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Joyce J. Scott at Grounds for Sculpture: A fierce vision in beads and glass

By Thomas Hine | January 18, 20198



Photo by Ken Ek

A sewing needle is a sharp instrument that helps pull disparate things together. It's the primary tool of the artist Joyce J. Scott, subject of a provocative, funny, horrifying, and altogether wonderful show at Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton Township, N.J.

Scott's sensibility, well documented in the terrific video that introduces the exhibition, and in the more than 50 works on display, is sharp and penetrating. "My work is not meant to be openly offensive," she says in a written statement at the beginning of the show, "but that does happen." To a moment when racism and misogyny, her two great topics, are front and center in American life, she brings lots of attitude — and beauty, too.

Her art began with beadwork, and has long involved glass. "Joyce J. Scott: Harriet Tubman and other Truths," on view through April 1, combines a career retrospective with several recent works commissioned for the show, including two large outdoor sculptures. Unlike most museum retrospectives, this one, curated by Lowery Stokes Sims and Patterson Sims, leads off with the newest material, including nine works Scott created in collaboration with Berengo Studio on the glass-making island of Murano in the Venetian lagoon.



"Dizzy Girl" (2014-16) by Joyce J. Scott, at Grounds for Sculpture.

This strategy helps give this show its contemporary edge, because it focuses on what the artist is thinking right now. You won't soon forget *Breathe*, a joyous but mildly disquieting sculpture of a red glass woman giving birth to a clear glass baby. I am particularly drawn to *Dizzy Girl*, a figure with a nearly psychedelic blue and orange surface, a head coming out of her head, and a yellow chain that becomes a noose around her second head and ends in a couple of corncobs. There is also a small figure at the other end of the chain, trapped in a net. It's menacing and kind of gorgeous. I don't understand it, quite, but that mystery is probably what makes it so compelling.

But if you are unfamiliar with Scott, a 2016 MacArthur "genius" award winner, it is best to go to the second floor to see her art develop. She was born in Baltimore, where she has always lived, and as a young girl, she learned to sew and do beadwork from her mother, Elizabeth Talford Scott. Some of her mother's work is in the show, and it is clear that she was talented and skillful.

Joyce Scott's early work sprang directly from her mother's, and in turn from African American tradition. But it was complicated by an art school education and extensive travel, where she learned other beading and sewing techniques. She was also exploring the visual expression of different spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, Mexican Catholicism, and West African religion in the Americas.

By her account, the decisive moment in her career was when she was at a workshop in Maine and met a Native American bead artist who showed her how to do the peyote stitch, a bead weaving technique that does not require a loom. "Everything in my life changed," she says,

because it allowed her to do beadwork without cloth backing. The advantage she cites is that it enables people to experience the translucency of the glass beads.

Her art of decorated surfaces immediately became sculptural. The stitch also gave her a way to "draw" with beads and create slightly cartoonlike human figures with expressive eyes. *Man Eating Watermelon* (1986) pokes fun at an old racist stereotype. It turns out that the watermelon really is trying to eat the man. It's a funny piece, but the man's fear seems real. You would never expect that you could get so much life into a thing made only from beads.

Buddha Gives Basketball to the Ghetto (1991) makes use of the same technique, but with a bit of monumentality and mystery. Buddha, a frequent subject of Scott's art, seems to be giving basketball as a kind of blessing, a path to transcendence and beauty. A ladder spirals around him, suggesting the promise of a rise. But the player, though he is making a graceful gesture, is only two-dimensional, lying on the ground, not in the air, where a basketball player ought to be.

The first piece of blown glass in the show is the Medusalike *Pussy Melon* from 1994, but blown glass did not really become a preoccupation for Scott until the turn of the millennium, after two studio residencies. The beads, however, have never disappeared. They are embedded in the blown glass, or used to dress existing wooden African sculptures that she has made into new works.

The new works she has done for this show all relate in some way to Harriet Tubman, escaped slave, abolitionist, Underground Railroad organizer, Civil War spy, and suffragist. In the introductory film, Scott says she associates Tubman with her mother. "They were little thunderbolts," she says, and one suspects she's one too.

The best of these is a suite of works called *Harriet's Closet*, an imagined boudoir that contains items that sum up Tubman's, and also Scott's life. At the center is a quilt, encrusted with Scott's characteristic beadwork, and incorporating one of her mother's quilts. Tubman is almost always depicted with a rifle. Here, the rifle is made of blown glass and beads, and it takes the form of a bent bouquet of flowers.

Another piece of Tubman iconography is the slave's shackle, which Scott resisted depicting too literally. Here, it is a blown glass heart, connected to a hand in a beaded glove. A shawl, representing one given to Tubman by Queen Victoria, is made from wool Scott spun and wove and decorated with pearls, beads, and insects cast in resin. Above it all, a glass Tubman presides as the Buddha.

The exhibition also includes two outdoor sculptures of Tubman. One, made of bronze-patinated foam, stands 10 feet high atop quilts and next to a rock garden with running water; bead-festooned trees stand behind it. Everything is good here but the sculpture itself, which lacks intimacy and the sense of the artist's hand that marks nearly all of Scott's work.

The other outdoor sculpture is a 15-foot-tall Tubman made from mud and straw. It is meant to be an ephemeral object that melts away. It will probably outlast the show, but you should get here before the full exhibition disappears.