

Interview with Joana Vasconcelos on multiculturalism, tradition, feminism and sculpture

Agustín Pérez Rubio

Agustín Pérez Rubio – I would like to start by talking about the idea of multiculturalism in the Portuguese context, the relationships that exist here with the postcolonial world and also the question of how a Portuguese artist negotiates with a globalised culture. The question is, how do you relate or negotiate with the local?

Joana Vasconcelos – The fact is that Portugal is not a very real place, I mean with respect to the European context. Portugal is a peculiar case; it is not the typical model of a European country, that is, it is not the French, German or British model. I like the fact that you started with this question, because it makes you ask, “And me? Where am I from? What are my roots? What movement do I belong to?”

As a result, neither the Portuguese nor the Spanish have developed along typical European lines and have always lived with the expectation of having to relate differently, because we actually have a common geography and history, although culturally we have not been part of these broad lines of European development. In this way, over time, when we become aware that it is pointless to keep looking back at our colonial past, you start to wonder about the reality of Europe and realize that, nowadays, you share many more historical similarities, customs and ways of thinking than you did with the former colonies. These have become something very different today. Take Brazil, for example. Brazil is no longer what the Portuguese think - an historical, romantic Brazil, or the solution to all problems. In Portugal, that is the way people sometimes still think, as if Brazil is the solution, a kind of tropical solution.

APR – A sort of symbolic paradise.

JV – Yes, a symbolic paradise, both in a positive and negative sense. Because if you make a big mistake in life, you can disappear in Brazil. But Brazil also signifies economic recovery, that is, a place where someone can turn a small business into something that suddenly becomes huge. It is a bit like a Portuguese version of the American dream. Both Brazil and Angola are like that, for example. While that is no longer the case, there continues to be a sort of delay between what is still thought here and what Brazil has actually become. For years, this has made me think that there is a greater similarity and affinity with Europe than I thought and it has made me more aware of the differences with the rest of Europe’s cultures. However, relations with other cultures are a very strong source of invention, and even though I set off from the Portuguese context, when I leave here and meet these other cultures - be it in the East, in Asia, etc. - I always bring something back that seems new and different from my culture. That is even more perceptible when one travels farther afield.

Because here in Europe, there isn’t enough distance for it to work.

APR – I believe that in your work, this relationship with the *other*, with another time, with what is remote, what is different, not the product of an exoticism, but rather what I always like to call an idea of *displacement*. It is as if you take something that belongs to you and insert it or place it in connection with another. It is a question of approaching another context where the meaning of that other object is related in some way and is placed, by approximation, in a new context. I am referring, for example, to your piece consisting of a chandelier and sake bottles...

JV – Well, that is a good example, because when I did that project, I was asked to do something related to the Echigo-Tsumari region, and after seeing all my colleagues’ projects and learning more about the region, I entered into the sake culture. Even though this was a thorny issue because of its relationship to alcoholism in Japan and especially in such a cold and isolated place. Anyway, I did not delve much into the social aspects of the topic, but I sent them my project for the candlestick or bottle holder. What happened was that engineers redesigned my project and modified so much that I did not recognise it, altering greatly the image of the object itself. I could not understand how they could have done something like that, but after some discussion, they went back to my original drawing. However, what was most surprising about the story was that when we were setting up the piece with the team of firemen, one of them approached me and asked what the object was that we were setting up. Obviously, I told him it was a chandelier. And he asked me what a chandelier was. There are no chandeliers in Japan. So then I realized that this piece was very special for that reason, because I was mixing together an icon, a European object, with a Japanese icon, a sake bottle. I was incorporating a new idea of a place that they did not know and adapting the two.

I also realized that many things that we take for granted, that are part of our culture, very often have no significance in another culture and that I should be more careful about that. About how my culture, that is, not only my Portuguese culture but also my European background, comes across. How do you leave this safe place that is Europe? And Europe is a very safe place indeed.

APR – We are essentially talking about the difficulty of translation here, am I right? For example, whenever we talk about this mythical Portuguese word *saudade*, which is untranslatable, the concept of translating it is impossible, we can understand it, etc, etc. As we can no longer talk about the centre and the periphery, I am interested to know how you can insert a work

from within this context into the mainstream, in a globalised world. The question is what do you think is the problem with the reaction to your work in Portugal or Spain, and how is this work understood in your experience in another context? In a context that is not yours, for example? Because I think it has to do with a reaction of both the public and the knowledge of a range of issues, which are, and have much to do with, a contextualization of where the work emerges, where the technique comes from, or the aesthetics of the objects you use, or the project you use it in.

