

## ***Melting Pot. Selected ceramic and textile works by Joana Vasconcelos and Ai Weiwei***

**Joana Vasconcelos, Ai Weiwei**

**7 September - 5 November, 2022 - Extended until December 23, 2022**

---

The exhibition presents a selection of works by Joana Vasconcelos including ceramic and textile pieces from her acclaimed *Bordalos* and *Boxes* series, alongside two ceramic works by Ai Weiwei. By revisiting the readymade and the parameters of New Realism and Pop Art, both artists ironically question contemporary society, its socio-cultural norms and collective identities. Their nonconformist visual language, often referring to the history of art and playing with the codes of luxury and design, or with the potential of elements drawn from the domestic universe, allows artisanship and industry, tradition and modernity, popular culture and erudition to coexist.

In the English lexicon, the expression *Melting Pot* is defined as a space within which “elements of very varied origin mix, where different ideas meet.” For this reason, the phrase is often used to describe diverse, multicultural societies.



© Arlindo Camacho | Courtesy Atelier Joana Vasconcelos

Joana Vasconcelos photographed by Arlindo Camacho

The present exhibition is part of the International Academy of Ceramics (IAC) 2022 Congress. Marking the organisation's 70th anniversary as well as its 50th congress jubilee, this year's event takes *Melting Pot* as its theme. Hosted by swissceramics, the Geneva-based Swiss association of professional ceramists, the congress runs from the 12th to 16th September 2022. An exceptional 5-day program will include academic conferences, debates and visits to national and international exhibitions. More than 25 exhibitions based on the theme are organised in public and private museums, art galleries and historical or contemporary institutions in the city as well as other locations in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. A UNESCO partnership evening is also planned to bring to a close the week's activities.



Ai Weiwei photographed with *Pillars* (in progress) in 2006. © Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

The IAC was founded in 1952, immediately after the 2nd World War, with the aim of building bridges between people and cultures through the art of ceramics. It held its first General Assembly in 1954 at the Ariana Museum in Geneva, its birthplace and headquarters. That year, 14 participants from 14 countries were present. The IAC currently boasts 1010 members, representing 77 countries from all continents. Since 1958, the organisation has been affiliated to UNESCO and makes numerous contributions to its various mandates in the fields of science, education and culture.

Henry Reynaud, founder of the IAC, pursued his original ambition to make Geneva the international capital of past and contemporary ceramics. From its outset, Reynaud imagined the Academy as a multicultural domain, nurturing intellectual and artistic exchanges at the highest level. He advocated reconciliation and friendship between people and played a decisive role in obtaining the status of official NGO partner of UNESCO.

<https://www.aic-iac.org/accueil/cotisation/activite/congres-aic-2022-geneve/>  
<https://swissceramics.ch/fr/events/melting-pot-congres-aic-geneve-2022/>





Joana Vasconcelos  
*Jane Avril*, 2016  
Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro faience painted with ceramic glaze,  
Azores crocheted lace  
100 x 70 x 140 cm

Collection of the artist/Courtesy Gowen  
© Luis Vasconcelos/Courtesy Unidade Infinita Projectos

In 2005, Joana Vasconcelos began to create her *Bordalo* series sculptures from a limited set of faience pieces designed by Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro (1846-1905), unanimously placed amongst the most renowned Portuguese artists of the 19th century. The appropriation carried out by Joana Vasconcelos, in the scope of Bordalo Pinheiro's vast production in ceramics, only includes the naturalist representation of animals. Some of these animals are rendered oversize and their proximity to the viewer might generate a surreal feeling. Wasps, lizards and snakes, crabs and lobsters, frogs, bull-heads, donkey-heads and horse-heads, wolves, or cats are ambiguously imprisoned/protected by a second-skin in crochet-work, thus introducing unexpected flows of meaning in the dialogue between popular culture and erudite culture and between tradition and modernity. The use of crochet in a paradoxical imprisonment/protection of the animals, as well as the reference to the domestic context, open up a vast and rich field of interpretation enhanced by the beauty and strangeness generated by the result of the operation. The name of each piece is inspired by personalities from history, society, etc., often in relation to the country or location where the work is exhibited for the first time.



© Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Ai Weiwei, *Watermelon*, 2006, porcelain, 45 x 45 x 47 cm.

In 2006, the artist Ai Weiwei stayed in Jingdezhen, the center of Chinese ceramic production and studied with local craftsmen who were proficient in the medium. Crafting an ordinary watermelon in porcelain, China's highest and most highly-respected art form, challenges the reverence for the medium. The perfectly realistic object also interrogates the issue of product authenticity in China.

---

**Joana Vasconcelos** was born in 1971 in Paris. She lives and works in Lisbon (Portugal) where she has established a unique, collaborative artist-studio working model employing some 50 people. She is a multimedia sculpture artist whose works are often complex installations on a monumental scale.

