

# Joana Vasconcelos

## **VALKYRIE MUMBET**, 2020

Handmade woolen crochet, Azorian lace, assorted fabrics including capulana, velvets, cotton and polyester, ornaments, pom-poms, LED, inflatable, fans, microcontrollers, power supply unit, steel cables

384 x 672 x 504 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos is known internationally for feminist sculptural work that explores the personal and collective histories of women. Her art celebrates women's labor, exposes societal biases, and interrogates gender roles. Imposing yet playful, Vasconcelos's Valkyries are a series of free-form, site-specific fiber sculptures made of textiles, embroidery, pom poms, crochet, and lights. The title refers to the Valkyries from Norse mythology, fierce war goddesses who determine the fates of others. Many of Vasconcelos's *Valkyries* are named after influential women, goddesses, and real-life heroines.

For her first U.S. solo exhibition, Vasconcelos wanted to pay respect to a courageous woman who made a great contribution to Massachusetts. She asked MAAM for a list of notable women from our local history. We provided her a list of individuals whose legacies include suffrage, poetry, charity, cycling, nursing, and activism, to name just a few. Vasconcelos was strongly drawn to Elizabeth "Mumbet" Freeman's story and wanted to honor her. This monumental installation is the artist's own distinctive homage to Freeman.

Freeman was the first enslaved woman to sue for her freedom under the newly enacted Massachusetts Constitution's Bill of Rights, which states that "all men are born free and equal." Her legal victory in 1781 established a key precedent that led to the abolition of slavery in the state. Vasconcelos did not want to presume to tell Freeman's story. Through *Valkyrie Mumbet*, she sought to make a connection across space, time, and cultures with a woman she admires, with the hope that others will also be inspired to learn more about how a strong black woman named Mumbet changed history.

For this piece, the artist draws upon her expertise and vast collection of textiles from around the world. The sculpture is constructed out of various handicrafts—lace, crochet, embroidery—and various fabrics, including capulanas from Mozambique, a former Portuguese colony in Africa where the artist's parents were raised. Vasconcelos did not want to shy away from the central role that Portugal had in transatlantic slavery. Capulana has a long, complex global history that is intertwined with Portuguese trade and colonization. Today, capulana are often a symbol of ethnic pride and resilience and are part of a revival of home-grown African textile industries as well as a reclamation and remix by Africans and others.

*Valkyrie Mumbet* is a sensorial experience. It is also an ode to Freeman and a celebration of freedom. It is a catalyst for conversation and inquiry about Freeman's life story; slavery in Massachusetts; the role of law in social change; and the history of textiles. We hope it does all of these things and are glad you are here to share it with us.

This exhibition was curated by Lisa Tung, Executive Director, with Michaela Blanc, Curatorial Fellow. *Joana Vasconcelos | Valkyrie Mumbet* was made possible in part by the generous support of Anonymous; Fotene Demoulas and Tom Coté; David and Lynn Eikenberry; the Portuguese Consulate of Boston; and TAP Air Portugal.

## **ELIZABETH “MUMBET” FREEMAN**

On August 21, 1781, a woman known as “Mumbet” won her freedom suit in court against her owner. Enslaved from birth, and never having been taught to read or write, she relied on her wits and fierce determination to achieve her freedom. Slavery was legal in Massachusetts at the time, and her court case was unprecedented. Mumbet’s claim to freedom was based solely on the ideals of the newly adopted Massachusetts Constitution, which stated that “all men are born free and equal.”

Overhearing discussions of this tenet, Mumbet set about finding a lawyer to help convince a jury of her inherent rights. After winning her freedom in court, she adopted the surname “Freeman” and went to work as a paid domestic servant for her attorney. She also continued to serve her community as she had before, working as a respected nurse, midwife, and healer. Extraordinarily for any woman of that time, Freeman eventually saved enough to purchase her own home in Stockbridge Village, Massachusetts. There are few direct records of Freeman’s life outside of her will, her epitaph, and short biographies written by her contemporaries.

