

THE BALTIMORE BANNER

The Joy of Celebrating an Artist who is Still Alive – and Thriving

Leslie Gray Streeter

3/25/24 5:30 a.m. EDT



Artist Joyce J. Scott sits atop a throne inside a yurt installation in her retrospective exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)

I've covered many retrospective art shows in my career, taking the invitation to stroll through an artist's creative biography writ large in paint and clay on walls and platforms. Last week's preview of the latest such visual memoir at the Baltimore Museum of Art featured the usual: a throng of press, fervent admirers and experts on the artist's work.

But this time, the main expert was uniquely well-versed in the subject.

"Most retrospectives are dead people," said Joyce J. Scott, who led the winding, vibrant trip along the path of her own inspiration that is the ["Joyce J. Scott: Walk a Mile in My Dreams"](#) exhibit, which can be seen at the BMA through July 14. "I'm alive, and I'm sure it's been a challenge for them."

From the love shown to the prolific artist and self-described "Baltimore girl" by the BMA staff, that's probably not true. From where I stood, she seemed delightful, providing insight into the astonishing breadth of a lifetime of filtering her expressions on what she calls "isms" of all varieties. On display are nearly 140 pieces including sculpture, textiles, intricate beading, jewelry, prints and more. Some evoke a knowing warmth, others a searing pain. All are colorful, complicated, witty and guaranteed to make you think. "I am someone who is always on a quest," Scott said, "to do something different with what exists."



Aya Dixon of Bmore Art photographs some of the pieces inside the "Joyce J. Scott: Walk a Mile in My Dreams" exhibit. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)



A large, interactive loom is one of the pieces in Baltimore artist Joyce J. Scott's retrospective exhibition. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)

She came to the art world as part of a beautiful legacy started by her mother, the late [Elizabeth Talford Scott](#), whose work is also currently the subject of [its own exhibit](#) at the museum and in several other institutions [in and around](#) the Baltimore area.

The elder Scott's primary medium was quilting, evoking the traditions of her family's deep roots as sharecroppers and, before that, enslaved people. Elizabeth Talford Scott's work is featured lovingly in her daughter's new show, most notably in the striking introductory piece. "The Threads Of My Seat of Knowledge" encompasses a literal seat under a yurt festooned with quilts and books — a throne for a queen whose power is woven from the past and its connection to the present and future.

Joyce J. Scott cautioned visitors not to dismiss such work as easily accessible and folksy, like she's "from some special space and I'm some magical Negress," she said. "It's not improv. I did go to school."

The Maryland Institute College of Art graduate sat proudly and resplendent in patterns of royal purple as [BMA Director Asma Naeem](#) regaled the crowd with highlights of Scott's storied career, including when she won a MacArthur Genius Grant in 2016.

"Joyce, you are everywhere," Naeem said.

"Like the influenza or something," Scott replied, with perfect comic timing. It cannot be overstated how funny she is, not just as a human, but in how she weaves a sense of playfulness into her work, a function of what she calls her "trickster" spirit. Her stories are almost as impressive as her art, like the time she was "thrown out of Brownies because I didn't get a cut of the [Girl Scout] cookie sales."



Joyce J. Scott, right, is introduced by Baltimore Museum of Art Director Asma Naeem at a media preview. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)

During the preview, the artist was transported in a wheelchair, which she explained she does not usually need but made it easier to travel the length of the exhibit with her bad knee. "But I can still fight," she said, laughing.

"Walk a Mile in My Dreams" is deliberate, bold and effervescent, much like its creator. It made me grateful that Scott never seemed to follow the edict that women in this society, particularly women of color, should exist quietly and politely.

When the floor was opened for questions in the part of the exhibit featuring detailed outfits from the 1970s and 1980s — all of which I would wear — I asked the artist if she was driven artistically and personally by seeking to take up as much space as possible.

After joking that my question could be mistaken for calling her fat, Scott said she was born in a “sweet spot” of history that allowed her to evolve as an artist since her birth in the 1940s through the relative progress that came with each successive decade.

“I know I have power, and I have the prowess and the courage to follow it. I will not be squelched,” Scott explained. “And I’m *phat*.”
Everyone laughed.
“See, that’s funny!”



Historical footage of Scott is seen on a small TV set in the “Thunder Thigh Revue” portion of her exhibition. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)



"Lynched Tree," at left, is a piece by Scott that depicts a woman who has been hanged. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)

Such is her versatility that the show can go from the humorously powerful videos of her "Thunder Thigh Revue" shows from the '80s with performance partner Kay Lawal-Muhammad to the painful figure of "Lynched Tree," depicting a woman who has been hanged — a melting figure of beads, metal and tragedy. The piece is installed in unique locations at each place it appears to enhance its message. At New Orleans' Tulane University, for instance, it clung [disturbingly from a tree branch](#).

"I'm not sure why we are still fooling around with racism," Scott said, adding that "it's such a failure for humans to keep doing it."

I'd advise taking your time walking a mile through Scott's dream. There's so much to see, hear and drink in, and no matter what you absorb, it makes a statement. The artist wouldn't have it any other way.

"I want you to know how bodacious I am," Scott said. "I want people to go home and drink about it. Why else am I on this earth?"



Baltimore artist Joyce J. Scott. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)