PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

# Joyce J. Scott: Declarations

By Laura Giles
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Art@Bainbridge's newest exhibition, organized in conjunction with the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, celebrates the work of renowned Baltimore artist Joyce J. Scott (born 1948), whose multidisciplinary practice is deeply rooted in the creative legacy of her African American ancestors. Often merging her signature glass beadwork with repurposed objects and craft techniques, including quilting and glassmaking, Scott creates potent ensembles that frequently confront some of the most difficult chapters in American and global history to seduce and shock the viewer. Scott has said of her multi-layered approach: "I skirt the borders between comedy, pathos, delight, and horror." Spanning more than four decades, many of the twenty-three works on view—including necklaces, tapestries, and prints—demonstrate her engagement with urgent social and political themes like gun violence, genocide, sexism, racism, and "all the 'isms' that society offers," as the artist has described; other mixed-media ensembles celebrate historical Black heroines, such as Harriet Tubman, or evoke complex family ancestries. Scott's provocative statements and dazzling declarations gain eloquent and troubling resonance in the historical setting of Bainbridge House, once home to Prime, an enslaved man who lived there as property of the loyalist physician Absalom Bainbridge during the Revolutionary War, before petitioning for and gaining his freedom in 1786.





(Left) Joyce J. Scott (born 1948, Baltimore, MD, *Mz. Teapot*, 2021. Courtesy Mobilia Gallery. © The Joyce J. Scott Art Trust and Archives. Photo courtesy Mobilia Gallery / TALP

(Right) Joyce J. Scott, *Caught Peeping*, 2021. Courtesy Mobilia Gallery. © The Joyce J. Scott Art Trust and Archives. Photo courtesy Mobilia Gallery / TALP

As a child, Scott learned quilting and beading from her mother, Elizabeth Talford Scott (1916–2011), a textile and fiber artist who gave her—in Scott's words—a "passport of needle and thread" to explore ancient and contemporary global weaving and beading traditions, including those of the Yorùbá people of West Africa. After finding the rectilinearity of loom weaving too constraining, Scott had a breakthrough moment in 1976, when she learned about the Native American ceremonial peyote stitch—a free-form, flat-beading technique—from the Muscogee (Creek) artist Sandy Fife Wilson (born 1950) at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, Maine. This technique became the structural foundation for Scott's increasingly complex and sculptural beaded forms. In the exhibition, these range from the unusually minimalist necklace titled *Blue Face* (2006), which Joyce describes as "a line drawing worn on the body," to the intricate and flamboyant *Mz. Teapot* (2021), who is both narrator and protagonist of her own story. A commanding presence, *Mz. Teapot* smokes a cigarette while carrying a teapot on her head, which reveals an erotic scene—perhaps a fantasy—that she bears as lightly as the myriad figures scampering around and clinging to her. On one side of her base, two tiny black heads nestle in a teacup—an evocation of the Yorùbá sacred twins, the Íbejí, a detail that imparts a gravity to the spirited ensemble.

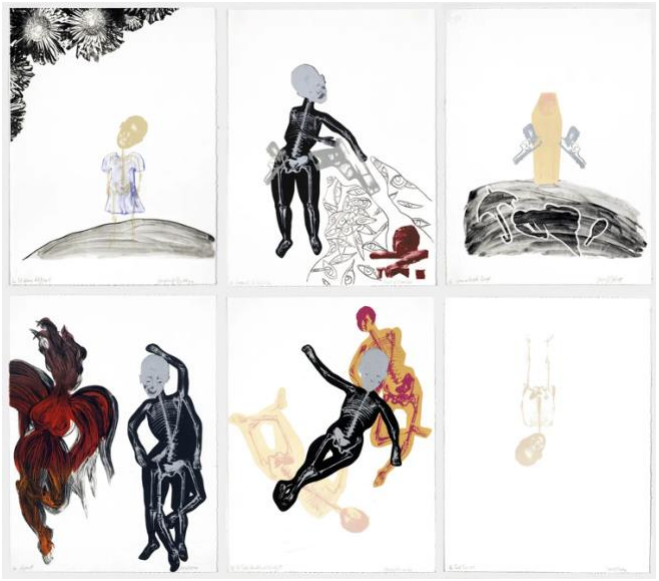
Scott's gift as a wry and elusive storyteller who often leaves the precise meaning up to the viewer is evident in the exhibition's shimmering chorus of luminescent necklaces and tapestries. Her wide-ranging sources include the Bible, as in *Caught Peeping* (2021), which evokes the misogynistic tale of Susanna and the Elders; spiritual icons like the Virgin of Guadalupe and tarot figures such as Le Monde (The World); and contemporary events. A particularly harrowing example of the latter is *Yazidi Sex Slaves* (2016/2025), which graphically addresses the 2014 ISIS campaign of genocide against the Yazidi people of northern Iraq, when thousands of women and girls were sold into sexual slavery. Conveying a more poetic mood, the heart-shaped tapestry Waterways (2021)

conjures vignettes of human and humanoid figures adrift in an aquatic world, the work's title and shifting colors signaling the ocean's alluring, dangerous presence across centuries and continents.



Joyce J. Scott, *Waterways*, 2021. Courtesy Mobilia Gallery. © The Joyce J. Scott Art Trust and Archives. Photo courtesy Mobilia Gallery / TALP

Questions of interconnected biological heritage—a legacy of slavery and colonialism—anchor another major strand of Scott's repertoire, most sustained in her series *Ancestry/Progeny*, and represented by several works in the exhibition, including the richly beaded doll-like *Prayers* (2012), in which a cast-glass head, inspired by Yorùbá sculpture and suggesting African ancestry, is fused with limbs from repurposed Catholic votive figures; for the artist, as the title implies, this work is about being surrounded by blessings, regardless of mixed ethnicities, traditions, and self-images. A more recent beaded tapestry, *Untitled Fairy Tale*, from the *Graphic Novel Series* (2019–20), which the artist calls "a joyous piece," expands on her frequent theme of procreation, featuring a prominent woman holding a clear circle surrounding an embryo while smaller figures lurk within the thicket-like composition.



Joyce J. Scott, *Soul Erased* (Portfolio), 1999. Published by Goya Contemporary and Goya-Girl Press. Courtesy Goya Contemporary and Goya-Girl Press. © The Joyce J. Scott Art Trust and Archives. Photo courtesy Goya Contemporary and Goya-Girl Press / TALP

In the final gallery, the exhibition demonstrates how Scott deploys beadwork and printmaking to confront the pervasive presence of gun and sexual violence while also invoking the impact of historic racism and excessive (often state-sanctioned) force on the lives of Black Americans, both real and imaginary. *Excessive Force* (2018), a potent ensemble of thirteen votive-like beaded objects, memorializes Black victims of police violence, ranging chronologically from Rodney King (died 1991) to Philando Castile (died 2016). In the tapestry *Blutz* (2021), which conjures up a nightmarish nocturnal setting, dazzling beadwork embeds seductive lapis lazuli passages within interlocking visceral vignettes of gun violence and sexual assault perpetuated on Black and white victims. Finally, a lyrical fatalism drives the spiritual allegory in *Soul Erased* (1999), a six-part print series that traces the downfall of a young Black man who, despite his community's concern, commits murder; warned by a flaming angel to reform in the central scene, *Repent*, he ignores them and is dragged off to an unknown place, where he is left, in Scott's word's, "hanging upside down in this abyss," barely visible because "he has lost himself. " Here, as in all her work, Scott withholds resolution, leaving open the question of the "Soul's" fate and privileging the viewer's freedom of interpretation.

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