

ARTFORUM

Joyce J. Scott

Seattle Art Museum

By Emily Butler



Joyce Scott, *No Mommy Me II*, 1991, leather, beads, laminated magazine detail, thread
12.25 × 6.63 × 9.5 in. & 4.75 × 4.13 × 2.75 in.

Joyce J. Scott's retrospective at the Seattle Art Museum foregrounded her multifarious talents: quilting, weaving, and beading. She deploys the results as jewelry, wearable artworks, tapestries, sculptures, installations, and more. The exhibition, which came to Seattle after debuting in her hometown of Baltimore, included nearly 140 works spanning a five-decade period, along with documentation of Scott's riotous performances, which range from revues to music videos. Her compositions feature an array of vivid, flowing forms and figures, achieved through her frequent use of freehand glass beading, which

softens the biting satire on violence and human oppression that they depict. As Scott proclaims in the catalogue, her ambition is to “create artwork that knocks your socks off.”

Ten themed sections structured the show. Named after titles of Scott’s works, they cover the major concerns in her practice, including “Ancestry and Progeny,” “Bearing Witness,” and “None Are Free Until All Are Free.” The show guided us through her inspirations, her recurrent interests, and the boundless growth of her ambition. This evolution has been fueled by her technical innovations: for example, her fused-bead glassware and her latest tapestry-size beadworks. Scale, however, is ultimately achieved through collaboration, a cornerstone of her practice since the 1970s, when she set up a giant loom in Druid Hill Park in Baltimore. At the Seattle Art Museum, the loom is sited at the heart of the show, inviting the public to learn and contribute to a giant weave.

The show introduced Scott’s myriad influences, a close-knit network of accomplished quilters who initiated her into the craft at an early age. These included her celebrated textile-artist mother, Elizabeth Talford Scott; Art Smith, her mentor during the 1970s who inspired her to consider the sculptural and performative aspects of jewelry; and Muscogee Creek artist Sandy Fife Wilson, who taught Scott Peyote beadwork in 1976. These and many other sources of inspiration were brought together in an ambitious new installation at the start of the show, *The Threads That Unite My Seat to Knowledge, 2024*, which looks like a yurt and feels like a sanctuary. The external structure is adorned with quilts made by Scott’s mother, grandmother, and grandfather—for instance, the intergenerational *Fifty Year Quilt, 1930–80*—while the interior shrine-like space is paneled with large, elaborate glass-bead compositions. Described by the museum as a storytelling environment and by the artist as a “habitat for the soul,” the work also bears the traces of the research gathered during her extensive travels to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These trips were the occasion for deep exchange with communities of artists and artisans, where she shared her techniques and learned new forms. Approaching other cultures with deep respect, her interpretations have, in turn, inspired a younger generation of artists, including Sonya Clark, Jeffrey Gibson, and Malcolm Peacock, all of whom have contributed texts to the catalogue.

Using beauty and humor as her allies, Scott intends for her work to be a tool in the fight against racism, sexism, patriarchal structures, and classism. In *No Mommy Me II*, 1991, Scott draws from the experiences of her own mother, a domestic worker who juggled caring for her while also tending to her employer's children. The sculpture features a delicate, beaded nanny struggling to hold a comically oversize, idealized white baby seemingly cut from an advertisement. Meanwhile, her own daughter looks on with bewilderment, sitting alone and apart on the floor. More than three decades after it was made, the work's sharp commentary on the labor of care being borne by working-class women and women of color remains as relevant as ever. Scott repeatedly drives her points home: Prejudices lead to racial slurs, oppression, and ultimately violence. A delicately beaded watermelon sculpture, *Saint Watermelanin*, 1994, sprouts a Black female figure who seems to rollick in ridiculing the idea of associating a fruit with a race, while also succumbing to its effects, limbs flailing, as a drowned victim.

Scott offers a spiritual take and suggests that talent—and inspiration, such as her own, which she has nurtured over half a century—provides a path to fulfill oneself and to uplift others. Supported by the generous curation of the show, which rendered her threads, weaves, and knowledge so accessible, Scott offers an open invitation to join her flow.