**Ai Weiwei** (\*1957, Beijing) lives and works in multiple locations, including Beijing (China), Berlin (Germany), Cambridge (UK) and Lisbon (Portugal). As a multimedia artist, he also works in film, writing and social media.









Joana Vasconcelos  
*Mãe d'Água* (detail), 2019  
Stainless steel shower heads, handmade  
woollen crochet, fabrics, ornaments, polyester  
240 x 86 x 54 cm





Courtesy of Gowen © Julien Gremaud

Installation view. *Melting Pot*. Selected ceramic and textile works by Joana Vasconcelos and Ai Weiwei, 2022, Gowen, Geneva. Works by Joana Vasconcelos. From left to right: *Dripping Springs*, 2015, *Pas de Deux*, 2002, *Mãe d'Água*, 2019.

## The *Bordalo* series by Joana Vasconcelos



Joana Vasconcelos  
*Bragança*, 2012  
Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro faience painted with  
ceramic glaze, Azores crocheted lace  
82 x 42 x 30 cm



Joana Vasconcelos  
*Gary*, 2015  
Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro faience painted with  
ceramic glaze, Azores crocheted lace  
54 x 88 x 60 cm

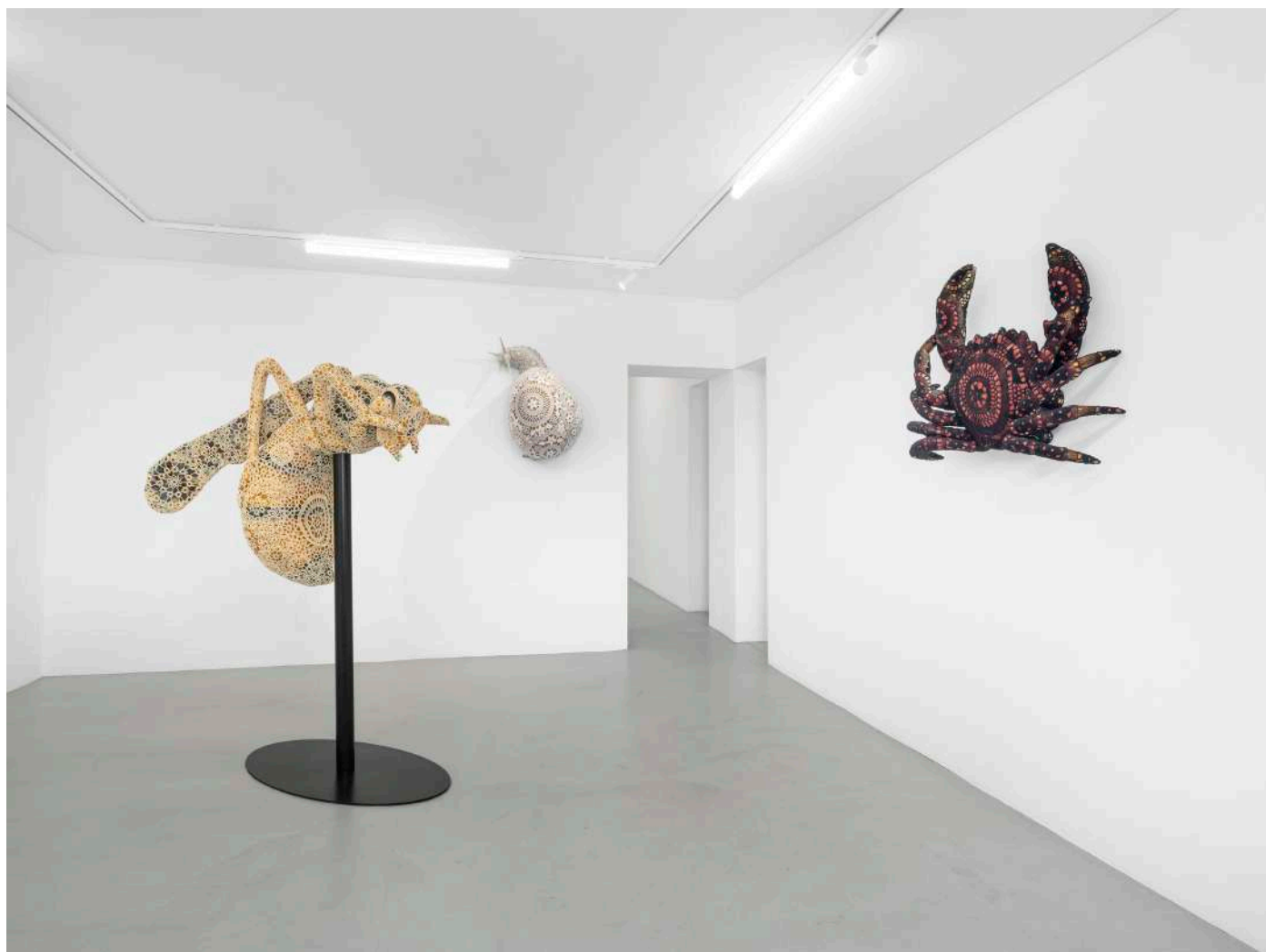




Courtesy of Gowen © Julien Gremaud

Installation view. *Melting Pot*. Selected ceramic and textile works by Joana Vasconcelos and Ai Weiwei, 2022, Gowen, Geneva. Works from Joana Vasconcelos' *Bordalo* series. From left to right: *Gary*, 2015, *Jane Avril*, 2016, *Tarântula*, 2013.





Courtesy of Gowen © Julien Gremaud

Installation view. *Melting Pot*. Selected ceramic and textile works by Joana Vasconcelos and Ai Weiwei, 2022, Gowen, Geneva. Works by Joana Vasconcelos.





Courtesy of Gowen © Julien Gremaud

Installation view. *Melting Pot. Selected ceramic and textile works by Joana Vasconcelos and Ai Weiwei*, 2022, Gowen, Geneva.

## The watermelons series by Ai Weiwei

The ceramic works of Ai Weiwei belong to a conceptual practice which highlights the political, economic and societal struggles endemic in the artist's motherland. By directly addressing these issues, as well as globalization, mass production and western consumerism, Ai Weiwei links the contemporary world with the traditions of Chinese culture. In the same vein as Duchamp, Ai Weiwei's works harbour playful undertones, yet represent critical themes pertinent to the artist's own experiences. Drawing on everyday motifs and objects, often referring to the agricultural sector, he additionally questions the authentic versus fake. In 2006, the artist travelled