



6 Artists Turning Beads into Spellbinding Works of Art

By Ariela Gittlen

Feb 16, 2018

E pluribus unum. Out of many, one. It's the United States motto, embossed onto coins since 1795, but it would also make an excellent slogan for beadworkers of any nation. Whether the result is as immersive as one of Nick Cave's beaded Soundsuits, or as discreet as a rosary, the practice of beading transmutes a jumble of parts into a meaningful whole.

Many cultures have rich beadwork traditions, yet aesthetics and motifs can vary widely, even within the same region. Like other traditional craft forms, such as embroidery or weaving, beadwork is often seeded with symbolic visual language, messages passed down within a community or family unit.

Yet beads are not merely benign, traditional objects. Beginning in the 15th century, when Portuguese traders arrived in West Africa, glass "trade beads" were used by Europeans to establish trade networks, barter for resources, and buy slaves. In North America, beads were likewise used for nefarious purposes, perhaps most infamously by Peter Minuit, a Dutch trader who is said to have purchased Manhattan from the Lenape Indians in exchange for a box of beads and assorted trinkets.

For many artists working with beads today, the medium's historical connection to colonialism, slavery, and genocide is still potent—it may even be the reason they employ it. Others use beadwork to explore different kinds of conceptual concerns, from challenging the invisibility of women's labor to asserting the importance of the individual. The following artists engage with beadwork in diverse ways, but each is pushing the medium in new directions.

Joyce J. Scott

B. 1948. Based in Baltimore, Maryland



Joyce J. Scott
Head Shot, 2008
Grounds For Sculpture



Joyce J. Scott
Vessel, 2006
Mobilia Gallery

Scott, also a recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship (she won the award in 2016), doesn't believe in pussyfooting around. Her work bluntly confronts difficult subject matter, including classism, racism, and misogyny, or as Scott calls them, "your general basket of humans sins."

She approaches beadwork with reverence for its history and cultural significance. "This is an ancient skill and I must be worthy of the task," Scott says. "I'm a loopy fool with a gift that brings great joy and power to myself and the viewers of my art."

Scott's sculptures frequently combine glasswork and found objects with beadwork in both witty and disturbing ways. *Head Shot* (2008) depicts a hollow glass hand gripping a gun with a beaded head balanced on its barrel. Look closer and you'll see that the hand is full of real bullets and the head has lost the top of its skull, exposing bumpy beige brains. Lovely to look at yet disturbing to contemplate, it reads as an indictment of our passivity in the face of gun violence, particularly against people of color.

Day After Rape Series: Gathering Water (2009) shows a pair of tobacco pipes joined together by delicate beadwork depicting a woman's naked and headless body. The series of which this work is a part refers to the rape and murder of women during the conflict in Darfur. Scott is determined that we not ignore injustice, whether it belongs to the past or the present. Her mastery of technique and genius for storytelling guarantees that we cannot.