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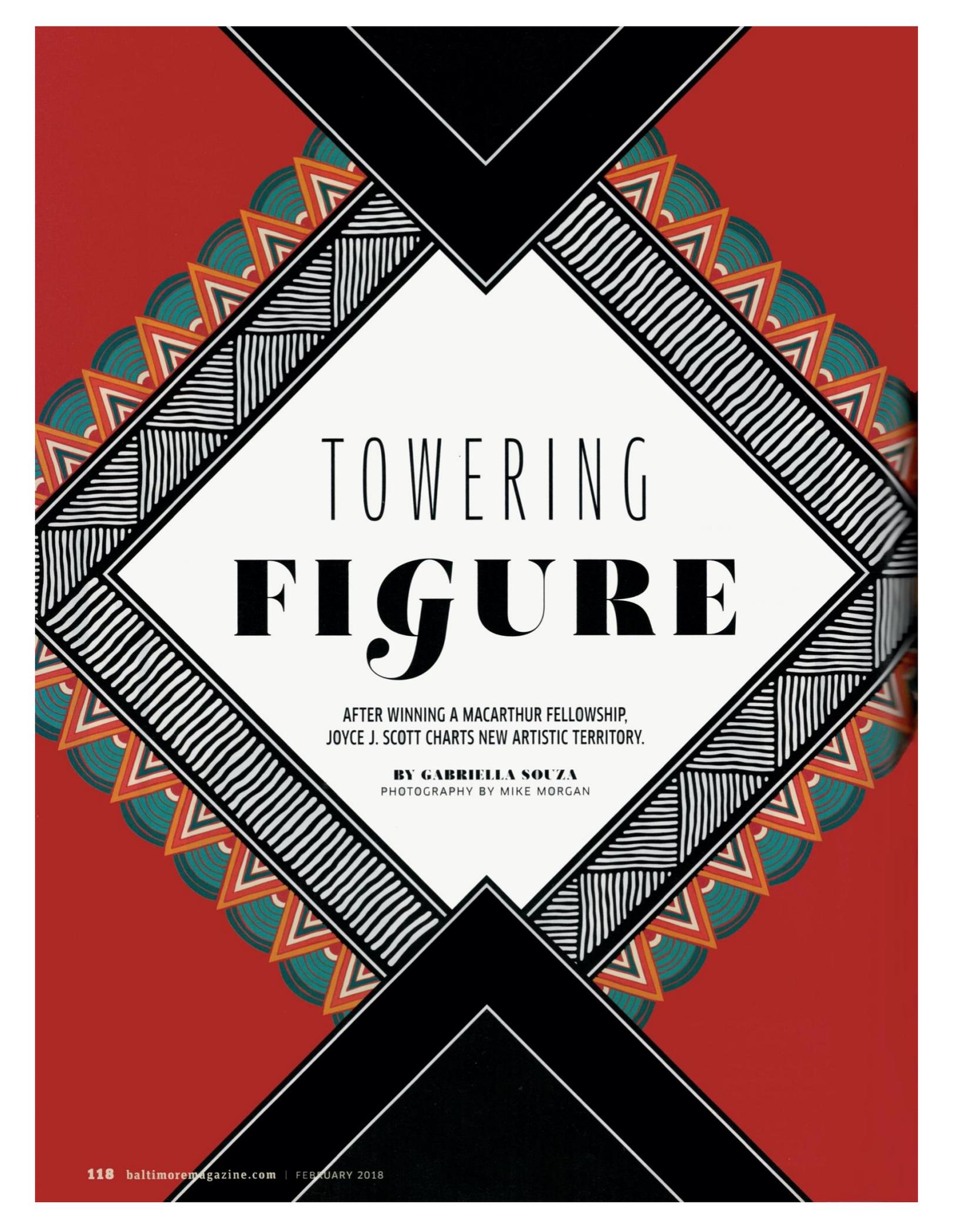
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# Baltimore

