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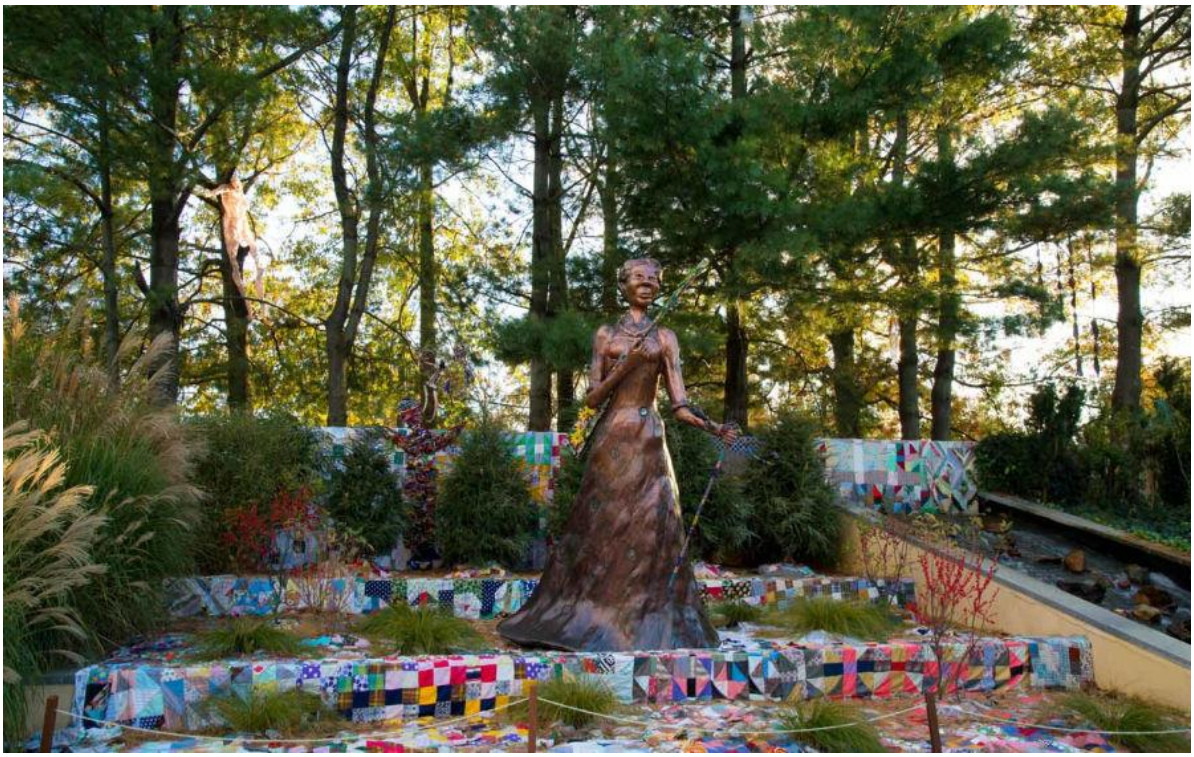
To Hold Ugliness and Beauty

Joyce J. Scott's art is unabashedly political, broaching subjects such as guns, racism, and misogyny. It's also gorgeous, rich with tactile materials, color, and an attention to light.

By Jillian Steinhauer | March 26, 2018



Araminta With Rifle and Vèvè, by Joyce J. Scott, 2017. Courtesy of Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland. *(Photograph Courtesy of Grounds For Sculpture)*

Back in the spring of 2016, then–Treasury Secretary Jack Lew announced a plan to replace the image of Andrew Jackson on the $20 bill with that of Harriet Tubman. The move was widely celebrated: Finally, a woman would appear on the country's modern paper currency, and the face of a black abolitionist hero and suffragette would supplant the visage of a white male president who enslaved people and championed the Indian Removal Act.

Unfortunately, bigoted white male presidents having come back into fashion, President Trump's treasury secretary, Steven Mnuchin, stalled the plan last summer, saying, "We have a lot more important issues to focus on." Once again, a US institution has decided not to honor a black woman.

More than many of its adherents would care to admit, the mainstream US art world reflects the country at large: It tends to venerate straight white men and uphold their politics. That context goes some way toward explaining how the 69-year-old Joyce J. Scott—the winner of a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship in 2016 and an exceptional artist—could spend decades on the edges of the spotlight. It's also part of the reason why the largest survey of her work to date is on view at a lesser-known sculpture park in Hamilton, New Jersey, rather than at a major New York City museum.

