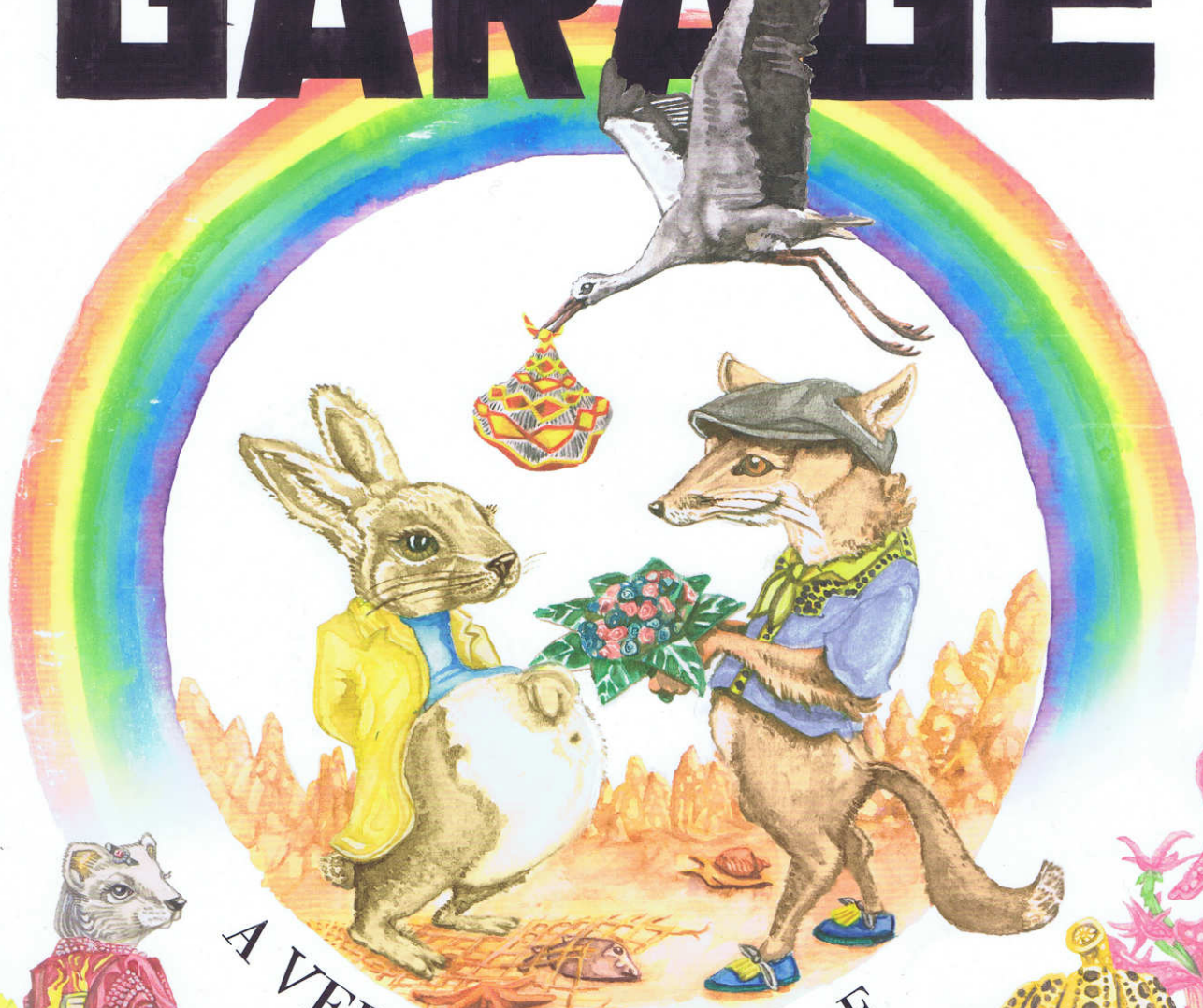


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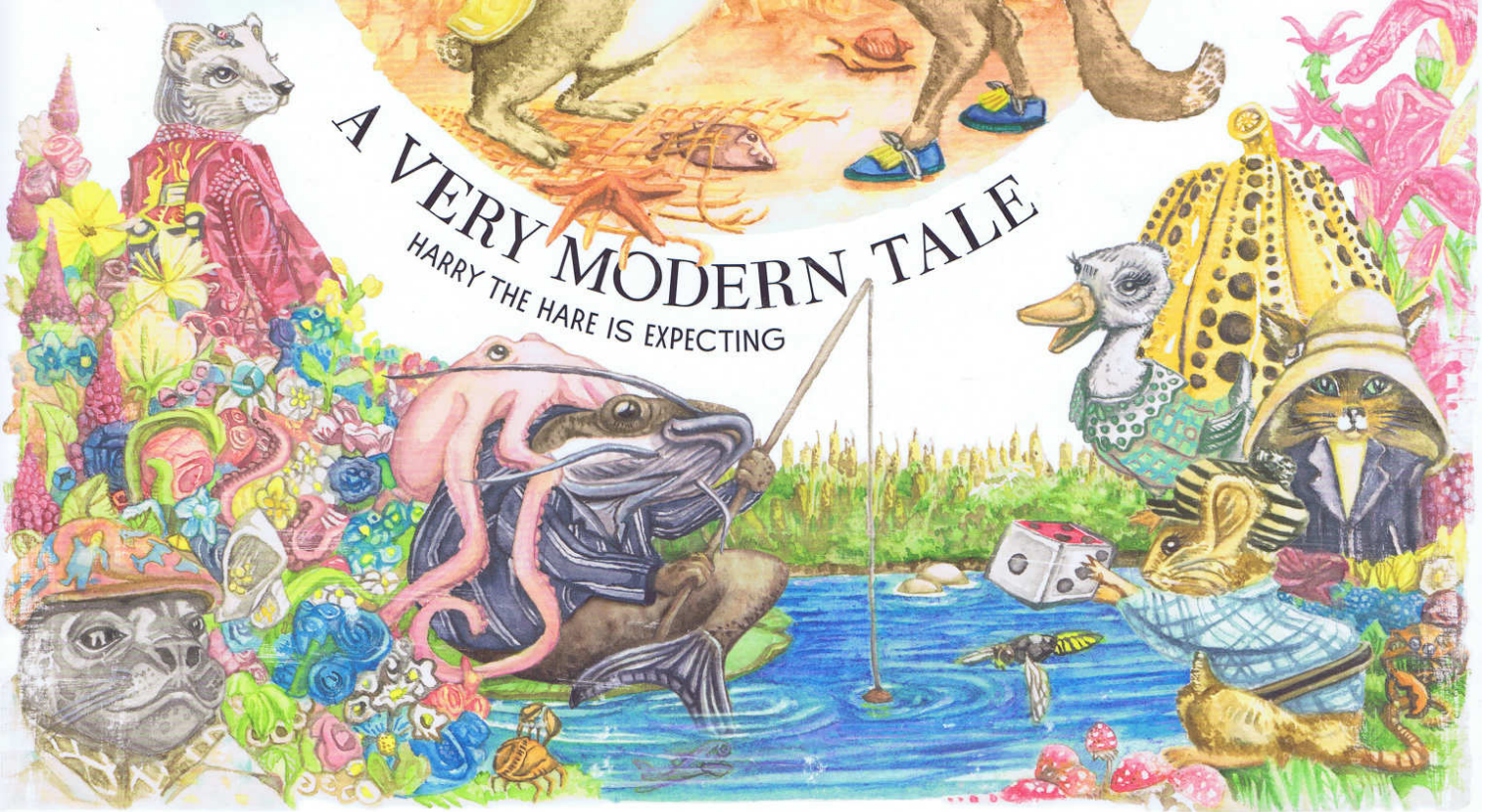
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# GARAGE



A VERY MODERN TALE  
HARRY THE HARE IS EXPECTING



# JOANA

With her monumental creations, the Portuguese artist Joana VASCONCELOS has forged a unique aesthetic language out of everyday objects – underwear, furniture, and knick-knacks – that address the role of women in society. She blazed into the 2005 Venice Biennale with her sculpture *The Bride*, a massive chandelier made out of thousands of tampons.