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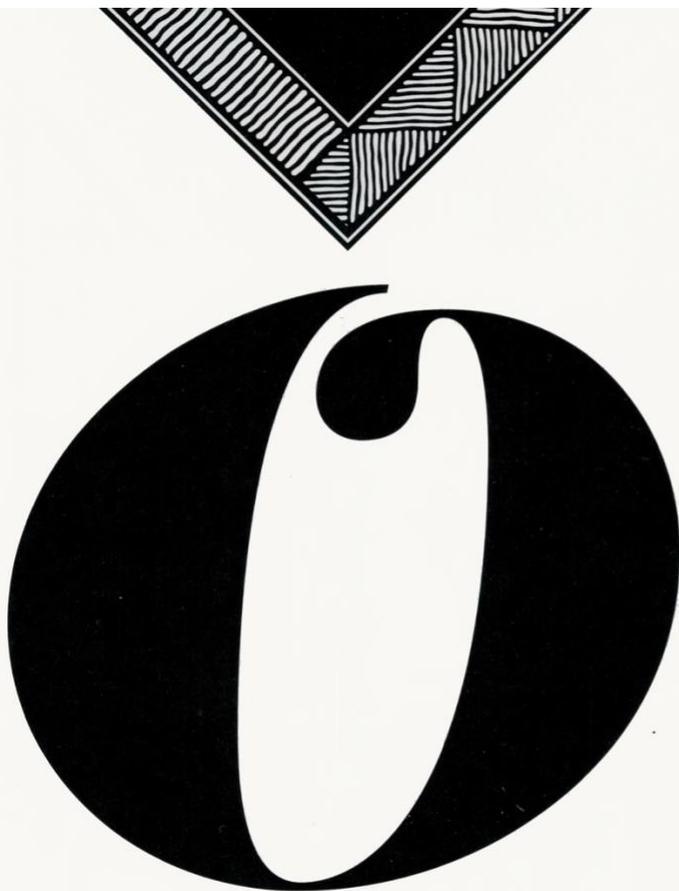


# TOWERING **FIGURE**

AFTER WINNING A MACARTHUR FELLOWSHIP,  
JOYCE J. SCOTT CHARTS NEW ARTISTIC TERRITORY.

**BY GABRIELLA SOUZA**  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE MORGAN



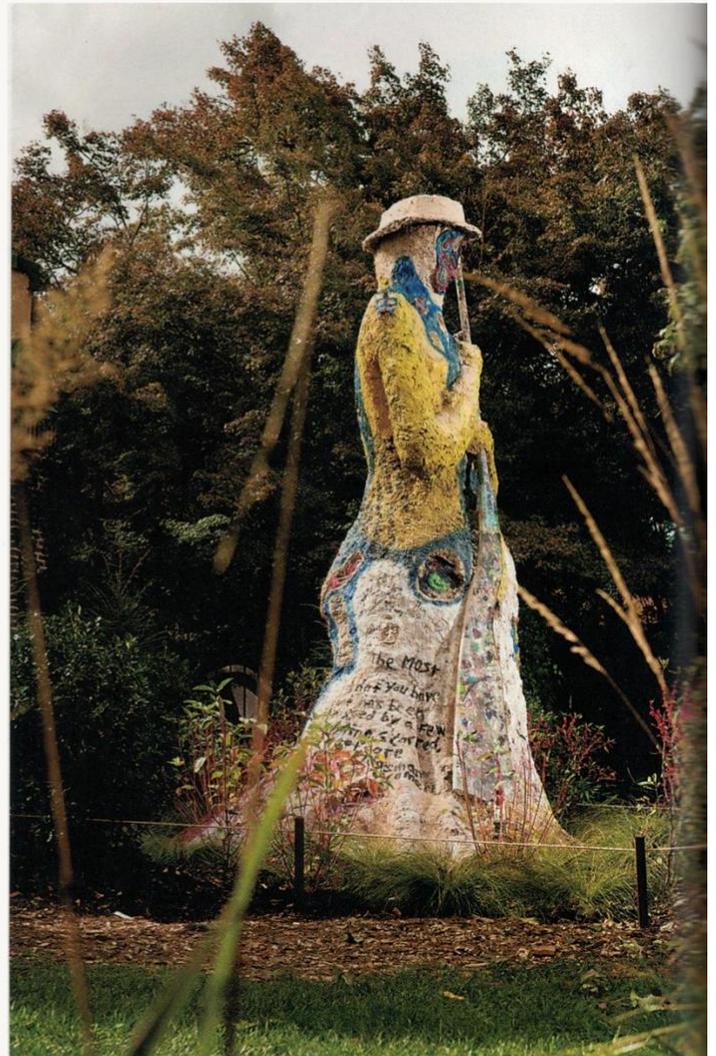


## ON A SUNNY FALL DAY, A FIGURE CAN BE SEEN RISING

from a grassy patch of land in New Jersey. The sculpture isn't much to look at yet—not long ago, it had been just a mound, albeit a big one at 15 feet, give or take a few inches. But steadily, the shape of a legendary woman is coming to life. This work depicts Harriet Tubman, the Underground Railroad conductor and Union spy and nurse, and is the vision of Joyce J. Scott, an artist coming into her own legacy.

