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The Skeletons of Joyce J. Scott

A Review of Walk a Mile in My Dreams, Joyce Scott's 50-year retrospective now on view at the BMA

June 3, 2024 | Words: Laurence Ross | Photography: Jill Fannon



Joyce J. Scott's reputation precedes her: a Baltimore native who is bold and bright, witty—and scrutinizing. Brimming with life. The first time I saw *Walk a Mile in My Dreams*, her 50-year retrospective now on view at the BMA, Scott sat within an architectural structure of colorful family heirloom quilts titled "The Threads That Unite My Seat of Knowledge" (2024).

Her body and voice animated the artwork that revels in the idea of artistic legacy, how artisanal skills are passed from family member to family member, across generations, and within—as well as between—communities. Sculptural arms at the top of the structure hold up a long thread that leads a figure holding a giant needle, all made from beads, images that reinforce none of this work can be done in isolation. At the base of the seat upon which Scott sat are three beaded skulls, the calaveras associated with the Day of the Dead, cementing the presence of the past.

Also a well-known performer, it comes as no surprise that for Scott, the proper place for skeletons isn't hidden inside a closet but put on display, commanding our attention. Whether working in fabric, monoprint, blown glass, or beads, Scott embeds human skeletons as a mainstay in the narrative.

As a bead artist, Scott will sometimes form skeletons out of thousands of beads, but one can also spot singular beads in the shape of skulls if one looks closely. Surveying Scott's oeuvre, one can see she isn't preoccupied by death; Scott is preoccupied by the ways in which we choose to live—and treat each other in life.



Sculpture atop Scott's "The Threads That Unite My Seat to Knowledge," 2024



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



Joyce J. Scott, "What You Mean Jungle Music," 1987; photo: Cara Ober



Joyce J. Scott, "Hunger (necklace)," 1991, photo: Cara Ober

***"Surveying Scott's oeuvre, one can see she isn't preoccupied by death; Scott is preoccupied by the ways in which we choose to live—and treat each other in life."* - Laurence Ross**

"Hunger" (1991) is a necklace of glass beads, thread, plastic, and photographic prints. This piece of jewelry is one of many in the show that elevate the term "statement necklace" to an entirely new level. Though Scott stitched the words FOOD and AFRICA around the trim, the eye might be first drawn to a face of the left side of the piece that seems intent to look away from the rest of the scene. The beadwork itself is so intricate and beautiful that one could initially overlook the fact that within the stitches of the necklace are several skeletons, one of which seems to be contained within a sort of womb.

One of the photographic prints shows an emaciated Black child in the fetal position. The concept of scarcity, the image of starving children, and the sheer abundance of beads—"seed beads," as they are often called, a name that invokes harvest and nourishment—creates a provocative juxtaposition that's much more than one typically bargains for in a necklace. Scott's statement is difficult to ignore, insisting we not turn our attention away from such crises but instead take better notice.

Beadwork doesn't immediately lend itself to tackling global social issues, as one is predisposed to think of jewelry as adornment. Therefore, when we encounter narratives of gender and racial violence in Scott's work, the shock is manifold; we witness depictions of massive societal calamity rendered in such tiny beads, and, in the case of many of the works, fashioned to be worn on the body. These pieces have the potential to bring the conversation outside the studio, gallery, museum, or private collection and into the public eye.



Joyce J. Scott, Lynched Tree, 2011/2024, Plastic and glass beads, blown glass, wood, metal, found objects



Detail from Joyce J. Scott, Lynched Tree, 2011/2024

Individually, the beads are diminutive in size, used within a genre of art that has historically been diminished—as have most historically feminine practices—as "craft." But while craft shows cater to the innocuous, the purely decorative, and the whimsical for whimsy's sake, there is nothing innocuous about Scott. Using the Peyote stitch, she is able to build three-dimensional, increasingly larger sculptures, the largest in the exhibition, "Lynched Tree" (2011/2024), spanning nearly the height of the ceiling.

"Sex Traffic 2" (2017) features one of the more striking skeletons in the show, using the blown glass figure of a naked woman as its base. This woman's body is extended on a rod, feet pointed backward, back arched upward, head forward and tilted toward the sky. Reminiscent of a clipper ship's figurehead, the idea of transport is conjured. Carried on the back of the glass woman's thighs, there is another naked woman of beads on her back, legs pinned open as if in stirrups, hands above her head, being carried away despite her eyebrows arched in protest.

