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“I Was an Artist in Vitro”: Joyce J. Scott and Her Darkly Beautiful Art

Harriet Tubman and Other Truths at Grounds for Sculpture bills itself as Scott’s most comprehensive exhibition to date.

January 30, 2018

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Joyce J. Scott, “Araminta With Rifle And Vèvè” (2017), painted milled foam with found objects and milled foam rifle with blown glass and mixed media appliquéés, beaded staff, dimensions variable (image courtesy Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore, MD, photo by Ken Ek)

Hamilton Township, NJ — “Ain’t I a woman?” These were the words of abolitionist and women’s rights advocate Sojourner Truth in an 1851 speech,

speaking for generations of black women who toiled and suffered, and were essentially stripped of their femininity. In order to survive, they “ploughed and planted and gathered into barns,” and suffered “the lash as well,” said Truth. Their lives were devoid of jewels, lace, and fine perfume.

Sculptor, printmaker, installation artist, performer, quilt maker, storyteller, and jeweler Joyce J. Scott affirms the femininity of her forebears, giving them the finery they deserve, most notably in the installation “Harriet’s Closet,” which she describes as a “dream boudoir” for Harriet Tubman, the “inner sanctum of a great lady,” with such items as quilts, shawls, hats, and beads. And yet Tubman’s signature rifle is also a part of the boudoir, albeit fabricated in glass with a floral motif.

Scott specializes in drawing her viewers close with glittering bling, then serving up shocking subject matter: spread-eagle legs made from wooden pipes and beads, for example, in the *Day After Rape* series, or the smashed-up head of Rodney King. All this can be seen in *Harriet Tubman and Other Truths* at Grounds for Sculpture, an exhibition advertised as Scott’s most comprehensive to date.



Joyce J. Scott, “Shackles/Heart and Hand” (2017), blown glass, beads, 14 x 3 x 5 inches (image courtesy Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore, MD, photo by Ken Ek)

An exhibition catalogue is available, with essays by curators Patterson Sims, former director of the Montclair Art Museum, and Lowery Stokes Sims,

curator Emerita at the Museum of Arts and Design and former president of the Studio Museum in Harlem, as well as an essay by Seph Rodney, an editor at Hyperallergic.

Using all the formal elements of art, Scott “lures you to engage in a dialogue you may not have had, and hopefully it will lead to your making a change,” said Amy Eva Raehse during a visit to Grounds For Sculpture. Raehse is the director of the Goya Contemporary Gallery in Baltimore, which represents Scott.

“My work is politically and socially oriented because that’s what keeps me up at night,” Scott added. “It’s important to me to use art in a manner that incites people to look and carry something home — even if it’s subliminal — that might make a change in them.”



Joyce J. Scott, “Head Shot” (2008), seed beads, thread, glass, bullets, 18.5 x 4.5 x 4.5 inches (Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA, Museum Purchase, photo by Ken Ek)

Scott uses humor to address issues of racism, violence, sexism, and social injustice. A performing artist as well — Scott sings as part of the duo the

Thunder Thighs Revue — she burst into song for the Grounds for Sculpture board of directors on the eve of her opening.

“People see art as ephemeral and elitist, with no concrete application,” said Scott. “We have art to examine how we can make a difference in our children’s lives. Art can be what newspapers used to be, what collage is, rolled up, a joyous occasion even when about challenging issues. It allows us to think and stretch and use all our facilities. What’s happening in our museums is a primal way for people to connect to each other. It helps us understand our humanity.”

A 2016 MacArthur “Genius” Fellow, Scott was born in 1948 and lived with her mother until Elizabeth Talford Scott’s death in 2011. Scott’s mother, a fiber artist who received the 1987 Women’s Caucus for Art Honor Award for Outstanding Achievements in the Visual Arts, was her inspiration and sister in creativity. As the daughter grew into an artist, “Mother Scott,” as she is referred to by friends and curators, became more earnest in her quilt making, which has appeared in solo and group exhibitions at the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Museum of Art and Design, the Fuller Craft Museum, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“The quilts are my heritage. I gain my strength from them,” said Scott, comparing them to magic carpets that take her on a special dream ride, and to being wrapped in personal stories.



Joyce J. Scott, "Three Generation Quilt I" (1983), fabric, thread, 57 x 46 inches (collection of the Artist, photo by Ken Ek)

A selection of Mother Scott's quilts is on view in *Harriet Tubman* — and there are quilts by the daughter, as well. Unlike traditional quilts with regular patterns, Mother Scott's are free-form, often employing materials from her life — including beads. Her surfaces are dense with intricate compositions and wild colors.

Scott's father, like her mother, was born to sharecroppers in North Carolina. Both migrated in the '30s and '40s and met in Baltimore. Theirs were families of makers: in pottery, knitting, metalwork, basketry, blacksmithing, quilting, and storytelling.

