

## HYPERALLERGIC

# The Serious Joy of Joyce J. Scott's Beaded Art

The decorative allure of Scott's textile and beaded creations seduces viewers into her sharp critiques of racism, misogyny, and other social ills.

Isabella Segalovich July 12, 2024



Installation view of Joyce J. Scott: *Walk a Mile in My Dreams* at the Baltimore Museum of Art (all photos Isabella Segalovich/Hyperallergic)

BALTIMORE — Joyce J. Scott's half-century retrospective at the Baltimore Museum of Art is an invitation to wander in her dreams. Those of us who accept that invitation will likely never forget both their beauty and their urgency. The artist, known to some as the "Queen of Baltimore," is a master of beading, quilting, printmaking, weaving, and performance. She has crafted an oeuvre so entrancing that I found myself meandering through the exhibition three times in an attempt to soak up every last detail, whether luscious, disturbing, or somehow both.

Upon entering the show, I was immediately struck by "I Call Her Name" (2023), a huge, impossibly intricate sculpture composed of undulating waves of beads. I was delighted

to find “Monsters, Dragons, and Flies” (1982), a quilt Scott created with her late mother, the extraordinary Elizabeth Talford Scott. On an adjoining wall, dancing figures and skeletons are held together by delicate connective tissue, made entirely out of beads. More enchanting heritage quilts hang on a large, spindly structure looming over piles of books, dolls, and beaded sugar skulls that surround a soft quilted chair. Just outside this room are five mannequins decked out in resplendent fabrics. Look closer, and you’ll realize that the mannequins themselves are crafted from beads. Look behind the mannequins, and you’ll see that you’re just at the start of the show.



Joyce J. Scott and Elizabeth Talford Scott, “Monsters, Dragons, and Flies” (1982), fabric, thread, beads

Beads are Scott’s primary material, typically strung together using the “peyote stitch,” a technique in which the strings that hold the beads are woven together as you go. This allows her to improvise as she crafts, creating splendid and riotous forms in her sculptures and wearable art, as eye-catching as they are thick with critical social commentary. “The beads have a decorative beauty,” she says in a quote printed on the gallery wall. “They glitter. They’re full of color. They shine. Because the pieces tend to be small you have to get close to see them. Then, once [people are] drawn in, I give them the punch-line.”

And her works indeed pack a punch. That decorative allure seduces viewers into her sharp critiques of racism, misogyny, and other social ills. It often takes a moment, as you lean into a glittering array of intricately colorful beads to realize that they portray subjects such as a lynching, a woman being trafficked and brutalized, or the violently injured form of Rodney King. While the twisting contours of her human figures' limbs can enhance their joy and beauty, the figures can just as quickly invoke horror as they are sexually assaulted, murdered, or even devoured in one work by a "man-eating watermelon."



Joyce J. Scott, "Man-Eating Watermelon" (1986), beads, thread

But even with the heaviest of subjects, Scott uses levity to engage her audience. In works such as "Man-Eating Watermelons" (1986) she plays with words as she does with beads. The wall text next to this piece includes another quote from the artist: "I believe that laughter is one of those situations when you're most vulnerable. When you're that vulnerable and looking at something that is tragic you are learning, or becoming part of something, in some way."

These days, many of us feel desperate to understand how art can incite change. The brilliance of Joyce J. Scott's art, from its irresistible shine to its use of comedy and drama to ignite critical conversations, may provide more than a few clues.

*Joyce J. Scott: Walk a Mile in My Dreams continues at the Baltimore Museum of Art (10 Art Museum Drive, Baltimore, Maryland) through July 14. The exhibition was co-curated by Cecilia Wichmann, BMA associate curator of Contemporary Art, and Catharina Manchanda, SAM Jon and Mary Shirley Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, with support from Leslie Rose, Joyce J. Scott Curatorial Research Assistant.*



Joyce J. Scott, "Blue Baby Book Redux," detail (2018),  
glass beads, thread



Joyce J. Scott, "Africa Necklce" (c. 1980), glass beads, synthetic  
thread



A visitor takes part in the collaborative weavings that make up "The Living Wall" near the end of the exhibition.