:** Likely many of us are too afraid to do the travelling inside ourselves.

**JV:** Yes, I agree.

*I could talk to you and explain who I am through my work, but it isn't something I believe I should do, because it becomes physiological. And the physiological relates to my own intimate processes.*

< Joana Vasconcelos, Solitaire (2018).  
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

**RP:** It goes back to that wonderful point you made earlier 'of everyone seeing your dirty laundry'.

**JV:** Exactly. I have been involving that process of travelling inside myself for more than ten years that enabled me to make the pieces that I have produced for YSP because all of the works here are in some ways autobiographical. About who I am, about my life, and of my personal experiences, and I couldn't have done that without having started by talking about me. I could talk to you and explain who I am through my work, but it isn't something I believe I should do, because it becomes physiological. And the physiological relates to my own intimate processes. But then as well when I am talking about myself, I am talking about everybody else. We are one, we are united. We are because others exist. It is called 'unbutu' - I am because we are.

**RP:** It is included in a recently released song by Coldplay.

**JV:** It relates to a tribe in South Africa, that if one of its group does something wrong, the tribe comes together and puts that person in the middle of a gathering of all of the villagers, and they talk about that person's qualities. If you steal, lie, whatever it is, they bring the tribe into a circle, with that person at the centre, and say positive things. So instead of blaming them, they see it as a moment to celebrate the person's qualities, and say 'you forgot who you are.'

**RP:** And it really works?

**JV:** It really works, it is called unbutu - I am because we are.

**RP:** And is that central to how we should see your work?

**JV:** No, I exist, and when I speak about something or I translate the world through my work, I am aware that I am translating everybody's feelings as well. The person who has forgotten who they are needs to be remembered by the community, but also the community needs to be remembered by the person who has been forgotten. When one person acts out, it is because the community isn't recognising them enough. And it is the reverse with artists, we are a reflection of society, we are like a mirror reflecting what society has become.

**RP:** Yesterday I was in a conversation in which we talked about your studio, which I am told is a community in itself.

**JV:** It is.

**RP:** And what is it that you are doing there that you feel is important, and that possibly isn't present in society.

**JV:** First we try to acknowledge that we have a



community and that they are treated equally. That they are safe and that we have the utmost respect for one another, and I try to give my employee's the best conditions to work in that I can. So we eat together, we work together, we have a healer, yoga classes, karate, personal training. We have courses and classes for everyone, and people can also talk about their work, tastes, and so on. And we try to create within the wider group, a notion that everyone is important in their own way, by allowing them, celebrating even, their thing. It is a way of bringing people together. We work together for eight or nine hours a day, our lives are there in the studio, and without those people, my work wouldn't be possible. And the least I can do is to give them back (the best possible environment to work in).

**RP:** Which is interesting because you have throughout the day and yesterday, talked of your being here because of so many other people - in the way of unbutu, of acknowledging your presence here with other people in so many different places.

**JV:** 'I am because we are'.

**RP:** It sounds very simple, but at the same time remarkable.

**JV:** It does sound simple, but is equally complex.

**RP:** We don't do that, of acknowledging each other enough.

**JV:** Because we have forgotten.

**RP:** Fundamentally everything is about 'me'.

**JV:** It is very egocentric because it is 'you', 'you', 'you', but you only exist because others allow you to. I don't know if you have ever been to Thailand (or anywhere else in Asia), where the monks or the priests only exist because the community needs them. To be a priest is a calling, of course, it is something that you decide, but unless you have a community or parish that prays with you, then you have no point of existing. And the monk only exists because you offer them food, and you go to their temple. In other words 'they exist because we are there and because they are aware that we are with them.' The truth is that when I visited the monks in Venice, where I am about to do a project for the San Giorgio Maggiore church.

**RP:** Which dates back to the 16th century.

**JV:** I realised they exist in the same way that charity exists. And we are pretty much the same, artists only exist if critics keep on writing about them, institutions show them, and curators find their work. I cannot decide what you are going to write, or if I am going to be invited for another show, or if a collector will buy my work or not. Sometimes it can happen, sometimes not. I was invited in 2011 to do this show, and then again in 2014, and I thought what is it I need to do to

make this exhibition happen? Nothing. I had to wait for the right moment to arrive, and finally, it did.

**RP:** It appears you are entirely content with everything that is in front of you, in a way that we, for the majority, are incredibly anxious about - of the future. Was there ever a moment you felt frustrated?

**JV:** Of course, there was a time I wanted to control everything, and I wanted power over it. And then, of course, I realised I didn't have the power to control anything, and so I let go.

**RP:** Like swimming against the tide, and then turning to face the water the other way.

*When one person acts out, it is because the community isn't recognising them enough. And it is the reverse with artists, we are a reflection of society, we are like a mirror reflecting what society has become.*

> Joana Vasconcelos, Tutti Frutti (2019).  
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

