

BLACK ART IN AMERICA™

Joyce J. Scott: Living Her Wildest Dreams

By Shantay Robinson

Baltimore native Joyce J. Scott is enjoying a 50-year retrospective, *Joyce J. Scott: Walk a Mile in My Dreams* at the Baltimore Museum of Art. The exhibition is dense, with a remarkable number of artworks in ten thematic sections that span Scott's career.



The Threads That Unite My Seat to Knowledge (2024)

The narratives in the exhibition range in subject matter and tone. In one work she might be calling out the heinous practice of lynching through beaded sculptures and in another she is jokingly criticizing Black History Month through performance art. Underneath it all is an urgency for these stories to be told. Scott's 50-year career is well-documented in the exhibition. There are video performances, performance scripts, photos, and with her collaborator for *The Thunder Thigh Revue*, she produced a music video for an original song.



Lynched Tree (2011/2014)

The exhibition starts out grand with an installation called “The Threads That Unite My Seat to Knowledge.” It is an assemblage made up of a variety of ephemera, including heirloom quilts made by the artists’ mother and acclaimed textile artist, Elizabeth Talford Scott, as well as her maternal grandmother and grandfather, and godmother. The installation, which we can imagine is made for thinking, includes a seat at its center with books nearby for inspiration and the quilts serving as walls to block out any distractions. There are sculptures throughout the piece that provide inspiration and protection. This is a sanctuary. Although visitors may not sit in the seat to knowledge, one can imagine Scott regally seated amongst her ancestors’ quilts reaching for a book as stimulation for her next project, thinking about the world and how to create art that reflects her concerns.

A descendent of ancestors of the Great Migration, her parents traveled separately from North Carolina and South Carolina. They met in Baltimore. There, Scott grew up in a sort of idyllic Baltimore of the 1950s. She lived in Sandtown, Baltimore a block away from her elementary school and across the street from the newly developed Gilmore Projects. The neighborhood was vibrant in Scott’s youth. There were industrial jobs. And parents were able to make substantial livings to care for their families. It was a time in Baltimore when children could travel the streets with fewer concerns. There were recreation centers and pools. But it also had bars and night clubs to see Dizzy Gillespie and Billie Holiday for the adults. “I remember it as a true community. Because it was the 50s and early 60s where integration hadn’t really dug its heels in. The teachers and dentists and folks of varying degrees of scholarship still lived in the neighborhood.” The town wasn’t yet integrated aside from a Chinese restaurant or Jewish clothing store.

Growing up in the ‘40s, ‘50s’ and 60’s, Scott was witness to major changes in the country’s establishment. Living in Sandtown, Scott remembers a sense of community that supported her artistic goals. She recalls, “My teachers in the schools I attended, during the summertime all the way up to high school, gave me materials to go home and make artwork.” As a child of the city, Scott remains in Baltimore because she still feels that community despite the absence of industry to support the livelihoods of the people. She still feels that Baltimore is home. According to Scott, the Baltimore of today is not entirely different from the city of the past. Of course, there are repercussions from the industry that was phased out years ago. But she says, “For as many problems as we have, it’s a very tight city that is filled with artists and things to do. And when I say artists, I mean literary, visual performance, you name it. We’re all doing art.” Although the face of Baltimore has changed, with an increase in drugs and violence, the community continues to support the arts and Scott.



Swimming Lessons (2001) and Peeping Redux (Necklace) (2013)

Scott inherited creativity from her ancestors. Art was passed down to her through generations. Scott included heirloom quilts in this exhibition, giving reverence and recognition to her ancestors. But her godparents were Pentecostal preachers and she performed street ministry with them, so performance was also passed down to her. These learned behaviors from her lineage all show up throughout the exhibition in her craftsmanship and performance. She learned to make something out of nothing from her parents. Though they both didn't have more than about a sixth-grade education which they gained from one-room schoolhouses, they made a way for themselves and their children at a time when they didn't have access to information at their fingertips. Her family made what they needed if they didn't have it. She comes from crafts people. And although crafts are not historically highly regarded in the commercial art world, artists like Scott push the limits of craft to elevate it.



Spanish Saint (Necklace) (1980)

Over the years, she has worked in several mediums including, performance art putting on a show called *Thunder Thigh Revue* that was conceived in 1984 with fellow artist Kay Lawal-Muhammad. They talked about beauty, politics, racism, and gender bias. They were “women of substance” as one of their performances was named. They defied expectations by leaning into the uncomfortable topics and embracing their bodies in a society where being thin is perceived as the only acceptable way to be. They defied the norms that claimed you need to be thin, white, and affluent to be heard. They toured the *Thunder Thigh Revue* to rave reviews. And within the current exhibition, the duo presents a music video to a hip hop song they recently recorded.

Having been awarded a 2016 Macarthur “Genius” Award, it's expected that Scott's work exudes a certain intellectual quality. And though her work is predominantly created by craft like quilting, beading, weaving, and crocheting, the concepts behind her art, makes engaging with them an interaction that stimulates a range of narratives unlike traditional craftwork. She makes art about racism and sexism because she thinks both isms are illogical. The exhibition reserves a room for Scott's artwork about lynching. And there is a clear juxtaposition between the subject matter and the delicate beautiful, beaded artwork. Throughout the exhibition it isn't hard to notice that Scott is talented in many media. She considers her body of work “a book or concerto with many different chapters to it.”



Man Eating Watermelon (1986)

Scott's art emerges from a lineage of artmakers, including the quilter Harriet Powers, who was born into slavery, and whose work is now exhibited in the Smithsonian Museum among other notable institutions and the incomparable Faith Ringgold who challenged the status quo with her art and protest. Though Power's may not have had the national acclaim in her lifetime that she now has, it is her intricate designs on the quilts she made that have allowed other women craft artists to be taken seriously in this country. Ringgold was active in that fight to be taken seriously because the academy thought that craft work was low art as opposed to a medium like painting being high art. And Scott directly benefits from her predecessors in a way that allows her to boldly use craft to tell compelling narratives and make bold statements about the state of the world.

The work on display at the Baltimore Museum of Art represents a lifetime of work although the artist is still working five days a week. At 75 years old, Joyce J. Scott is still grinding. Every day is a blessing for the artist. She feels blessed to do what she loves to do. "God has given me this gift. And I'm happy to have it and use it. And I invite other people to have joy." When she looks in the mirror, she sees her father and mother. She says, "I see the joy and love they gave me." Her mother lived to be 95 years old, witnessing Barack Obama become President of the United States. But being born in the 1948, Scott witnessed a lot too. Not only did she see the election of the first African American President of the United States, but she was also witness to the March on Washington and the "I Have a Dream Speech" by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Hers is a generation of people who have gone through drastic changes, from having no televisions to having computers in their pockets. Not only has technology changed, but so much of our ethics have changed too. Scott's Baltimore is not the same as when she grew up because no one, nowhere, and nothing is the same. But what remains is the gift of personalities like Scott who share their stories.

Scott's beaded, weaved, crocheted, and quilted artworks will be on view in *Joyce J. Scott: Walk a Mile in My Dreams* at the Baltimore Museum of Art until July 14. And the retrospective will travel to Seattle Art Museum and open on October 17.