JV – I think the work has to communicate beyond its physical form. I mean, I believe that every work of art has this quality, which is a physical attribute, but also a conceptual quality.

APR – Something that transcends...

JV – If it does not transcend its culture, it is not a work of art. I believe that a work of art is ultimately a piece of multiculturalism. In other words, it is something that gets communicated beyond culture, the starting point, beyond the starting point, which is to say that the ultimate proof for something is that it has proved the test of time and history, that there are works that keep on communicating over the centuries, that is the proof. But at the same time, this proof has also to be converted into history, because there was no concept of the multicultural in the 15th century in the way we discuss it today.

APR – The idea of colonialism existed, but not that of post-colonialism.

JV – Yes, of course. Before, we colonised and we didn't share. But the world today is very different. With the current globalisation, you don't have to colonise, you have to share ideas and concepts. You must be able to communicate with people who you did not communicate with before, who you occupied, who you controlled, right?

APR – Yes, but there is also a great risk that comes from globalisation. Don't you think that globalisation is also a double-edged sword? Because in the end, if you standardize, you run the risk of losing one part of the message and the specific context of that culture?

JV – No, my view is somewhat different. You have to be able to produce something that has something to do with one's origins but which also has a physical body that is connected to beauty, dimension, architecture, form, etc., because sculpture is all of that, both in time and space, and in turn, all interconnected with the body of the visitor. Therefore, the physical body has to work on these aspects but it has to go beyond them; it has to

work conceptually. And there lies the problem, because when you do things that are conceptually very closed, that are centred on a very particular universe, you run the risk of making things that are very complicated, that will never go beyond some intellectual game generated with a certain group of people.

It is interesting to try to be an artist beyond one's borders, because unfortunately in Europe, as in the United States, we still see ourselves as the centre of the world and that is still a very colonialist perspective.

APR – Speaking precisely about this relationship with audiences and contexts, I would like you to tell me about how you relate to your own work. How do people from the world of art and culture, or the general public, relate to your work? Seeing as you are an artist whose work visibly reaches not only museums, collections and the art world, but also the general public as well. So how do you gauge it? How do you balance the artistic, aesthetic and conceptual aspect while, at the same time, establishing a relationship with the general public and its understanding?

JV – The truth is that my case is somewhat symptomatic in the Portuguese context, because people who know nothing, people who have nothing to do with the conceptual model of art, like my work. And it has a special relationship with consumerism, with daily life, with the private and the public, with present relationships, and with the more social relationship of art.

I work a lot on the time and space in which I exist, on this moment in time in which we live. People understand this very well; they understand that life is now. Art is a reflection of our time. This idea of reflecting on the time or the space in which you live, on your environment, is very strong, and by not following others but by going my own way it has given me a great deal of freedom that has opened my work to the public, not just to the art world.

APR – Your work is based directly on the place, that is, it deals with customs and cultural roots, those of fado and croquet, etc. From these you refer to specific contexts, but inevitably the image projected of the Portuguese in many instances, perhaps because of literature, Pessoa, movies, Oliveira, or culture, has to do with an image of loss, drama, sorrow, and some of your pieces propose this kind of reflection, or reflect that image, for example, *Amália* and others. By contrast, most of your work is full of life, closer to home, it is much happier in connection with what is vital; it is almost an exercise in *joie de vivre*. In some cases, one can almost see similarities in your work with more Brazilian, more hybrid notions. I refer here for example to pieces like *Valquírias* and *Contaminação*, works which are closer to a Brazilian informality than the clichéd image of the Portuguese. What is your opinion about that?

JV – The truth is that I do not really care, because as far as I am concerned, this stereotype that the Spanish are always dancing *sevillanas* and the Portuguese are all singing fado is just a stereotype and nothing more. That image is gone, because it is a brand image, it is an image connected with the dictatorship and has nothing to do with the contemporary world.

APR – Do you think this has hindered our ability to establish a relationship of equals with Europe?

