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Tugging at the Stitches of Art History: Elizabeth Talford Scott

Eyewinkers, Tumbleturds, and Candlebugs Revisited: A Legacy Unfolds at the
Baltimore Museum of Art

By Kerr Houston | December 26, 2023



Elizabeth Talford Scott, *Grandfather's Cabin/Noah's Art*, 1993-96. Delaware Art Museum, Gift of the Alberta du Pont Bonsal Foundation, 2000.
© Estate of Elizabeth Talford Scott at Goya Contemporary Gallery | TALP.

High above eye level, against a rich field of velvety red, a potent figure hovers beneath a band of sprent stars and tremulous rows of buttons. Is it a mermaid? A jet plane? A cross? Arguably, it's all of those, and the rest of the quilt—a sizable, reversible affair entitled "Both Sides Now (Turncoat)"—only extends this air of possibility.

Sections of irregularly printed fabric are casually joined, creating a jangling series of asymmetrical rhythms. Meandering lines of stitches suggest irregular homesteads seen from the air, while the block of velvet is the size of a grave, or a door. The aerial and the earthbound thus converge, offering a provocative complement to the smooth, stately curves of Henry Moore's "Three Rings" below.

Quite like the beguiling quilts that constitute its primary focus, the BMA's recently opened show of fiber works by Elizabeth Talford Scott, *Eyewinkers*, *Tumbleturds*, and *Candlebugs* (on view through April 28, 2024) is a densely layered and deeply affirming affair.

At once a retrospective, a revisitation of a seminal 1998 show of Scott's work, and an attempt to gently reimagine conventional museum practices, it embodies a creative energy and a dynamic sense of history in a way that's true to its subject. And, just like Scott's highly personal and formally rambunctious works, it's characterized by a freewheeling, inclusive spirit—and rewards a closer look.



Installation view of *Eyewinkers*, *Tumbleturds*, and *Candlebugs*. Photograph by Kerr Houston.

Born in South Carolina in 1916, Scott moved to Baltimore in the 1940s and worked as a caterer and childcare provider in Sandtown-Winchester before retiring in the 1970s. At that point, she began to experiment artistically in ambitious ways, combining the skills that she had learned in a vibrant Black household with an interest in Euro-American patchwork quilting traditions. Soon she was working confidently with a range of materials and application techniques. By the time she died in 2011, Scott had produced a fold of remarkable objects that were typically imbued with family lore and spiritual references, and which were often informed by her many friendships.

Guest-curated by George Ciscle and organized by Cecilia Wichmann, this show displays nineteen of those works (along with a photograph of the artist by Carl Clark and a beaded sculpture by her MacArthur Genius daughter Joyce J. Scott).

Meaningfully, it's installed in the BMA's Contemporary Wing: a gesture that allows Scott's work to float beyond the more restrictive rhetorical frameworks of American art or the decorative arts and to acquire a range of new associations. That interest in reframing her work is also evident in the wall texts, which

were composed by artist peers, critics, collectors, and acquaintances and which yield a communal, kaleidoscopic series of distinct impressions.

Despite this ambitious structure, the curatorial touch is actually rather light. Scott's works are given considerable space and generally hung on walls or draped on angled surfaces, permitting an unmediated view of their complex surfaces. So get close to "Grandfather's Cabin/Noah's Ark," a heavily worked quilt that deploys a boisterous array of techniques (stitching, knotting, batting), a surprising roster of materials (bright fabrics, found plastic elements, small rocks), and an involved iconography (stars, leaves, snakes) in evoking Scott's childhood home. The result is a jazzy mashup of textures, scales, and forms that feels vaguely akin to the encrusted aspect of Jackson Pollock's "Full Fathom Five"—or to a twinkling coral reef.



Installation view of *Eyewinkers*, *Tumbleturds*, and *Candlebugs*. Photograph by Kerr Houston.



(Detail of) Elizabeth Talford Scott, *Lowery's Quilt*, 1987. Courtesy of Lowery Stokes Sims, Baltimore. Photograph by Kerr Houston.

“Lowery’s Quilt,” made for the art historian and curator Lowery Stokes Sims in 1987, is another highlight. Five feet by five feet, it’s structured around a series of rough, approximately symmetrical blocks of fabric. In a field of deep, jewel-like tones, two bold patches of lemon yellow stand out like the clean notes of a trumpet. But if we look more closely still, we can spot items donated by Sims—buttons from aged, once-loved garments; an apron sent decades before by a pen pal—and small stones fixed in place by plastic netting. A distant cousin of a Rauschenberg combine, this remarkable quilt is simultaneously a residue of a life lived, a reassuring weighted blanket, and a talismanic shield.

