



Baltimore artist Joyce Scott named MacArthur Fellow



Artist Joyce J. Scott is one of the 2016 MacArthur Fellows. (Kim Hairston / Baltimore Sun)

By Tim Smith
The Baltimore Sun

Joyce J. Scott was in no mood for a prank phone call a few weeks ago.

The Baltimore-born artist, known for creating intricate, often provocative jewelry and beaded sculptures, was coping with acute sciatica. Unable to lie down, she tried to get some sleep while seated at a desk, her head resting on her folded arms when the ringing jolted her.

The voice on the other end informed Scott that she had been selected as one of the 2016 MacArthur Fellows, an honor that comes with an unrestricted stipend of \$625,000. It's the award popularly known as a "genius grant," a term frowned upon by the MacArthur Foundation, which started bestowing fellowships on exceptionally talented individuals in a wide range of fields 35 years ago.

None of that registered with Scott the moment the big news came.

"This sciatica has been hell," Scott, 67, said. "So, when I receive the call from the MacArthur folks, I'm yelling, 'Who is this? Prove it to me.' I'm thinking someone is joking with me. I'm really incredulous. Then, through my pain and sodden malaise, I realized this is the real thing. I almost threw up."

Asked if she had contemplated how she would start to spend the award money, Scott had an instant reply:

"Liposuction," she said.

To keep the lid on each year's list of Fellows, the MacArthur Foundation asks honorees to share the news confidentially with only one person. For Scott, that person was Amy Eva Raehse, executive director and curator of Goya Contemporary, the Baltimore gallery that has long represented the artist's work.

"I was elated, although not necessarily surprised," Raehse said. "I've known of Joyce's genius for a number of years. It was fitting that she would be selected for the award."

The MacArthur recognition follows closely on the announcement in May that Scott topped the list of the 2016 Baker Artist Awards, earning the \$50,000 Mary Sawyers Imboden Prize, among the largest of its kind in the country.

Major institutions include Scott's work in their collections, among them New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Arts and Design; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. Works by Scott have been in the collection of the Smithsonian's American Art Museum for several years.

"And the Smithsonian's new National Museum of African American History and Culture has accessed one of Joyce's works," Raehse said.

In a statement released by the MacArthur Foundation, Scott's art was described as "a potent platform for commentary on social and political injustices." She "upends conceptions of beadwork and jewelry," the statement continued, "by creating exquisitely crafted objects that reveal, upon closer examination, stark representations of racism and sexism and the violence they engender."

The recent Baker Artist Awards exhibit at the Baltimore Museum of Art offered striking illustrations of this element in Scott's work, including "Sex Traffic" — a life-sized glass rifle with a small figure of a black woman made of beads and thread, hands and feet bound, hanging onto the barrel.

"Joyce's work is a reflection of our humanity," Raehse said, "and not always a pleasant reflection. But holding up a mirror to society will ignite a conversation. By using her mastery of the media, Joyce is moving the conversation."

When not addressing weighty matters, Scott's art takes humorous, satirical turns, as in her series of pieces that attach seemingly incongruous beaded figures to Japanese ceramic figurines.

Doreen Bolger, former director of the Baltimore Museum of Art, is another longtime admirer of Scott. She recently donated a Scott painting to the Reginald F. Lewis Museum. In 2000, the BMA presented a 30-year retrospective, "Joyce J. Scott: Kickin' It with the Old Masters."

"We put a little warning about adult content on a few items," Bolger said. "We wanted to let people know they would be seeing something challenging, ranging from race to gender and you name it. She makes you think, and art should make you think. I get more and more and more impressed every time I see her work."

Scott joins a roster of Baltimore-born MacArthur Fellows that includes writer Ta-Nehisi Coates and actress/playwright Anna Deavere Smith. Other recipients include such Baltimore-based notables as Baltimore Symphony Orchestra music director Marin Alsop and historian Taylor Branch.

"Isn't it amazing the number of 'Balti-morons' who have won?" Scott said. The windfall from the MacArthur award — the \$625,000 will be paid in quarterly installments over five years — won't bring with it any uprooting. The artist plans to continue living in the rowhouse where she has lived for four decades on a modest block near the intersection of Pennsylvania and North avenues.

"I'm a true Baltimore babe and a Sandtown girl," Scott said. "I'm in a challenged neighborhood, but the people here are very supportive of me. How could I run away? My model is Louis Armstrong. He and his wife stayed in the same house [in Queens, N.Y.] forever. I'd like to invest more in my community."

Some of the award money will go toward making life a little nicer for Scott in her home, which is adorned with art inside and out.

"The houses on this block are more than a hundred years old," she said. "I'd like to make sure the water and plumbing are right. And I'd like to buy a walk-in tub and do things that will let me be independent here. One thing I won't be doing is buying furs. I tried one on once, and I looked like a wall of dead animals."

Scott, who has never married, added that she intends "to spend every damn penny," but mostly in the cause of her art. If she wants to travel abroad to hone skills, she will do it in comfort. She also envisions expanding community outreach efforts, using her new studio at Motor House in the Station North arts district.

"I think [the money] will give me more mulling time — maybe I'll mull in New Zealand," Scott said. "It will enable me to do larger sculptures. The work ethic is very deep with me."

Scott's mother, Elizabeth Talford Scott, was a nationally recognized textile artist, especially admired for her quilt work. She died in 2011. Her father, Charlie Scott Jr., worked at Bethlehem Steel; he died in 2005. Both had been sharecroppers in the South before moving to Baltimore.

"On my mom's side, there were blacksmiths, ceramists and weavers," Scott said. "On my father's side, quilters. All of that coalesced in me. The impish behavior I got honestly, to the chagrin of everybody."

That impish side expanded in a big way in the mid-1980s, when she and a friend launched the Thunder Thigh Revue, a comedy act with music that toured extensively. Scott's sense of humor also could be found in a character she created called Rodney Dangerous-in-the-Field, a slave who did stand-up comedy for what he liked to call "a captive audience."

Scott envisions writing comedy for others in the future. She is also an accomplished singer and plans to get back to that when she can. But art remains her primary focus.

"I saw early on that the important thing was not just being creative, but living a creative life," Scott said. "Not tinkering. I have made my whole life's endeavor to be 100 percent artist. I've been a self-employed artist for over 40 years."

Scott has never cared for being just another artist. "I want to be the best. I know there's a smidgen of egotism in that," she said with a smile. "I want to remain a challenge. I don't want to be at ease in my life because the world is not at ease. I want to be even more Joyce, as if that were even possible."