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Joyce J. Scott's 50-year retrospective to open alongside exhibits of her mother's quilts

Like mother, like daughter: The Scotts are 'bum-rushing Baltimore'



Artist Joyce J. Scott at the Baltimore Museum of Art with "Spring to Fall (Four Seasons)," 1991. The museum will open a retrospective of Scott's 50-year career on Sunday. (Kim Hairston/Staff)

By Mary Carole McCauley

Thirteen years after her mother's death, the MacArthur Award-winning artist Joyce J. Scott still hears the woman she called "Mom" or "Liz" standing just behind her, whispering in her ear.

"She's here right now," Scott, 75, said during an interview at the Baltimore Museum of Art and while putting the final touches on a 50-year retrospective of her artwork for an exhibit opening Sunday.

"She tells me she loves me. She's happy I don't forget her. Her voice never stops."

Scott delivered her trademark generous, gap-toothed smile and gave the words a humorous lift. But she was not speaking figuratively and she was not joking.

For more than six decades, the mother and her only child shared a house in West Baltimore, in Sandtown-Winchester and then, starting in 1974, in the Upton neighborhood — the same house where Joyce Scott lives today. Elizabeth Talford Scott was a talented quiltmaker, her celebrated daughter's first teacher, and her muse. Her death at age 95 might have altered the channels of communication between the pair. But it didn't end their conversation.

"I don't think I've ever witnessed a deeper bond between a mother and daughter," said Amy Raehse, executive director of Goya Contemporary Gallery, which represents Joyce Scott and manages Elizabeth Talford Scott's estate.

"Their story is an important American story and it happened right here in Baltimore. Elizabeth was born on the same plantation in South Carolina where her family had been enslaved. She was a sharecropper who had the equivalent of a sixth grade education, and now her work is exhibited in museums across the country. Elizabeth and Joyce are as authentic as authentic gets."

The legacies of both artists are being celebrated this spring in a series of citywide exhibitions.

The marquee attraction is the BMA's "Joyce J. Scott: Walk A Mile in My Dreams," a ticketed solo show of 140 artworks that includes beaded sculptures, jewelry, prints, clothing, wall hangings and performance art. After its four-month Baltimore run, the exhibit will move to the Seattle Museum of Art, which co-sponsored the show.

Alongside it, the Maryland Institute College of Art has launched its ambitious "No Stone Left Unturned: The Elizabeth Talford Scott Initiative." Students in the college's Exhibition Development Seminar organized shows featuring 40 of Elizabeth Scott's abstract, idiosyncratic quilts at nine museums and universities citywide, from Coppin State University to The Peale.

"Mom and I are bum-rushing Baltimore," Joyce Scott said.

Though the mother and daughter thought of themselves as equals, fate has a way of playing favorites. The younger woman had opportunities denied her mother and became the more acclaimed artist.

'The essence of my mother'

Joyce Scott rose to national prominence in 1991 at age 43 with her first major solo show at Washington's Corcoran Gallery, and developed an international following in 2013 after exhibiting her work in a collateral event of the prestigious Venice Biennale. Three years later, her status as a major American artist was cemented when she won the MacArthur Foundation fellowship, commonly known as a "genius" grant.

Though her work crosses genres, she primarily is known as a bead artist who uses a needle, thread and colored glass balls to tackle such politically charged topics as racism, sexual abuse and gun violence. Her pieces often are humorous, horrifying and disturbingly beautiful.

In contrast, Elizabeth Talford Scott sometimes held three jobs to support her family after moving to Baltimore in the 1940s. She worked as a housecleaner, childcare provider and occasionally as a cook while her own daughter was a latchkey kid.

During those afternoons after school while she waited for her mother to return home, the young Joyce turned to art.

“I had a TV and my art supplies,” she said. “I made stuff, and that allowed me to transform my loneliness into creativity.”

Joyce Scott revisits those afternoons in her “Mammy/Nanny” series, which are part of the museum retrospective. In her 1991 sculpture, “No Mommy Me I,” a Black child clings to her mother’s skirt, while the woman holds a pink-beaded baby aloft. The white infant has one foot planted on the woman’s chest, and the other covering her mouth.