JV – With regard to Europe or the colonies, I feel that right now there is a contradiction in both Portugal and Spain, which is based on whether we belong or not to this context or geography and this has finally made us ask ourselves who we are. And that is the question I ask myself in my work. Through it I try to think about what is positive and negative in that gap we are talking about and thus make a series of comparisons with my work to achieve a more positive image of the Portuguese and my own identity.

APR – Speaking about all these little things in respect to the context of your work and its process, you use a number of techniques, or objects, certain ways of making things, which, in many cases, are obsolete or forgotten. I refer to filigree, wrought iron and crochet, which is also disappearing. Crafts and techniques that come from the domestic domain and remain part of a cultural tradition. In these works, are you paying homage to them? Or is this in fact what you were speaking about, linking past events, since your own work often has to do with it, that is, the past in the present and how it is projected into the future?

JV – I agree. I mean, everything that you said about the techniques and the rest has to do with women not being part of art history, since this is something that is very new. At first, the emergence of women in the world of art was associated with what women had hypothetically been assigned to do, that is, manual things. But there are other things, from the domestic and intimate to the public and monumental as well, such as architecture, and this is the place where I feel most comfortable, because I do not like to focus on the hypothetical work of women, doing women's work, as understood within the imaginary plane.

APR – But there is a whole feminist movement which, on the contrary, has also claimed this way of doing things, this space, as its own, which is an ancient cultural construction, but which, as a result of exposing it, subverts, or delimits, a creative space. Would you agree with that?

JV – Yes, I would, of course. All materials are possible, all techniques are possible. No one technique is better than another.

APR – I think you can wage war and win, whether it's with bombs or a pebble.

JV – Exactly. The evolution of women in the art world has brought many new things. New techniques, new textures, new sizes, new colours, a new way of seeing the world. This has been very positive, because their participation has made the art world more dynamic and interesting. It was as if the world was only seen in one way, only by men, and never by women. But when I see the work of other women, when I understand all the progress that has been made, I believe that today's women are living a contradiction, which is the contradiction of the world. But it exists much more in women than in men.

We women are starting from a location, our cities, our countries, and spreading out globally. Globalisation is everyone's problem, but women are also going through this process, from family woman to social woman, as before men occupied both worlds. Women are now also moving from the world of family power to political power. And this is happening at the same time, that is, women are accompanying this dichotomy, not men. This greatly accentuates its scope, because you look at the president of Brazil and you realise that women are becoming part of this movement more and more. But all of this is also visible in the art world. Women who before were doing more intimate and smaller things are now producing very large artworks, for example.

APR – Let's focus more on this terminology about the feminine, about feminism, that is, the whole relationship your work has with this field. Do you see your work from a feminist perspective? Or do you assume it at the time you position yourself in it? Do you, in other words, feel that your work has to have a feminist discourse, or do you assume it as such, as a contemporary woman for whom that is already implicit?

JV – This is a very difficult question for me, because I can respond in several ways. For me to explain what I think, is something that feminists could not do. Feminism is a movement that made sense in an era when women no longer saw themselves reflected in the old models of what women were supposed to be. The problem is that women in the sixties, the generation of our mothers, had a past, namely, their mothers or grandmothers. There was a certain development of the role of women in society that followed a path up until feminism, though there are many debatable aspects to that. But when feminism arrived, there was a strong break in this process and progress. In this sense, it was a hard fight to get to the sixties and seventies and the whole feminist revolution. But there was always a past behind it. By which I mean, they had

to overcome new things outside what they understood, about something that already existed. Whether it was wigs or clothes, women began to liberate themselves until the seventies, when with the great emancipation women earned their individuality and freedom. But in the seventies, we never thought about what would happen next: the new reality.

In the seventies we discussed numbers, financial equality, wages and women's role in society, but we completely forgot what it meant to cut all connections with the past.

APR – Yes, indeed. And sometimes the assumptions were purely related to men: equality, that is, in relation to...