to Jingdezhen, a city renowned for its Imperial porcelain. Developing ceramic works with expert craftspeople, including the famous *Sunflower Seeds* installation, his coloured vases, floral bicycle baskets, white flower fields or crabs in their thousands meld powerful discourse with artisanal skill. His works adhere to the Chinese tradition of mimicking organic forms.

The two unique variations of *Watermelon* (2006), from a total production of 146 similar works, were produced during this period. In glazed porcelain, they are unique and independent. Referring to the Ai family's exile in the Gurbantünggüt Desert where the young artist observed melons growing on otherwise infertile land, their succulent, glossy surfaces disguise deep, personal hardship.



© Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Ai Weiwei  
*Watermelon*, 2006  
Porcelain  
45 x 45 x 47 cm  
Unique



Courtesy of Gowen © Julien Gremaud

Installation view. *Melting Pot*. Selected ceramic and textile works by Joana Vasconcelos and Ai Weiwei, 2022, Gowen, Geneva. On the left, Joana Vasconcelos, *Magic Mint Tetris*, 2015, on the right Ai Weiwei, *Watermelon (AW01)*, 2006 and *Watermelon (AW02)*, 2006.





Courtesy of Gowen © Julien Gremaud

Installation view. *Melting Pot*. Selected ceramic and textile works by Joana Vasconcelos and Ai Weiwei, 2022, Gowen, Geneva.

## The *Boxes* series by Joana Vasconcelos

Conceived as views open to the world, Joana Vasconcelos' *Boxes* are wall-mounted at eye level, in the same manner as windows or paintings. The works in this series are lined with azulejos, the traditional Portuguese handmade tiles. Typically used for both exterior and interior decoration of houses - sometimes in the kitchen - the azulejos relate to the familial world of the female. Contrasting with the hand-painted ceramics, abstract textile shapes burst from within the *Boxes*, breaking through the tiles and crossing their solid surface. The bodily forms vaguely suggested by these fabric volumes, as well as the materials, ornaments and techniques with which they are made, can also be associated with the female sphere. Like physical works of growth, these rebellious elements transform and blaze through colorful, uncanny and yet familiar shapes that breach the boundaries of the cocoon they inhabited. Vasconcelos' *Boxes* metaphorically represent the woman's struggle for equality and freedom from being relegated to a sole domestic role.