“Sometimes, these women’s kids felt they were not getting as much affection as the kids their mothers worked for,” Scott said. “But to me, my mother and the other women were superheroes who took care of other people’s children and then came home and started a whole new work day with their own families.”

Even as an overworked young mother, Elizabeth Scott made quilts that overflowed with colorful, vivid shapes, though she thought of them not as art, but as blankets to keep her family warm. A free spirit, she expressed her exuberance by painting a stairway lipstick red according to her daughter, and by papering the bathroom with the comic pages to encourage young Joyce to read.

Raehse said it wasn’t until the 1970s, when her daughter was grown, that Elizabeth Scott began thinking of her abstract quilts as works of art. In works such as “Grandfather’s Cabin/Noah’s Ark” she incorporates such un-cuddly but visually arresting materials as buttons, shells, bones and in particular, stones that revisit family rituals and look for healing to the natural world.

“My mother gets rid of a lot of angst in her work,” Joyce Scott said in the 1990 video, “The Silver Needle.”

“She paints with fabric, and they are the kind of drawings people make when they try to get rid of things. When I look at my mother’s work ... I am seeing the essence of my mother.”

‘What took them so long?’

Elizabeth Scott came late in life to a too-brief artistic career. Most of her quilts were created in between the mid-1970s and the late 1990s, when she began showing the first symptoms of illness.

She knew she was brilliant, even if it took the blinkered art world an unforgivably long time to catch up.

“What goes through my head is how hard I worked,” she said in the 1990 video. “What took them so long to accept [my art]? Supposing I had the education that even babies have today, with the imagination that I have, think of how far along I would be.”

George Ciscle, who curated “Eyewinkers, Tumbleturds, and Candlebugs,” the Elizabeth Scott exhibit at the BMA, said the artist has been more influential after her death than she could have predicted.

“Elizabeth’s work was being shown in museums long before the big exhibit of the Gee’s Bend Quilts at the Whitney,” Ciscle said, referring to the 2003 exhibit that elevated quilt-making from overlooked craft to fine art. “She was one of the forerunners of that whole movement.”

She completed her final quilt in 1998, shortly after being diagnosed with dementia. For the remaining 13 years of her life, her care was her daughter’s priority.

“Joyce has always made her own opportunities,” Raehse said. “But Joyce put some things on pause for several years because she didn’t want to leave the house for too long.”

Ciscle said Joyce Scott’s friends worried about the toll that the mother’s long, slow decline was taking on her daughter.

“I watched my mother change from this firebrand, this explosive person, into someone who one day isn’t walking and one day isn’t talking,” Joyce Scott said. “But the flip side is that I was able to do for her what she had done for me.”

And indeed, the Joyce Scott from the 1990 video almost seems a different person than the Joyce Scott who in 2024 wheeled around the BMA at the media preview cracking jokes.

It wasn’t just that the woman in the video has covered her hair with a turban, while the older Scott just as often allows her wild red curls to shoot from her head like sunrays. Even her voice on the video is different: lighter, softer, and sheathed in social armor.

“I am not on this earth to stay the same Joyce,” Scott said, when discussing her transformation following her mother’s death. “I am on this earth to become the next Joyce.

“I thought I was an all right person before my mother got sick. But when she developed dementia, all my pieces came together. I found my smart woman, my caregiver, my tall person, my accepting self.

“It all coalesced.”

If you go “Joyce J. Scott: Walk A Mile in My Dreams,” opens Sunday and runs through July 14 at the Baltimore Museum of Art, 10 Art Museum Drive. Tickets cost \$5 to \$15 and are free on selected community days, including March 24. “Eyewinkers, Tumbleturds & Candlebugs: The Art of Elizabeth Talford Scott,” runs through April 28 at the BMA. Admission is free. For details, call 443-573-1700 or visit artbma.org. A listing of other institutions sponsoring exhibitions of Elizabeth Talford Scott’s quilts can be found at elizabethtalfordscott.com.