

THE SUN

Baltimore artist Joyce Scott celebrates Harriet Tubman in retrospective at New Jersey sculpture garden



"Araminta with Rifle and Veve" by Joyce J. Scott at Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, N.J. (Tim Smith/ Baltimore Sun)

HAMILTON, N.J. — She seems about to take flight, this 10-foot-tall woman with the bronze patina. She gazes fiercely ahead, cradling a rifle in one arm.

Perched amid a landscape of elegant plants and, in place of grass, a carpet of quilts, the outdoor sculpture exudes confidence, determination and hope. So much so that you don't notice right away another female figure, this one almost skeletal, hanging in a distant tree — as if lynched.

The visual and emotional impact of that juxtaposition is just one highlight of "Joyce J. Scott: [Harriet Tubman](#) and Other Truths," an expansive retrospective of work by the inimitable Baltimore artist at Grounds for Sculpture, an inviting 42-acre oasis dotted with nearly 300 sculptural pieces by established and emerging artists.

The acreage now holds two larger-than-life pieces commissioned for this exhibit that depict Tubman. One of them is designed to disintegrate into the elements by the time the exhibit closes April 1.

“They told me I could do whatever I wanted,” says Scott, a 2016 recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship (the so-called “genius grant”). “And I said, are you sure? They seemed very excited about the boundaries of sculpture that could be pushed. And whatever I requested — some will say ‘demanded’ [Scott breaks into a grin] — it happened.”

Scott, who will be honored next weekend (with Librarian of Congress Carla D. Hayden) at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum, has long been best known for works incorporating beads and glass work. More than 50 examples, drawn from museum and private collections, are included here, displayed indoors on two floors of the Museum Building. But the new Tubman-related works are likely to make the exhibit all the more magnetic.

“Harriet Tubman has always been there with me,” the artist says. “That’s who I always wanted to be, someone with that kind of grit.”

The grit is literal in the case of the earthwork sculpture titled “Graffiti Harriet,” composed of packed mud and grass and, at 15 feet, Scott’s tallest sculpture to date. This Tubman, too, holds a rifle.

The other avatar is dubbed “Araminta with Rifle and Veve” (Araminta was Tubman’s original first name; a veve is an object from voodoo culture). It started as a clay model that was enlarged and carved out of foam, then encased in resin and fiberglass before the bronze patina was applied.

The sculpture is situated in a little glen-like setting alongside cascading water, which Scott sees as a reminder “of the highways and byways Harriet had to travel.” The ground cover of quilts refers to the warmth they provided and a symbol for “swaddling people in love,” the artist says.

There are also sculpted objects placed about, referencing birds and spirits. The whole scene seems to vibrate with resonances and messages.

Over the past two years, Scott made frequent visits to New Jersey to work on her Tubman pieces. Throughout, she had assistance from the Seward Johnson Atelier and Digital Atelier, which provides 3D technology to help artists create large-scale sculpture.

Grounds for Sculpture chief curator Tom Moran and other staffers also lent a hand. The imposing “Graffiti Harriet” was carved by Clifford Ward, guided by Scott’s drawings. Kyle Psulkowski’s contributions included painting on Tubman’s skirt an excerpt from an 1868 letter Fredrick Douglass sent to the Underground Railroad heroine.

To apply the sculpture's finishing touches — including a beaded, mask-like face for Tubman that exhibit co-curator Lowery Stokes Sim says “gives her a ferocious presence” — Scott was hoisted by a scissor lift.

The artist also added an unexpected object at the feet of the sculpture: a small lawn jockey. A quintessential touch from the ever-provocative Scott.

If all goes according to the calculations, “Graffiti Harriet” will gradually dissipate over the next several months.

“The idea is that it will drop to the ground in a pile, representing Harriet Tubman's remains,” says Amy Eva Raehse, executive director and curator of Goya Contemporary, the Baltimore gallery that represents Scott.

The 14-foot resin rifle, which Scott worked on with artist Austin Wright, was not crafted to be impermanent. It will still be there at the end, a reminder of Tubman's determination to carry out her mission of leading slaves to freedom.

That this Tubman sculpture will fade while “Araminta” stays firmly in place at another spot on the grounds reflects a point behind Scott's work.

“Harriet is always fading and resurfacing,” the artist says. “And whenever people start to talk about her again, we seem to learn new things. She is so relevant right now, with the proposal to put her on the \$20 bill. I used to think they should keep [Andrew] Jackson, but put him on the back so he would have to see Harriet's [backside] every day, but that might be something he'd like.”

Scott's tribute to Tubman continues inside the nearby Museum Building in an alcove called “Harriet's Closet.” The artist has created some objects and gathered together others to provide an imaginative way of revealing a personal side of a woman famed as an emancipator, Union Army nurse and spy, social activist and more.

Items of period clothing are displayed, along with a bit of antique furniture. There's a rifle, of course, but Scott made this one of blown glass and embellished it with flowery details. At the center of the room, a huge, vividly beaded quilt seems to spill out of a trunk.

Above the entrance to “Harriet's Closet” is a finely detailed work made of glass and plastic beads that Scott finished just before the exhibit opened: “Harriet Tubman as Buddha.” Here, as Sims puts it, Scott conveys Tubman “transcending earthly concerns.”

The rest of the indoor portion of the exhibit provides an absorbing survey of Scott's creative life, as well as wonderful quilts made by her late mother, Elizabeth Talford Scott, a pivotal influence on her daughter.



Joyce Scott, a Baltimore artist, is one of the 2016 MacArthur Fellows. (Kim Hairston, Baltimore Sun)

Scott's familiar themes of race and sexuality are in strong evidence. A series of "mammy"-referencing works includes one of a woman attentively holding a white child, while her own child seems to disappear into her long skirt, neglected. The artist's rape series is doubly potent now, amid heightened awareness of sexual assault. There is humor, too, in the collection, though always with an edge, reflecting the Scott philosophy printed on one of the gallery's walls: "I skirt the borders between comedy, pathos, delight and horror."

Scott's maneuvering through those borders leads her into an extraordinary realm all her own. This exhibit, providing such a rich sampling of that realm, makes Grounds for Sculpture an even more worthy destination than usual.

IF YOU GO

"Joyce J. Scott: Harriet Tubman and Other Truths" runs through April 1 at Grounds for Sculpture, 80 Sculptors Way, Hamilton, N. J. Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Timed tickets, \$10 to \$18, are required. Scott will join journalist David Finkel for a free "MacArthur Fellows in Dialogue" at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 17. Call 609-586-0616, or go to groundsfor Sculpture.org. For information on the Reginald F. Lewis gala Nov. 11 honoring Scott, go to lewismuseum.org