Luís Vasconcelos/Courtesy Unidade Infinita Projectos  
© Unidade Infinita Projectos



Joana Vasconcelos  
*Mistress*, 2015  
Viúva Lamego hand painted tiles, handmade woollen  
crochet, ornaments, polyester, plywood, iron  
215 x 86 x 60 cm



Luís Vasconcelos/Courtesy Unidade Infinita Projectos  
© Unidade Infinita Projectos

Joana Vasconcelos  
*Magic Mint Tetris*, 2015  
Viúva Lamego hand painted tiles, handmade woollen  
crochet, ornaments, polyester, plywood, iron  
138 x 129 x 70.5 cm



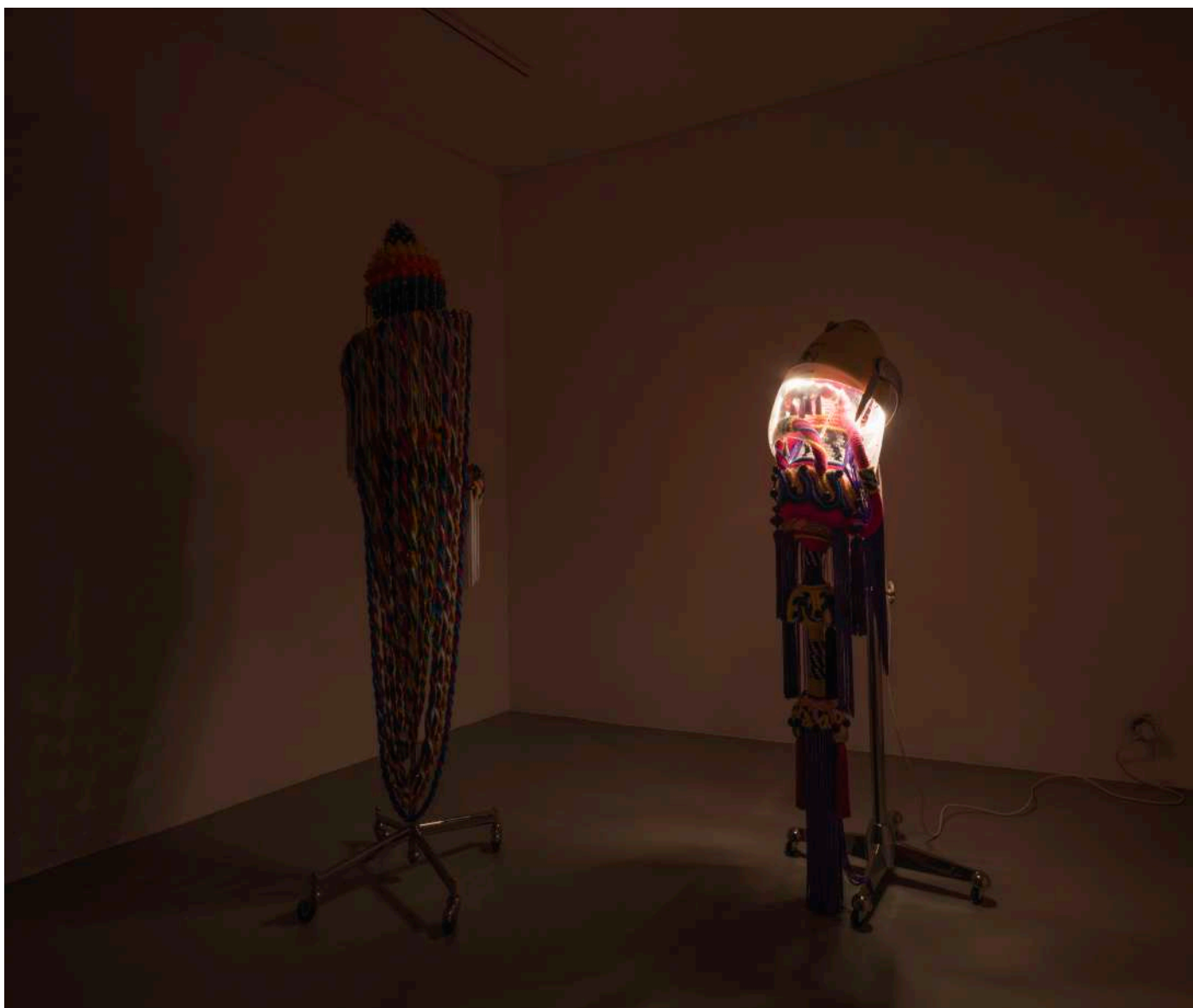




Courtesy of Gowen © Julien Gremaud

Installation view. *Melting Pot*. Selected ceramic and textile works by Joana Vasconcelos and Ai Weiwei, 2022, Gowen, Geneva.  
Joana Vasconcelos, *Delirium*, 2022, and *Ubuntu*, 2022.





Courtesy of Gowen © Julien Gremaud

Installation view. *Melting Pot*. Selected ceramic and textile works by Joana Vasconcelos and Ai Weiwei, 2022, Gowen, Geneva.





Contact: T. +41(0)79 330 17 54 | [info@gowencontemporary.com](mailto:info@gowencontemporary.com)  
Grand-Rue 23, 1204 Geneva