

Art | Basel



Joyce J. Scott: 'I'd like my art to induce people to stop raping, torturing, and shooting each other'

Thomas Chatterton Williams | October 2, 2018

Thomas Chatterton Williams speaks to the Baltimore-based artist about her sharecropper heritage, the distinction between art and craft, and her frustrations with stereotyping

Joyce J. Scott has never not made art. Her mother, Elizabeth, with whom Scott worked side by side and shared a Baltimore row house for most of her life, was an extraordinary maker of quilts in her own right. Scott's meticulous off-loom beadwork practice draws on the rigorous craftsmanship that was her birthright, as well as a dizzying array of global influences – from Native American handicraft to Thai Buddhism and Murano glassblowing techniques – amassed over decades of attentive study and travel. The end product amounts to something far greater than the sum of its disparate inputs, a multifaceted whole that is entirely shocking and new.

Scott, who won a MacArthur 'genius grant' in 2016, at the age of 67, challenges restrictive notions of cultural authenticity while simultaneously embracing – and in the process subverting – simplistic stereotypes about the scope of black art and life. Her work, which will be presented by **Peter Blum Gallery** in Art Basel Miami Beach's **Survey sector**, is at once richly cosmopolitan and powerfully rooted in the distinctly black American Baltimore community she has never left. Scott's labor-intensive sculptures and installations are frequently figurative, repurposing neutral handicraft processes as vehicles for scintillating humor and haunting ideas. 'I'd like my art to induce people to stop raping, torturing, and shooting each other,' she has said. In pieces such as *Man Eating Watermelon* (1986) and *Buddha Supports Shiva Awakening the Races* (1993), which operate on two levels like three-dimensional pointillist canvases – impressing the viewer on different registers from near and far – she leaves us no choice but to linger and think. Perhaps we may even improve.



Joyce J. Scott, *Pussy Melon 2*, 1995. Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery, New York City.

It seems like you were born to make art.

My mother was from South Carolina, and my dad from North Carolina. They came up during the Great Migration from the South. My mom's side comes from a long line of craftspeople – potters, weavers, quilters. She was a very industrious woman who had a lot of different jobs. She was a cook, a nanny, a housekeeper. And she was a quilter. Nothing in our house went un-mended. My parents were sharecroppers, and though they came from very humble beginnings, my mom was very clear about the beauty she wanted in her home.

You were extraordinarily close to your mother and you even lived next door to each other in Baltimore, is that right?

No, no, we lived in the same house, babe. We had two houses, but the second one was for storage and to extend my studio.

Even better. So at what age did you understand that you were going to make art seriously?

I knew in utero. But I made the real choice when I was about 23. My undergraduate degree is in education. I knew I'd be a 700lb alcoholic if I worked in the public-school system. So I did what any

self-respecting kind of hippie would do. I ran off to Mexico with friends, and while there I was lucky enough to get a scholarship at the Instituto Allende. I did my master's degree in crafts. I came back. I had one job as a drug counselor, for which I used art as my method. We painted on the walls and we made pottery and stuff. I did that until methadone was introduced. I knew that was not something I wanted to be part of, so I stopped. My mom and I decided to buy a house. We bought one for \$10,000. I've never had a *job-job* since. I've always been self-employed.

What was your mother's conception of art?

My mom was a storyteller. It showed in her work, but we didn't really put it that way until I got out of graduate school. But then you think about Rauschenberg using quilts in his work, and you're like, 'Wait, he really is a craft fine artist.'



Joyce J. Scott, *Mammie Wada IV*, ca. 1978-81. Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery, New York City.

Do you make the distinction between craftwork and fine art?

I don't see how painting a cup is better than making the cup. The difference is a social construct that makes work created by people without an academic education worth less than the work of someone who went to art school.

Did you have to overcome resistance to the craft side of the work?

Yes, I did. I'm also a jeweler, and folks are like, 'It's jewelry.' Even though it may have taken longer to make and you use the same intellectual punch to make it. I always fought against that.

The titles of your pieces tend to be as interesting to me as the beautiful bead- and glasswork itself, see for instance *Buddha Gives Basketball to the Ghetto* (1991). How do you come up with the wordplay?

