

# HYPERALLERGIC

## The Uneasy Beauty of Joyce J. Scott's Seductive Forms

by **Cara Ober** | July 11, 2016



Joyce J. Scott, "Lewd #2" (2013), hand-blown Murano glass processes with beads, wire, and thread, 22 1/2 x 14 x 16 in (photo by Michael Koryta, courtesy Goya Contemporary)

BALTIMORE — The golden man is tiny, but he's got a penis like a garden hose. Naked, he stands over a much larger woman, holding a long loop and pointing the tip at her face, which is obscured by what appears to be a thin, white cloth but is in fact ejaculatory fluid. Her body is voluptuous with perky, upturned breasts. She lays on her back with legs curving towards the sky, supporting his feet with her open hands. She is languid, as if engaged in a powerful yoga maneuver or floating in water, while he hovers over her. Although he dominates her, this is definitely a consensual act; her body practically purrs with pleasure.

Rendered as pornography, or as part of Jeff Koons's *Made in Heaven* series, this scenario could be shocking or offensive, at least gross. However, sculptor [Joyce J. Scott](#) manages to make it refined and even dazzlingly beautiful through her choice of medium. Constructed completely in

blown and beaded glass, the piece presents a surface so luminous and rich, its naughty content is obscured until it's too late and you've already fallen in love with it.



Installation view *Generations: Joyce J. Scott | Sonya Clark* at Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore (photo by Joe Hyde, courtesy Goya Contemporary)

Titled “Lewd #2,” this sculpture is currently on view in Scott’s show at Goya Contemporary, along with six similar three-dimensional works that sit comfortably atop pedestals, plus one beaded wall relief. Curated by gallery director Amy Eva Raehse, the exhibit showcases Scott’s work with hand-blown Murano glass, which she then enhances with beads, wire, and thread to help shape figures and busts. The glass renders solid forms radiant and transparent, with intense, wet color so compelling you want to lick it, or at least fondle it. Scott’s signature beadwork, attached to the blown glass, is formed into small figures, flower chains, snakes, and ribbons of semen, expertly completed without any underlying armature. Each beaded element provides surface embellishment and unexpected contrasts with the larger glass forms.



Joyce J. Scott, “Breathe” (2014), hand-blown Murano glass processes with beads, and thread 20 1/2 x 19 1/2 x 16 in. (photo by Michael Koryta, courtesy Goya Contemporary)

There are several overtly sexual works in the show, including “White Tongue,” in which a glass head sports a snakelike appendage; a tiny, beaded figure sits naked and proud, riding the tongue like a pony. In “Lewd #1,” a nude, Modigliani-esque female form reclines, while a small, red beaded devil whispers into her ear. But the exhibit also features three Buddha figures, including one titled “Breathe,” that present a transition between sex and spirituality.

The most powerful piece in the show, “Breathe” is made of rich garnet-colored glass that glows under the gallery lights. Twenty inches tall, the red woman sits with crossed legs like a Buddha. A clear glass baby emerges from her vagina, and she holds his arms, lifting him out. He is halfway inside her and halfway out, emerging calmly, with light-capturing bubbles and striations in his solid glass head. The mother is regal; her head is embellished with an iridescent green snake-crown that wraps around her neck and trails down her

front. The faces of both mother and child are crudely rendered with only the most basic details, creating an aura of sanctity and distance, like ancient statues of fertility figures or goddesses.



Joyce J. Scott, "Buddha (Earth)" (2013), hand-blown Murano glass processes with beads, wire, and thread, 27 1/2 x 11 1/4 x 11 1/2 in. (photo by Michael Koryta, courtesy Goya Contemporary)

In several works in the exhibit, Scott tests out a new process she invented. After working with glassblowers in Murano and being featured in *Glasstress 2013*, part of that year's Venice Biennale, the artist decided she wanted to physically fuse her detailed beadwork with the blown glass. She was informed by the Murano experts that it could not be done, but Scott engaged in a trial-and-error process to discover how to melt the beadwork into the surfaces of molten glass. In several works, she has effectively printed onto the glass surface by fusing flat sheets of beads into it.

In "Buddha (Earth)," for instance, Scott melds a beaded orange face with a glowing green figure; a gold leaf painting is embedded in its surface. In "Buddha (Wind)," a 20-inch black glass bust is embellished with a white, granular face of embedded beads. Although they have flattened slightly, they still retain their individual patterning, while rendering the Buddha's calm features. This unlikely combination of what becomes, essentially, a form of drawing with glassblowing is jarring and intriguing, both technically as well as aesthetically. While the blown glass shapes are elegant, Scott's beaded faces are cartoonlike. It's almost like painting a mustache onto a holy icon: the contrast should confuse and alienate, but somehow,

instead, is charming.

That she succeeds is perhaps not surprising. Scott is an expert with her materials. Throughout her long career, she has tackled issues of race, sex, gender, and violence in an unapologetically honest fashion. She has depicted rape, mutilation, guns, racial epithets and prejudices, always with work so beautiful that the viewer is seduced by aesthetics before they can ingest the content. Scott is a longtime Baltimorean of African- and Native-American descent, and comes from a family of expert quilters, beaders, and artisans. She has lived her entire life blocks from where Freddie Gray was arrested, and her personal experiences as a black woman in Baltimore underlie all her work. Although in this particular exhibit, Scott borrows freely across cultures, including Mexican Day of the Dead skeletons, Japanese Buddhas, and African fertility figures, the works in the show explore the sexuality and spirituality assigned to black women in American culture. Scott's figures are female, powerful, thick, and devastatingly beautiful; she presents black women as sensual and sentient beings, contradicting common stereotypes with decadence rather than militancy.

Beyond the sexual and racial connotations here, Scott offers sublime and transcendent experiences in this body of work. As objects, the glass sculptures are luxurious, even mesmerizing, in terms of their technique, detail, and scale. In addition to addressing a host of social taboos, Scott challenges art world taboos against beauty and humor, which are often not taken seriously by critics and curators. At her best, Scott manages to trick the viewer into an uneasy collusion with her; it's bewildering and a little disturbing, but also thrilling.



Installation view *Generations: Joyce J. Scott | Sonya Clark* at Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore, showing the work of Sonya Clark (photo by Joe Hyde, courtesy Goya Contemporary)

In the smaller back gallery, the sculptures and jewelry of Sonya Clark present a quiet reaction to Scott's work. Made of human hair and formed into larger-than-life dreadlocks, Clark's works present a next generation of engagement with African American culture and identity, but it's difficult to focus on next to Scott's colorful, raucous party.

*Generations: Joyce J. Scott | Sonya Clark* continues at Goya Contemporary (Mill Center, Studio 214, 3000 Chestnut Avenue, Baltimore) through July 18.