This sculpture represents a new medium for Scott, who primarily works with beads and found objects in her smaller-scale sculptures. Scott's intention for the work also departs from her norm. Her Harriet isn't meant to be displayed permanently: Made with a mixture of soil, clay, straw, and cement, it's designed to disintegrate. Once the sculpture is complete, Scott intends for it to eventually become part of the earth, 40 miles from the routes where Tubman helped slaves escape to freedom, and 175 miles from Washington, D.C., where debates have raged about putting her countenance on the \$20 bill.

Scott sits in a golf cart to one side of this statue, playfully shouting orders at two men who are shaping her Harriet Tubman into being. She watches as the men use implements resembling garden tools to create the folds of the figure's long skirt. The material begins to crumble around one of their raised trowels and comes tumbling down, prompting Scott to shout at one of the men jokingly, "Kyle's gone and thrown rocks at everybody." The men laugh, and look down reverentially, as if they are in the presence of royalty. A few minutes later, Scott begins to get out of her golf cart, and Kyle dashes over to help her. "Look at that, Kyle's already got my cane," she says in her trademark teasing style, batting her eyelashes. As Lowery Stokes Sims, retired curator emerita at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, says, "Knowing Joyce is like always being caught up in an impromptu performance."



Scott, a Baltimore native who, for most of her life, has lived and worked in her home city, joined the ranks of creative royalty in 2016 when the MacArthur Foundation awarded her one of its so-called "genius grants." The commendation—which honors roughly a dozen "extraordinarily talented and creative individuals" each year with a \$625,000 investment in their potential—has brought increased national and international recognition to a woman who is frequently touted as one of Maryland's greatest living artists. Throughout her career, she has used deceptively simple materials to make profound statements about race, gender, and identity and how they reverberate in the world.

"What comes out when you see [her work] is how vibrant, politically savvy, and aesthetically provocative she is," Sims says. "You don't need any explanation of what it means. It just says it. Her energy and her commitment and her conscience just permeate the entire project."

It's fitting, then, that Scott spent a good portion of her MacArthur year reflecting on another great Maryland woman for an exhibit at Grounds For Sculpture, a 42-acre sculpture park in Hamilton, New Jersey. Scott's exhibit, titled *Joyce J. Scott: Harriet Tubman and Other Truths*, showcases a second outdoor sculpture of Tubman, as well as an indoor installation of her heroine's imagined bedroom. The show also serves as a retrospective for Scott and features works from throughout her five-decade career in one of the buildings at the park.





THIS SPREAD: CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT, GRAFFITI HARRIET INSTALLED AT GROUNDS FOR SCULPTURE IN NEW JERSEY; SCOTT REFINES FACIAL DETAILS ON THE 15-FOOT EARTHWORK HARRIET TUBMAN AVATAR; ARAMINTA WITH RIFLE AND VÉVÉ; SCOTT CARVES THE 10-FOOT FOAM HARRIET TUBMAN AVATAR. PREVIOUS PAGE: SCOTT IN HER BALTIMORE HOME.

## “KNOWING ‘JOYCE IS LIKE ALWAYS BEING CAUGHT UP IN AN ‘IMPROMPTU PERFORMANCE.”

“[Harriet Tubman] was someone who was a go-getter and had the nerve,” Scott says. “When we talk about resiliency, self-sufficiency, black pride, Black Lives Matter, black girls matter, we’re talking about her.”

Tubman was born into slavery in the Eastern Shore’s Dorchester County. After escaping to Philadelphia, she returned 13 times to take family and friends to freedom, and was the first woman to lead an armed military raid. But for Scott, the connection to Tubman is more personal. She reminds Scott of the woman who figured most important in her life, who started her on her artistic journey and molded her into the woman she has become: her mother and fellow artist Elizabeth Talford Scott.

“I see the twindom between Harriet and my mom. [My mom] taught me about being a woman, about my responsibility as a woman. And she taught me how, as a woman of blackness, I could make a way where there was no way. I was not supposed to hide my light under a bushel; I was supposed to shine. So in a way, Harriet Tubman has always been there with me. . . . Someone with that kind of grit and gumption, that’s who I want to be—what I want my artwork to be.”

**FOR MANY IN BALTIMORE’S** art scene, Scott’s MacArthur award was a long time coming.

“Joyce has been performing at such a high caliber of artistic genius that it was, at times, frustrating that she hadn’t gotten the MacArthur yet,” says Lesley King-Hammond, Scott’s friend and the founding director of the Center for Race and Culture at the Maryland Institute College of Art, where Scott was once a student. When the news broke in the fall of 2016, “all I could say was, finally, at last, thank God.”