I was one of those girls who would save \$1,015 a year and just go somewhere. One of the places I went was Thailand, where there are a whole bunch of black Buddhas with curly hair. One of the explanations for those curls is that they were small seashells. But I'm like, 'That's a black man.' I thought about how the power of Buddha could be used within my community. And, of course, I thought of basketball. If you look at that piece, Buddha is holding in his hand what looks to be half of a basketball, but it's really a prayer cup. I wanted to bring an evolved psyche to my community without it being religious, because Buddha isn't a god. He's an evolved human, right?



Joyce J. Scott, *Sex Traffic 2*, 2017. Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery, New York City.

The work is so intricate, I was astounded. How long does it take to make something like that?

It can take me a year, because I work on more than one piece at a time. And I have to procure stuff. I had to go to Italy to make those glass Buddhas.

Where did you go in Italy?

The island of Murano – the Berengo Studio. This was my first truly adult trip on my own. I was going to do a residency in a country where I don't speak the language. It was very much a cultural thing, where an African-American woman from Baltimore comes to Murano, which is a small island. We had to work this thing out together, and it was really quite sweet.

How long did you stay out there?

I went three times. Twice to work for three weeks to a month. The third time, my work was in the satellite show of the Venice Biennale. No, not California, baby [Laughs.]. I was trying to be *la donna*. I would get on the vaporetto, and I'm walking with a cane, and I would go up to young men, and I would push my hand out and say *prego*. They'd help me sit down. I was like, 'This is it.'

How did you start monetizing your work? Because it sounds like it's very expensive to make.

I had my first real sale when I was about 16. I was selling jewelry to shops around the city. And by the time I got a scholarship to the Maryland Institute College of Art, I had a little bit of business selling jewelry. I made clothes. I've done theater. I always knew I would have to be self-employed. I bristled under anything that seemed to be unfair authority.



Joyce J. Scott, *Harriet's Rifle 2*, 2018. Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery, New York City.

I'm like you.

So I started very young. But my mom was also self-employed. Even though she worked in someone's house somewhere, she had side businesses. She would always sell dinners. Do you know what 'arabs' are? Not people we call Arabs. In Baltimore, we still have people who sell fruit and vegetables in horse-drawn carriages. Some people call them 'arabbers'. In my neighborhood, we called them 'arabs'. They still come around.

And they're black?

Yes. My mom would buy vegetables from them, and then she would cook for the neighborhood. I always knew that I had to have a side hustle.

I love the term you use here, which calls to mind another facet of what makes your art so special – it is at once so cosmopolitan but also extraordinarily rooted in place. Baltimore infuses your identity.

I love my city. I still live in a challenged, African-American neighborhood, literally around the corner from where the Baltimore uprising was two and a half, three years ago, after the death of Freddie Gray. I'm in the middle of this. But I am not mired as much as swaddled by my community. You live with an art context here. There are murals everywhere, people sing on the street. It's arty – it's that, along with everything else.

Are you optimistic that art can, in fact, make people stop raping, killing, and torturing each other?

I don't have the ego to think my personal art is that powerful. I believe there can be a critical mass, though. If I teach someone, that is social justice.

Who were the artists you admired when you were developing your own vision? Because it doesn't look like anything I've ever seen before.

A lot of my looking was at indigenous communities, be they Native American or African or Scottish. I started traveling when I was really young. I've been through Central and South America, Asia, Africa, Europe. I never stopped. And when I was there, I didn't just go and sit down and look at the ocean and say, 'I'm an American, bring me a mai tai.' We would climb up to the top of Machu Picchu, or we'd be in a cave. Or I'd be in Africa in a bush taxi, riding and talking with people. My artwork does that, too.

Do you think people are surprised by the range of your interests and references?

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Yes. We still hold the same stereotypes about everybody. And I'm not even scared of the stereotypes. It's not the use, it's the abuse of the stereotype. It's the idea that that's *all* I want to do.



Joyce J. Scott, *Harriet Tubman as Buddha*, 2017. Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery, New York City.

Thomas Chatterton Williams is a writer based in Paris and 2019 National Fellow at New America.

Joyce J. Scott's work will be presented by Peter Blum Gallery in the Survey sector of Art Basel Miami Beach 2018. Survey presents precise art historical projects. Participating galleries in 2018 include : **Anat Ebgi, Ceysson & Bénétière, Eric Firestone Gallery, espaivisor, Galeria Jaqueline Martins, Hackett Mill, Haines Gallery, Hales Gallery, Louis Stern, Paci contemporary, Peter Blum Gallery, Richard Saltoun Gallery, Sabrina Amrani, Tibor de Nagy, Venus Over Manhattan, and Walden.**