Now Vasconcelos is the guest artist of the 2012 contemporary art exhibition at Versailles, and the first female one in its history. She speaks to the curator Caroline BOURGEOIS.



**CB:** You've often told me how difficult it is to come from a "backward" European country, when it comes to dealing with the international art scene.

**JV:** In Portugal, the art scene is very small and closed. When I was young, nobody in Portugal thought about contemporary art. Things have changed now, but at the time, being an artist was not something that seemed possible. It was a bit of a fantasy. Portugal produced one artist every 10 years or so. So young artists like me had no support. We were a small group, and we always ended up in the same places. It was very difficult to get an idea of the international art scene, let alone to be part of it.

**CB:** Was it difficult, as a woman, to get recognition?

**JV:** In Portugal, there has always been a tradition of women sculptors. For example, the director of Ar.Co [the Centro de Arte & Comunicação Visual in Lisbon] at the time was a woman. But large-scale sculpture was almost exclusively done by men, as if they were the only ones allowed to do it – as if monumental sculpture was reserved for men. And here was I, a woman, and young, too, daring to do it! That wasn't very popular.

**CB:** Your first appearance in a major international event was when you showed *The Bride* – a massive chandelier made out of thousands of tampons – at the Venice Biennale in 2005.

**JV:** Having my work in the Biennale was a big surprise, and I realized then how ignorant of the international art scene I was. It was a challenge, and I wasn't ready: I didn't know any curators,



my gallery was not in a position to meet the challenge, and I had no help from my country. I felt very alone. Two years later, I was lucky enough to have my work shown in Venice again, in a parallel project [*Yellow Brick Road* at the Palazzo Nani Bernardo Lucheschi, 2007 Venice Biennale]. This time, I was better prepared. I had a new gallery, Nathalie Obadia in Paris, and some collectors who supported me. Then last year, when my work *Contamination* was shown at the Palazzo Grassi in the exhibition *The World Belongs to You* [also curated by Bourgeois], I felt ready to face the world.

**CB:** I've always felt that you have a feminist approach in your art, because you use objects that are traditionally attributed to women, such as lingerie, upholstery, and trinkets.

**JV:** *The Bride* is about decoration, the identity of women, and the idea that the woman is a luxury object. In our European culture, the wedding dress is a symbol of wealth. Even nowadays, when a princess or a movie star gets married, the most talked-about thing



Photographer  
Kira BUNSE

Opposite, left-right  
*Calypso*, 2009, *Cleopatra*, 2009,  
*Carlomagno*, 2011

This page  
*The Bride*, 2001–2005

is her dress. I also work with specifically Portuguese elements. For instance, the heart is a Portuguese symbol, as well as a symbol that everyone can identify. I try to question these symbolic elements, in particular those that are linked to the position of women in society, and to displace them.

**CB:** You will be the first woman artist to have a show in Versailles, which is a historic center of power in France.

**JV:** Versailles is a difficult site because it is very full, very complete. Nothing needs to be added. So my approach was to consider Versailles as if it had always been my aesthetic background – it's an opera, and my work has always grown from the idea that the world is like an aesthetic opera. At the time of Louis XIV, Versailles was an incredible hotspot of creativity in fashion, lifestyle, and design. It was one of the most contemporary places in the world.

There was a grotesque dimension to the 18th-century court that compelled people to abnormality. You can see that in the clothing, the play with wigs, the games, the music, the furniture. I wondered, what would life at Versailles be like if it were translated into our contemporary world? Today, Marie Antoinette would travel by helicopter. I imagined the Valkyries in the Gallery of Battles as goddesses who give life to warriors. I played on this paradox between the past and the present.

**CB:** What are you trying to convey with the Versailles show?

**JV:** I hope that when they see the show, people will feel they can reinvent their future, and that the future cannot exist without being based on the past. You don't need to erase the past in order to invent the future. You can reinvent traditions. ●

Château de Versailles,  
June 19 to September 30.  
Curator Jean-François CHOUGNET