Scott joined a varied MacArthur class, including a computer scientist working to improve the well-being of low-income communities and a composer whose work focuses on the American worker, all theoretically at the cusp of incredible work.

“The MacArthur [Foundation] sees them as the future. And it’s really wonderful that Joyce, at 69 years old, is still considered the future of that conversation, because there’s a value to what she’s doing,” says Amy Raehse, executive director and curator at Baltimore’s Goya Contemporary art gallery and Scott’s longtime gallerist. “[She’s] telling the story of our culture and including those voices that haven’t always been included.”

That’s not to say that this is Scott’s first experience with large-scale exposure. Her work has been praised in countless publications and journals, from *The New York Times* to the online arts magazine *Hyperallergic*. “[Her works] exhibit a playful virtuosity, along with attentiveness to wider social issues,” *The Times* wrote in 2009 after seeing some of her pieces at the Park Avenue Armory. Her work was included at the 2013 Venice Biennale and was the focus of shows at the Museum of Art and Design, the Cleveland Museum of Art, Prospect New Orleans, and The Baltimore Museum of Art, among others.

Creativity was instilled in Scott from a young age, as it had played a large role in her family. Her ancestors were sharecroppers from the Carolinas, and both her mother’s and father’s sides had artistic pursuits, whether that was as potters, weavers, or painters. Her mother made a name for herself internationally as a fiber artist who created quilts with dimension and textural depth. Scott’s father and mother separated when she was 12, and mother and daughter developed a close relationship based not only on living together but on a creative collaboration that lasted until Talford Scott died in 2011.

Like her mother, Scott was most interested in fiber art, but she turned her attention to a humble object that stands in stark contrast to her boister-





## “I DON’T HAVE TO DO THIS IN ANYBODY ELSE’S WAY BUT *MINE*.”

ous, larger-than-life personality: the bead. “Beadwork for me was about extending my family’s techniques of needle and thread, and I put a bead on it,” Scott says. “It’s a very ancient form, and it was my way to be a mad scientist. I [wanted to create] not just for myself but for the betterment of the entire race, so I used beadwork. And I was also out to defy anyone who said it wouldn’t work.”

Early in her career, her works had come alive on a loom, but her creativity transformed in the 1970s. After earning a bachelor of fine arts from MICA and a master of fine arts from the Instituto Allende in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, she attended an artists’ residency where a fellow artist taught her the peyote stitch, a method of beadwork that allows you to weave freehand. This afforded her the flexibility to experiment with shape and color, and to work improvisationally, like the skat singing she favors as an occasional jazz performer.

Scott rarely sketches, and doesn’t plan her color scheme in advance. Her skill and technique have boggled the minds of the curators who work with her. “She does most of the work herself, which I think is the most extraordinary thing. I’m always saying to her, ‘You know, so and so has 20 people beading for them,’” says Sims. “But for Joyce, the most important thing is for her energy and spirit to be in the pieces. It’s really an extension of her entire being.”

Sims is also amazed at how Scott consistently reinvents her art. In the 2000s, she added blown glass to her work. And in 2017, thanks to the Grounds For Sculpture exhibition, she added large-scale sculpture to her portfolio.

**IT’S MID-AFTERNOON** on that fall day at Grounds For Sculpture, and Scott is gazing at the long, skinny barrel of a rifle that lays on a table in front of her. This isn’t just any rifle—it’s 10 feet long, made of fiberglass, and its shiny surface glistens in the sunlight. Two visitors pause in their stroll to gaze at its luminance, and Scott notices them. “You can come look at it,” she calls out, motioning them over. She is proud of the direction it has taken. “I don’t have to do this in anybody else’s way but mine,” she has said previously. “It’s a rifle, but it shoots something other than [regular] bullets. And that’s what freedom does. You get shot with something other than pain.”

On the rifle’s surface, preserved in resin, is an amalgamation of objects—glass flowers, buttons, feathers, and beads—blended with more startling items, tiny black figurines whose large, white eyes pop from their faces. Scott has been collecting racist artifacts like these, as well as objects that tell of black identity, for decades. She keeps them in the many rooms that make up her studio in her West Baltimore rowhouse, organized in a manner that only she understands.

The rifle will be held by another piece that Scott is crafting for Grounds For Sculpture. Like the aforementioned sculpture, it will depict Harriet Tubman, but it will be decidedly different from the earthen figure—for one, it will be more realistic and recognizable as Tubman. Like the rifle, it will also be constructed from fiberglass and will stand 10 feet tall. Scott has envisioned this sculpture standing near one of the park’s water sculptures, encircled by quilts, a direct homage to her mother.