The exhibition at Grounds for Sculpture, "Joyce J. Scott: Harriet Tubman and Other Truths," was co-curated by Lowery Stokes Sims and Patterson Sims, both of whom have long championed Scott's art. Featuring 74 works, the exhibition ushers its viewers through the entirety of Scott's artistic trajectory—from her early experiments in sculpture and jewelry to the artistic breakthroughs that came from learning the peyote stitch in 1976, which allowed her to construct free-form sculptures out of beads; from quilts made by and with her mother, Elizabeth Talford Scott, during the 1980s and '90s to her embrace of glass-blowing in the 2000s—and includes two new site-specific sculptures of Tubman.

Throughout this five-decade evolution, Scott's work has remained unabashedly political, broaching subjects like guns, racism, and misogyny. It has also always been gorgeous, rich with tactile materials, color, and an attention to light. In *Sex Traffic* (2014), for instance, the upright, phallic core of the work—a glass rifle hand-blown by Scott while in residence on the famed Venetian island of Murano—seems suffused with light. The tiny yellow beads that make up the small female figure tied to the gun seem to sparkle and shimmer. This is the core function of Scott's work: its ability to imbue dark subjects with light, to incarnate ugliness and beauty at the same time.

"I try to make something very beautiful, very comely, something alluring that someone wants to come to, and then they realize it's about race or sex or whatever," Scott has said. "I just can't help myself. I am a product of a most wonderful life…I MAKE ART…but there is no release from the day-to-day hints through culture that my blackness is in some way an impediment, my sheer existence an irritant. It all itches me…. Art is my scratch."

Scott was born, raised, and has spent most of her life in Baltimore. The city doesn't figure into her work directly—there are no street scenes or portraits of neighbors—but its split personality, of holding extreme poverty within its borders and extreme wealth just outside the city line, may well have contributed to her ability to see good and bad not as opposites, but as forces that coexist.

In her work, Scott often elucidates the dangers, both social and physical, that black people can face. Her most direct works about this, made in the late 1980s and early '90s, are grouped on the second floor of "Harriet Tubman and Other Truths." One harrowing piece features a lumpy, black-beaded head on its side with green lips and a small red tongue poking out; strands of red beads on the crown and chin suggest blood. The work's title makes the inferences explicit: *Rodney King's Head Was Squashed Like a Watermelon* (1991). Nearby, Scott skewers the watermelon stereotype with less horror and more humor: In *Man Eating Watermelon* (1986), a miniature piece of fruit consumes the leg of a dark-skinned man who's trying to escape.

Black Madonna (Madonna and Child) (1986) shows a black-leather-clad Madonna-cum-nanny holding two children, one made of brown beads and the other of pink beads, up to her breasts; while the pink kid suckles, the brown one reaches for the woman's neck and gazes at her face. This longing becomes more pronounced in *No Mommy, Me I* (1991), which features a brown boy pinned against the bottom of his mother's dress as she raises up and looks at a translucent white baby instead.

Across the gallery, a display case is devoted to Scott's *Day After Rape* series. In the foreground, small brown women are shown in various states of distress and dismemberment; two are just beaded torsos with pipes and pieces of wood for limbs. Behind them hang menacing faces, which appear to be the attackers, betraying no remorse but haunted by the ghosts of their crimes in the form of smaller figures that crawl or sit on them.

None of these works are subtle, but they're not prescriptive either. They fall somewhere between observation and expression, with a withering honesty that's softened by the materials with which they're made. The beads, especially, are a way for Scott to abstract her subject matter, to cushion the gut punch that so much of her work delivers. As she's noted in recent interviews, the beads function like pixels, both forming the picture and breaking it into smaller units; these units refract light in such a way that viewers don't always know, at first, what they're looking at. They have to linger and let the image resolve.

Scott learned from an early age that all manner of materials and items were valuable, and as part of her process she collects things—beads, African statuettes, buttons, ceramic figurines—and incorporates them into her art. As she explains it, her family members were artists "because they lived in the South and they were sharecroppers. In those circumstances, if you needed a cup, you made it. If you needed a blanket or a quilt, you made it." Scott also learned from a young age how to sew.

Elizabeth Talford Scott, who lived with Joyce until her death in 2011, was a brilliant quilter; the inclusion of a selection of her quilts at Grounds for Sculpture is especially insightful. You can see the roots of her daughter's obsessive handicraft, love of color, and pleasure in going off-script in Talford Scott's kaleidoscopic creations like *Tie Quilt #2* (1991), which features strips of castoff neckties assembled into an asymmetrical psychedelic pattern. The quilts, importantly, are also a major method of storytelling; Scott calls them "diaries for preliterate people." In her own work, Scott has taken up the mantle of telling stories—the central panel of her *Three Generation Quilt I* (1983) shows her receiving a needle and thread from her mother.