But wait: stones? Really? Really: repeatedly, Scott punctuated her works with small pebbles, which she associated with qualities such as strength, luck, and faith. In a touching 11-minute video pieced together from several 1990s recordings and shown in one of the galleries, Scott suggests that the Rock of Gibraltar holds the world together. And in an untitled object made for the artist Oletha DeVane in the 1990s, three stones worked into a field of shimmering pink and gold fabric are meant to cure what ails: applied to a body part, they were intended to soothe and to comfort. Thus, as Joan Gaither puts it in one of the wall texts, Scott’s overarching aim was “to quilt for the soul.”

In a sense, then, Scott’s work was consistently verbal in nature; her products speak openly of the processes by which they were made and embody an intentionally active aspect. The outcomes of improvisational sketching, unfettered imagining, and patient manufacture, they invoke themes such as sheltering, collecting, and nurturing.

As the show’s title (which draws on her idiosyncratic vernacular) implies, Scott saw the world in a particular way. But she was always also interested in transmission: in the communication of lived histories and stitched forms across lives and even generations.



(Detail of) Elizabeth Talford Scott, *Grandfather’s Cabin/Noah’s Art*, 1993-96. Delaware Art Museum, Gift of the Alberta du Pont Bonsal Foundation, 2000. © Estate of Elizabeth Talford Scott at Goya Contemporary Gallery |TALP. Photograph by Kerr Houston.



Installation view of *Eyewinkers, Tumbleturds, and Candlebugs*. Photograph by Kerr Houston.

A final room thus offers a fitting coda. Designed largely by two students in Deyane Moses' ongoing Exhibition Development Seminar (which includes students from MICA, Morgan State, Coppin State, and Johns Hopkins), the space includes a timeline of Scott's life and an array of books related to quilting. But it also features a scrapbook, a video, and a number of items from Scott's 1998 exhibition at MICA, *Eyewinkers, Tumbleturds, and Candlebugs*, which was curated by Ciscle and the very first cohort of EDS students.

This is thus a chance to reflect on a quarter century of local history—and to look forward to a host of related exhibitions and events that Moses and her class will direct at eight other sites around Baltimore City from February to May 2024.

As a result, this is very much a show about community. Study the labels closely, and you'll discern the outlines of a sprawling social network: an artistic ecosystem in which Scott was a vital nexus. Given that, the BMA's attempts at truly inclusive exhibition design feel especially apt. Through the provision of multiple entrances, various seating options, braille wall texts and a touchable quilted sample, the museum anticipates the differing needs of a diverse audience, and upholds Scott's basic interest in affirmation and the irreducible value of each individual.

So how, finally, to think about Scott's practice? Certainly, it's possible to see her work as an extension of diasporic traditions and as loosely related to the work of other African-American quilters. The notion of stones charged with potency has a lengthy history in Africa, and Hausa dyers sometimes work stones into bunches of fabric. Sharon Kerry-Harlan occasionally employed buttons and round objects in the 1990s, and the shells and snakeskins that dot Scott's compositions also appear in the work of Dindga McCannon. These are significant, if limited, continuities.

But as the siting of this show implies, it can also be rewarding or even liberating to think of Scott's work simply as contemporary art. Her recurring use of items with personal histories (one of the quilts on display is made largely of neckties that belonged to a donor's grandfather) embodies the "archival

impulse” that Hal Foster famously discerned in 1990s contemporary artistic circles. And her fluid embrace of multiple mark-making and signifying strategies makes her work a semiotic wonderland. When she was coming up, Scott says in one of the videos, she called herself a quilter—”but now I use the word from the web. I’m an artist.”

She certainly was, and this show clearly conveys her audacious, irrepressible artistry. In the process, it also offers a subtle but insistent disruption of traditional museological and art historical logic, gently expanding our sense of what contemporary art might encompass. After revisiting this show, I found myself thinking about Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz*, an iconoclastic 1961 jazz album built around raucous, heterophonic improvisation and featuring, on its cover, a reproduction of a painting by Jackson Pollock.

Arguably, *Eyewinkers*, *Tumbleturds*, and *Candlebugs* involves a comparable energy and a related openness to casual cross-genre connections. Animated by cosmic allusions and personal histories, Scott’s works certainly achieve their soulful aim. But as this show demonstrates, they can also hold their own in conversations about contemporary art. Alluring exercises in stitchwork, they thus hint at what it might mean to tug at the stitches of a history of art that has not always been welcoming to such magic.



Installation view of *Eyewinkers*, *Tumbleturds*, and *Candlebugs*. Photograph by Mitro Hood.