JV – Assumptions, the relationship with men, the relationship with society, but also the relationship between women. This relationship has changed a lot. And women of the revolution, we can say of feminism, have forgotten that, by destroying everything and failing to build a new reality, they were simply destroying. But to build, you also need to destroy. They have destroyed, but have left us a place where there are no more references. Drawing a parallel with cities, the way these have sometimes been bombed is similar to what happened to women. Like the cities with a significant culture, tradition and heritage, which were immediately attacked, women were bombarded and everything disappeared. Then, later, they were rebuilt without any idea of how the city used to look and where it was, just as has happened with many women.

What happened is very complicated because I believe that feminism as a movement has been crucial. But now some things no longer have the same meaning as they used to, as the battle today is more one of humanitarian equality, of human conditions, which has another kind of presence. How will the modern woman make the future? That is the problem. She can no longer look back to make the future, so there is a very strange interplay between past and future, in which one is trying to look ahead but with some amnesia or erasure of the past.

APR – But does it not bother you that part of your work is seen from one angle, or from a feminist perspective?

JV – No, because, in fact, my work has feminist roots and human rights roots. I mean, as a fellow woman, I look at women as human beings who still do not have a series of privileges, a series of human rights. So from that point of view, I am a feminist, because I fight for human rights, whether for women, children, ethnic minorities, homosexuals, or whatever. I think that wherever there is discrimination it is important to fight it. And I think the world has to be more egalitarian.

APR – How is the whole idea of struggle reflected in

your work? Because behind what you say, there is a political position.

JV – My work is often uncomfortable, or causes problems, more to women than men because I bare many things that women are afraid to reflect on. By contrast, my work is not complex for men, but it is for women. Because I look at issues that are very personal and that touch on identity and the way we look at life today. That is the problem, and there are works that reflect the paradox of our time: private and public; the family woman, the social woman, the timid woman, the sexual woman, the smart woman and the object woman. Because there are many women. Now there is no pattern. You can be one woman or several women all at once. But it is not easy in a society that has been built around the idea of a woman having just one identity. In more conservative countries like ours, women's access to the labour market has not happened as fast. So the role of Anglo-Saxon women has little to do with the experience of Latin women who had to stay in the family until the eighties. In contrast, many of them lived alone, did not have children, or it was a personal choice. But in countries where dictatorships persisted, it did not happen. So it's like you had a delay, a moment, and the Spanish and Portuguese women are still facing a much greater dilemma than Anglo-Saxon women.

APR – Yes, because a model cannot be assimilated equally...

JV – No, because it makes no sense either. Because the industrial model has disappeared in Europe as well. And the modern woman cannot look back, because there is nothing to look back to, nor look forward because we don't really know what will happen. So it is not at all easy.

APR – Most of your works have a relationship with architecture through the idea of the large sculpture and intrinsically relate to the body, and in many of them there is an explicit relationship with the female body. This is not solely because of the utensil, say, a Tampax, or a mirror, or lipstick, etc., but also due to this quasi-relationship of forms. Many of them involve anthropomorphic issues related to the basic or ancestral forms of the feminine. How would you define this relationship you establish with the female body?

JV – The relationship with the body is essential in sculpture. The interaction between bodies is what makes, in my view, a sculpture special. What I attempt to do is eliminate the gap that exists and create a new relationship with sculpture. One which is not just about observing and contemplating, but about enjoying and participating.

APR – But you don't talk about relational aesthetics in your work...

JV – No, but it is true that many times the viewer has to complete the artwork. That is, when the viewer approaches the work, it is no longer in the space, because it is the space, and the viewer automatically becomes part of it, relating to it in an integral way, not in an external way. And not in an internal way either. I mean, there is a kind of involvement, since the physical communication with the object is no longer the distance or the observation, but a means of integrating with the work. And that creates a new space, a space to share. That means that the viewer accepts that the object becomes part of its space. This happens very often at the homes of collectors, as the objects become

part of the decoration alongside the design chair, with a well-dressed lady attending a party, in other words, the space is played with today which did not happen before because everything was organised. This also reminds me a lot of Versailles, which may be a good example because it brings me back to Palazzo Grassi in Venice this year. My next big project is to put on a large exhibition in Versailles and I'm studying in depth its history, its origins and everything that has shaped its aesthetic world, which is far removed from the contemporary world in which there isn't one, single aesthetic. We live in an adulterated world, where everything is all mixed up and seen as a whole, in the same way as I see my sculpture and its relationship with the viewer.

Translated by Paulo Leite.