Her will detailed the items she owned, including clothing, fabrics, and household goods that she was able to bestow to her daughter, granddaughter, and great-grandchildren. A prized possession, a necklace of gold beads, is represented in the sculpture by yellow pom poms. There are numerous children’s and adults’ books about Freeman’s life. Her story is part of the African American Heritage Trail and items from her life are preserved at the Massachusetts Historical Society and the New England Historic Genealogical Society in Boston. There is currently an independent movie in development and a movement to commemorate her with a postage stamp.

Elizabeth “Mumbet” Freeman’s story deserves to be told many times, her courage in fighting for her freedom in court left an indelible mark on Massachusetts history. She helped set a legal precedent that led to the end of slavery in the Commonwealth and ultimately helped to free many others.

*Any time, any time while I was a slave, if one minute's freedom had been offered to me, and I had been told I must die at the end of that minute, I would have taken it, just to stand one minute on God's earth a free woman, I would.*

—Elizabeth Freeman



## **EPITAPH**

Elizabeth Freeman, known by the name of Mumbet died Dec. 28 1829. Her supposed age was 85 years. She was born a slave and remained a slave for nearly thirty years. She could neither read nor write, yet in her own sphere she had no superior nor equal. She neither wasted time nor property. She never violated a trust, nor failed to perform a duty. In every situation of domestic trial, she was the most efficient helper, and the tenderest friend. Good mother, farewell.

## FREE & EQUAL?

Historical documents show that people of African descent were enslaved in Massachusetts by the 1630s. By 1670, Massachusetts had made it legal for the children of enslaved people to be born into bondage as well. This departure from English law made the institution more profitable, and slavery became entrenched in the Thirteen Colonies during the following century. Census records indicate that there were approximately 4,500 people enslaved in Massachusetts by 1754.

Enslaved people in New England had limited legal rights. Nonetheless, they and their advocates often looked to the courts to achieve their freedom. In certain circumstances, enslaved people could and did take their owners to court for extreme physical abuse; broken promises to grant freedom; or the unclear status of an individual's mother. Between 1764 and 1780, nearly 30 enslaved people sued for their freedom. The subject of this artwork, Elizabeth "Mumbet" Freeman was the first to sue purely on the basis of a natural right to freedom. The legal case was made under the new Massachusetts Bill of Rights, Article I, which declared that "all men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights."

Her case, known as *Brom & Bett v. John Ashley, Esq.*, was unique because it was a direct challenge to the constitutionality of slavery. Freeman's successful court battle in 1781 helped hasten the demise of the practice in Massachusetts. By 1783, it was declared to be in opposition to the principles of liberty and equality outlined in the Commonwealth's constitution. Slavery, however, was not formally outlawed in Massachusetts until the passage of the 13th Amendment in 1865.

## TEXTILES & TRADE

*Valkyrie Mumbet* is constructed out of crochet, embroidery, Pico lace from the Azores, pom poms, lights, and various types of fabric, including capulanas from Mozambique, where Vasconcelos's parents grew up. Capulanas are multipurpose cloths used as skirts, dresses, head wraps, baby-carriers, and bags. They are prized for their beauty and have been important symbols of wealth and status for centuries. The design, history, and use of this brightly colored cotton fabric across nations is complex. This type of cloth is also known as African wax print or Dutch wax cloth, reflecting the international trade and production of the fabric from the colonial era to the present day.

Early trade routes from India and the Arab world brought intricately patterned textiles to the eastern coast of Africa centuries before the Portuguese began colonizing the area in the late 15th century. The dominant Swahili culture incorporated, reimagined, and combined these fabrics and designs with their own over time. During the colonial era, European traders capitalized on their lucrative triangular trade routes between Africa, Europe, and the New World to eventually monopolize the textile markets. Relying on cheap cotton produced by enslaved laborers, techniques copied from Indonesian batik dyers, and fast production methods available in Europe, they mass produced and profited from selling these textiles across Africa.

Since gaining independence from Portugal in 1975, Mozambique has seen a resurgence in local designers reclaiming capulanas and revitalizing textile industries there. The cloths exemplify the fluidity of cultures and reflect a complicated and intertwined history of cultural exchanges across continents, as well as the legacy of European exploitation, colonization, and slaveholding. In this piece, by choosing to feature capulanas and highlighting their inherent beauty, Vasconcelos also acknowledges their historical and cross-cultural complexity.