Yet she extends the scope from personal narratives to more public ones, which is precisely what gives Scott's art its charge. Her use of beadwork, which viewers are drawn to for its intimate, domestic familiarity, creates surprising, overtly political art. It's also part of what gets her shunned by the mainstream art world, which has borrowed from, yet looked down upon, so-called "craft" practices since the dawn of modernism. Scott deserves credit for continuing to push the possibilities of her chosen materials.

Scott has incorporated glass into her art for a long time, via beads and found objects. And she learned to work with glass decades ago, first at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts and then at the Pilchuck Glass School. But it wasn't until the early aughts that glassblowing seems to have effected an aesthetic shift in her work, helped along by two residencies at the Berengo Studio on Murano. The first floor of the Grounds for Sculpture show is mostly devoted to these newer pieces. They are decidedly more concerned with gender dynamics, more contemplative, and more abstract.

In *Aloft* (2016–17), for instance, a buxom, blue, blown-glass woman supports a smaller man, whose glass head is stacked on top of hers and whose beaded limbs are wrapped around her face and neck. There's no indication that the man is a burden, but the social narrative here is clear enough: The woman holds the man aloft. Still, while the figures' genders are implied, they're not pronounced. The

work could just as easily depict two playful gods as an earthbound pair, especially since the Buddha has been a motif throughout Scott's career.

Many of these newer works feature two figures, which allows Scott to highlight the interplay between her materials: the smooth, curving forms of blown glass versus the knobby accumulations of beads. The pairs are sometimes connected by a beaded string or chain—in one case, it's a lasso-like penis—suggesting universal interdependency. *Breathe* (2015) features a red blown-glass woman giving birth to a clear blown-glass child. It's a remarkable technical achievement that harks back to Scott's nanny sculptures: Although the mother is red, not the black or brown that Scott more often uses, her cornrows suggest an African-American woman—perhaps transmuted into some sort of deity—who's giving birth to a white child. The expression on her face is inscrutable.

There is overall—though not always—a bit more ambiguity to these later works, a hint that, as she's aged, Scott's concerns have become increasingly spiritual. This is reflected in the most powerful section of the show, the indoor installation *Harriet's Closet* (2017), made in tandem with the two outdoor sculptures of Tubman. The latter are situated on the grounds nearby: a 15-foot-tall figure of soil, clay, and straw (*Graffiti Harriet*, 2017) and a shorter, more realistic likeness rendered in painted milled foam (*Araminta With Rifle and Vèvè*, 2017; Tubman's birth name was Araminta Ross). A compelling experiment, *Graffiti Harriet* grows directly out of the ground and is meant to return to it over the course of the exhibition, deteriorating and leaving behind only patches of beadwork and a gun made of resin. *Araminta* is a more solid, if slightly hokey, statue whose surroundings—an array of patchwork quilts and ghostly figures strung up in trees—upstage her.

Both are welcome interventions in a sculpture park overflowing with tackiness and, as Scott herself notes, renderings of white people. But neither evokes as much pathos as *Harriet's Closet*. The installation is what Scott calls a "dream boudoir," the imagined private space of the abolitionist hero (the wall text also refers to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*). It features items of clothing, found and handmade; quilts by Scott and her mother; a vanity holding a reprint of a letter from Frederick Douglass to Tubman; various sculptures and wall works in glass and beads; and two renderings of Tubman, including one of her as the Buddha that hovers over the space.

The individual components of *Harriet's Closet* show Scott at her finest. *Harriet's Quilt* (2016–17), arguably the centerpiece, is a series of swirling masses of chunky, stitched-together beads; containing yarn and knotted fabric made by Elizabeth

Talford Scott, it's the ultimate synthesis of a daughter's art with her mother's. The sculpture *Everywoman's Harriet* (2017) renders Tubman with two faces: the blackface of a racist doll and a more naturalistic, beaded one. The stereotype face looks out onto the world as Tubman holds a baby in one arm; the more private, honest face is turned toward the closet as, with her other arm, Tubman clutches a set of keys. The work is a stunning evocation of the burden of double consciousness.

Everywoman's Harriet is almost entirely black, just like the vintage dress (c. 1900) that stands in a nearby corner, alongside a beaded bonnet made by Scott. These dark elements are counterbalanced by more colorful ones: Elizabeth Talford Scott's exuberant plaid quilt; an all-glass flowering vine in the shape of a rifle; a crocheted shawl that includes pearls, preserved insects, and a portrait of Douglass. The tonal contrast creates a duality reminiscent of Scott's individual works, only now it's spread over a group of objects and feels even more like balance than tension.

Taken together, the items in *Harriet's Closet* conjure a feeling of expectancy: The dress seems to want to be worn, the real rifle picked up; the quilt spills eagerly out of its trunk. Scott has managed to call up, if not a specific inner life, then certainly the hint of one—and with it, the idea that even as we celebrate Harriet Tubman's image, we must recognize the part of her we were robbed of knowing.