At the age of three, Joyce began sewing with her mother, and at age five made her first necklaces and jewelry. "I was an artist in vitro," she is fond of saying.

After graduating from an all-girls white high school ("I helped to integrate it"), Scott earned a scholarship to get her bachelor's degree at the Maryland

Institute College of Art in 1970, and her master's degree from the Instituto Allende in Mexico in 1971, with further study at Rochester Institute of Technology and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. She worked for a time as a drug counselor, using weaving and crocheting to help Vietnam veterans, but felt limited in her efficacy.

Scott's aesthetic was counter to the Minimalist and Conceptual art being produced by her contemporaries. Glass beadwork became her primary medium in the '70s. "It became a method of communication that combined my mom's skills with a needle and thread with the possibility of transmitting light through glass beads."

In Scott's Baltimore home — an adjacent set of row houses she purchased with her mother — the walls are painted effervescent shades of teal, canary, and chartreuse. There are textiles evoking tribal origins, paintings and blown glass in bright colors, and beads, beads, and more beads. Every room is an art space. Crowned by a full head of orange curls, her neck is often adorned with her own creations: intricate designs made up of tiny seed beans. The necklaces, like the sculpture, take on disturbing subject matter yet attract with beauty, using the form of female adornment to deliver her message. They are also the most easily accessible of her works to collect.

When is it jewelry, and when is it art? They both come from the same creative impulse, says Scott. "Sculpture is about scale, meant to be looked at many times but not touched. Jewelry allows the wearer to be involved, choosing how to wear it on the body. I wear a lot of it, it's a way of inviting others to you."



Joyce J. Scott, "Man Eating Watermelon" (1986), beads, thread, 2 x 8 x 3 inches (collection of Linda DePalma and Paul Daniel, photo by Ken Ek)

The necklaces on exhibit show her transition from using a loom to employing the peyote stitch, based on the sacred plant, and with beads falling on a diagonal; the three-dimensional technique requires no armature. "These necklaces have narratives," said curator Patterson Sims. "She makes dark issues palatable. 'Rodney King's Head Smashed Like a Watermelon' takes an ugly theme and makes it beautiful."

"Pussy Melon" looks like the uninvited guest to Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party": a shriveled prune face with wiry hair emerging from labia. "War Woman" depicts a double-headed figure in a puddle of glass guns, each with a millefiori bead and key.

There is a strong maternal theme running through the work, including the *Mammi Wada* series, based on a figure from African lore that connects water and fertility. It addresses the contradiction of black women who raised white children from racist families. One beaded figure shows a white child getting all the attention from the black mother, while the black child hides in her mother's skirt.

Other works look at mixed ancestry. A beaded black doll has arms and legs that are made from porcelain figures of white aristocracy.

Scott makes no preliminary drawings, but works intuitively. She recalls how her mother invited many women to drink her homemade wine and tell story after story as she quilted. “The brain and hand and heart are threaded together,” Scott said. “It’s a vision and responds to what the materials do.”



Joyce J. Scott, “Harriet’s Closet” (2017), installation of beaded objects, textiles, and found objects (coatrack, rifle, chair, vanity, dress), dimensions variable (image courtesy Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore, MD, photo by Ken Ek)

In some ways, Scott conflates her mother with Tubman. “Like Harriet, my mom had strength and a desire for justice. I saw Harriet as a way to not only celebrate my mom but women who do the kind of work she did and were courageous. Harriet has always been with me ... I thought, that’s who I want to be, someone with grit and gumption.”

“Harriet Tubman’s Closet” was produced specifically for Grounds for Sculpture. At the center is a beaded quilt spilling out of a trunk. Representations of objects that might have belonged to the abolitionist hero include a beaded hat, a blown-glass rifle with floral details for self-defense, slippers, and a shawl. There is a beaded hand shackled to a heart, showing that her heart was bound to the work she did.



Joyce J. Scott in front of her 15' earthwork, "Graffiti Harriet." Created from mud and straw, the piece is expected to erode over time, leaving behind the rifle and beadwork. (photo by David Howarth for dmhphotographer.com)

On a vanity, rather than the typical perfume bottles there are two fetishes with insects embedded in resin, and a reproduction of the letter Frederick Douglas wrote to Harriet.

"Harriet's Closet" continues outdoors with a fiberglass figure made to look like bronze, standing in a sea of quilts and not far from a lynched figure.

On the other end of the Domestic Arts Building, "Graffiti Harriet," made of earth, is also scrawled with the words from Frederick Douglas's letter. At 15 feet — Scott's tallest work to date — the sculpture is expected to deteriorate during its winter in New Jersey. All that will remain is the beaded patchwork and gun, representing mementoes cast aside during the fight for emancipation.

On a snowy winter day, the sculpture showed no sign of deteriorating.

Harriet Tubman and Other Truths continues at Grounds for Sculpture (80 Sculptors Way, Hamilton Township, NJ) through April 1.