A white-beaded skeleton is wound around the figurehead, bones like binding ropes around the beaded woman's leg. The skeleton's skull is nestled next to the head of the glass woman so that from the front we are faced with a double-headed specter (the leg and feet of the skeleton appear whisp-like at certain angles, as if ghostly tails, the deadly threat of sex traffic proving evasive). The left hand of the skeleton is curling around the glass woman's right breast, as if to say he'll milk her for all she's worth.



Joyce J. Scott, *Sex Traffic 2*, 2017; Photo credit: Goya Contemporary



Joyce J. Scott, *Dead Albino Boy for Sale* (2021-2022), & *I Call Her Name* (2023) at the BMA



Joyce J. Scott, *Dead Albino Boy for Sale* (2021-2022), photo: Cara Ober



Joyce J. Scott, *Motherhood 3000*, 1983-86/2023, Fabric, thread, glass beads

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Scott repeatedly demonstrates the many grim ways in which the body can be turned into an economy. One of the most startling examples in the show is "Dead Albino Boy for Sale" (2021-2022), in which a young Black boy keeps close to the hem of his mother's skirt. The boy is dressed in bright blue while the mother is wearing a technicolor long-sleeved, high-necked dress in contrast to the white apron tied around her waist.

On her head, she carries a basket that contains what at first appears to be ropes of white fabric but is in fact the internal organs and severed body parts of an albino boy. While the sculpture is a direct representation of the human trafficking and organ trade spurred on by superstition in Tanzania, the piece also highlights that the perpetrators of violence are as likely to come from inside one's community as outside.

"You know, when they open up ancient tombs, many times all they find left is a beaded necklace," Scott has said. Beading is an ancient art form, a medium far more durable than bodies. Scott chooses beads in part because people are drawn to them—the way light is reflected and refracted with a glittering translucence. The skeleton is akin here; we have an interest in ourselves and in what lies beneath the surface. Though flesh is quick to decay, skeletons linger a bit longer. Perhaps the skeleton is the body in its least adorned state? Scott seems to suggest, stripped down, we all look pretty much the same. But a skeleton is not a body, really—just its scaffolding. There is no brain, no mind, no mannerism, no face, and therefore no person. The skeleton may be like what the thread is to a necklace—internal and integral but also, ultimately, lacking. Without the beads, without the body, there is no expression to speak to us.



Joyce J. Scott, *Shhhhh!*, 2012



Joyce J. Scott, *She Who Must Be Revered*,1989-90

Scott's sculptures are anything but silent, which is perhaps why the title of "Shhhhh!" (2012) draws even more attention to itself. Here, Scott dresses a found object, the figure of a woman, in a yellow-beaded dress. The skirt of the dress is adorned with skulls and skeletons as well as a human head holding a hand up to its lively mouth as if whispering a secret to the bones. What is the whispered voice saying? And who doesn't want to be overheard? Or, perhaps, who is speaking too loudly?

As green phantoms wind themselves up from the ground beneath the woman's feet and drape themselves around the woman's neck—suspended specters that echo Scott's own legacy of beaded necklaces—one can imagine this woman attempting to walk through the world as if she weren't connected to the struggles that surround her. As if she couldn't feel the weight of those who beg for her attention. As if she could live divorced from, and unaffected by, the humanity Scott pleads with us to share.

3000 Chestnut Ave, Mill Centre 214
Baltimore, Maryland 21211
goyacontemporary.com
410 366 2001



The artist with *Motherhood 3000*, 1983-86/2023, Fabric, thread, glass beads



Joyce J. Scott, *Spring*, 2000



Joyce J. Scott, *Watermelon Trophy*, 1992



Joyce J. Scott, *I Call Her Name* (2023) (detail)



Joyce J. Scott, *Buddha Transcends Field of Dead Fire*, 2024

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Joyce J. Scott, *Boy with Gun,* 1995



Joyce J. Scott, *Everywoman's Harriet* (detail), 2017



Joyce J. Scott, *Peeping Redux* (detail), 2013



Elizabeth Talford Scott & Joyce J. Scott, *Three Generation Quilt* (detail) 1983

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Joyce J. Scott, *Trickster Savior - The Salvation of African Albinos*, From the series *Flayed Tanzanian Albinos*, 2021-2022



Joyce J. Scott, *Ancha Melon*, 1987, *Daydreaming*, 1995, and *Saint Watermelanin*, 1994



The artist ensconced within *The Threads That Unite My Seat to Knowledge*, 2024, Heirloom quilts made by the artist's mother, maternal grandmother, maternal grandfather, and godmother, beads, thread, ribbon, performance environment



Joyce J. Scott, *Everywoman's Harriet*, 2017, *Inkisi: St. John the Conqueror*, 2009/2023, *Aloft*, 2016-17, *Shhhhhh!,* 2012, *War Woman* I, 2014