▶ CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SOME OF SCOTT'S PIECES: ANCESTRY DOLL; HEADSHOT; BUDDHA EARTH. OPPOSITE: SCOTT AT WORK IN HER HOME STUDIO.

The rifle's significance was further reinforced by its creation. After artists in Grounds For Sculpture's Seward Johnson Atelier helped Scott fashion the rifle based on her vision, she gathered a group—including members of the sculpture park's staff, her close friends, and fellow artists—to help her select the objects to put on the rifle and then to help her throw them into the resin.

"She has this voracious appetite to have a community of people, many times who have never done anything creative, be a part of the artistic process," King-Hammond says. "She gets a kind of exhilarated high from watching people discover that they have potential to do things that they had never dreamed would come about."

That inclusivity, that feeling of community, has always been important to Scott and to her art, as it was to her mother and to her ancestors. Scott even considered being a teacher for a time, though she says she quickly understood that "if I were to teach in the city schools, I would be a 700-pound alcoholic." It also could explain why Scott has remained a steadfast West Baltimore resident, living just blocks from the homes she inhabited as a child. She is honest about the drugs and poverty that she believes have been caused by redlining and other institutionally racist practices, and she frequently tells stories about young people she has chosen to mentor and assist, or about times she has asked dinner hosts if she can box up leftovers and take them to people living on the streets.

That generous spirit was part of what led Gary Garrido Schneider, Grounds For Sculpture's executive director, to approach Scott about mounting an exhibit there.

"It wasn't just that she shows you uncomfortable truths or unsettling,

powerful messages, but she does so in a way that both pushes you and welcomes you," Schneider says. At the same time, he knew it would be new territory for Grounds For Sculpture. "We haven't had a huge history of displaying work that is socially relevant. We haven't had a long history of dealing with race in the content of the work we were showing. We had to ask ourselves if we were ready for this."

**THE OCTOBER DAY** that *Joyce J. Scott: Harriet Tubman and Other Truths* opens, Scott greets members of the press in a sunlit, two-story building at Grounds For Sculpture that houses a portion of her exhibition. She wears a regal, floor-length purple velvet tunic and several of her own beaded necklaces. Lately, she has been feeling her age. The knee that had required her to use a cane a few months prior now sometimes requires her to use a wheelchair. But she is cheerful, calling those around her "baby" and "sweet potato." (It doesn't hurt that some of her entourage has taken to calling the wheelchair her throne.)

Lowery Stokes Sims and Patterson Sims, the two curators of the exhibition, lead the group through the show. There's an upstairs section, where Scott's earlier pieces and a few of her mother's quilts are on view. Displayed in cases that allow patrons to see the objects from all angles, Scott's works beckon, enticing visitors to stare at them, but also striking out with their messages like a one-two punch. Take *Rodney King's Head Squashed Like a Watermelon*, where luminous black, red, and green beads terrifyingly depict a bloated skull. The museum staff watches closely—the behavior of the press could indicate how the public will react as well.

In addition to the two, large-scale Harriet Tubman sculptures, Scott has created a third, smaller statue devoted to her heroine. This Harriet is made of beads, sitting in lotus pose, displayed high up on a wall. Lowery Stokes Sims tells the group that this work came together in five days. "She would send us pictures every day of the progress," she says. "I've never seen anything like it." This particular Harriet watches over a room where Scott has interpreted what Harriet Tubman's dream boudoir would look like—a more intimate view of the woman who often appears strong and solemn. There's a delicate shawl, a dresser, and an enormous beaded quilt that includes pieces that Scott's mother knotted shortly before her death.

After the tour, the press encircles Scott, and she asks bluntly, "So, what do you want to know?"

She answers questions about style and message and tells the group how she's going to do a whole series of Buddha sculptures. And then the discussion heads into personal territory. Scott tells how her father, Charlie Scott Jr., was scared of her being an artist, probably, she says, "because he thought I would be asking him for money my whole life. He wanted me to be able to provide for myself when they were gone." But, she says, he had to confront this fear head on when he realized how insistent his daughter was about her chosen path, and how much support she had from the art world.

"Teachers would tell my father, 'She's the one,' meaning I was someone who could actually tackle this life of an artist," she remarks. There, sitting among a gathering of works that span her five-decade career, she looks around for a moment before she says, with an air of satisfaction, "And I have." **B**

**GABRIELLA SOUZA** is the former arts and culture editor at *Baltimore*.

