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The Sparkling, Haunting Beauty of Joyce J. Scott

by Ilene Dube

‘Ain’t I a woman?’ Abolitionist and women’s rights advocate Sojourner Truth famously uttered those words in a speech from 1851.

Sculptor, printmaker, installation artist, performer, quilter, storyteller, and jeweler Joyce J. Scott, whose exhibition “Harriet Tubman and Other Truths” is on view at Grounds For Sculpture through March, affirms the femininity of her forebearers in works of sparkling beauty that draw viewers in. It’s only up close they discover the subject matter: spread-eagle legs made from wooden pipes and beads, for example, in the “Day After Rape” series, or the smashed up head of Rodney King.

“My work is politically and socially oriented because that’s what keeps me up at night,” says Scott. “It haunts me. It’s important to me to use art in a manner that incites people to look and carry something home — even if it’s subliminal — that might make a change in them.”

Yet she does so while using all the formal elements of art, says Amy Eva Raehse, director of Goya Contemporary Gallery in Baltimore, who represents Scott. “She lures you in to engage in a dialogue you may not have had, and hopefully it will lead to your making a change.”

Scott uses biting humor to address issues of racism, violence, sexism, and social injustice. “Danger and abuse more than pleasure, procreation, or settled existence permeate the lives of Scott’s women,” write the exhibition curators.

With this exhibit, Grounds For Sculpture is seeking to be relevant and responsive to the world, with a belief in the role of the artist to give voice to difficult truths and challenge perceptions.

“People see art as ephemeral and elitist, with no concrete application — a one-trick pony,” says Scott. “We have art to examine how we can make a difference in our children’s lives. Art can be what newspapers used to be, what collage is, rolled up, a joyous occasion even when about challenging issues. It allows us to think and stretch and use all our faculties. What’s happening in our museums is a primal way for people to connect to each other. It helps us understand our humanity.”

A 2016 MacArthur “Genius” Fellow, Scott was born in 1948 and lived with her mother until her death in 2011. Not every strong-spirited independent artist could spend a lifetime under the same roof as the woman who bore her, but Scott’s mother was noted fiber artist Elizabeth Talford Scott. “She was hilarious and wise, we were very good friends,” says the loving daughter. “She was a rascal and angel.”

According to her obituary, the elder Scott “held numerous positions, from housekeeper to chef to nanny of many beloved children, but her greatest achievement was her love and nurturing of Joyce, her only child. They forged a true love and friendship throughout life, supporting each other’s endeavors from pie-eating and soul-singing to creating and exhibiting their artwork... She used a single needle and thread as her magic wand, and in 1987 received the prestigious Women’s Caucus for Art Honor Award for Outstanding Achievements in the Visual Arts.”

At the age of 3, Joyce became her mother’s accomplice in creativity. They sewed together and at age 5, Joyce made her first necklaces and jewelry. “I was a born artist.”

After what she calls a latch-key childhood and graduating from an all-girls white high school (“I helped to integrate it”), Scott earned a scholarship to Maryland Institute College of Art and earned her master’s degree from the Instituto Allende in Mexico in 1971, with further study at Rochester Institute of Technology and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. She worked for a time as a drug counselor, using weaving and crocheting to help Vietnam veterans, but felt limited in her efficacy.

Scott’s father, like her mother, was born to sharecroppers in North Carolina. Both migrated in the 1930s and ’40s and met in Baltimore. Her father already had two children, and after Joyce was born he had another child with a different family. The former tobacco and vegetable sharecopper became a crane operator for Bethlehem Steel.

“He had no context for being an artist,” recounts his daughter. “My dad could turn a quarter into a dollar. He was a man of his time and taught me to be pragmatic and take care of myself so I could be a studio artist all of my life. He lived to his 80s, and only at end of his life, when my work was validated in articles and catalogs, did he understand that I could tackle this life as an artist.”

Elizabeth Scott’s earliest quilts were practical affairs, learned from her sharecropper mother and using clothing and other upcycled items from their lives. When Joyce came home from college and brought curator friends and historians, they realized the quality in her mother’s work and the quilts took on a new earnestness. The elder Scott continued quilting and giving lectures with her daughter until dementia set in, when she was in her 70s.

A good selection of Elizabeth Scott’s quilts is on view in “Harriet Tubman” — and quilts by the daughter, as well. In some ways, Scott conflates her mother with Tubman. “Like Harriet, my mom had strength and a desire for justice. I saw Harriet as a way to not only celebrate my mom but women who do the kind of work she did and were courageous. Harriet has always been with me.”

In her Baltimore home Scott is surrounded by walls painted effervescent shades of teal, canary, and chartreuse; by textiles that evoke tribal origins; paintings and blown glass in bright colors; and beads, beads, beads. Crowned by a full head of orange curls, her neck is often adorned with her own creations: an intricate design made up of tiny seed beans. During a recent visit, gallerist Raehse and curator Lowery Sims also wore these elaborate necklaces.

When is it jewelry, and when is it art? “It’s the same impulse to create,” says Scott. “Jewelry can be six or seven feet but usually is more intimate. Sculpture is about scale, meant to be looked at many times but not touched. Jewelry allows the wearer to be involved, choosing how to wear it on the body. I wear a lot of it, it’s a way of inviting others to you and to feel you up. Sculpture can be that but a lot is meant to be stood under, walked through. When person is wearing jewelry they’re there with you, one on one.”

The necklaces on exhibit show her transition from using a loom to employing the peyote stitch, based on the sacred plant and with beads falling on a diagonal l — this three-dimensional technique requires no armature. “These necklaces have narratives,” says Patterson Sims. “She makes dark issues palatable. “‘Rodney King’s Head Smashed Like a Watermelon’ takes an ugly theme and makes it beautiful.”

“Pussy Melon” looks like it fell off Judy Chicago’s “Dinner Party,” perhaps an uninvited guest, a shriveled prune face with wiry hair emerging from labia. In “War Woman,” a double-headed figure in a puddle of glass guns, each with a millefiore bead and key, eros and guns are fused.

There is a strong maternal theme running through the work, including the “Mammi Wada” series, based on a figure from African lore that connects water and fertility. Patterson Sims talks about the contradiction of black women who raised white children from racist families. One beaded figure shows a white child getting all the attention from the black mother, while the black child hides in her mother’s skirt.

“Harriet Tubman’s Closet” is an installation produced specifically for Grounds For Sculpture. “In seeking how to represent Harriet, Joyce came up with the idea of an intimate closet,” says Lowery Sims. “She envisioned it as a dream boudoir. Harriet had a private life with secret dreams and desires, and we wanted to evoke that.”

At the center is a beaded quilt spilling out of a trunk. Representations of objects that might have belonged to the abolitionist hero include a beaded hat, a blown-glass rifle with floral details for self-defense, slippers and a shawl. There is a beaded hand shackled to a heart, showing that her heart was bound to the work she did.

On a vanity, rather than the typical perfume bottles there are two fetishes with insects embedded in resin, and a reproduction of the letter Frederick Douglas wrote to Harriet.

“Harriet’s Closet” continues outdoors with a fiberglass figure made to look like bronze, standing in a sea of quilts and not far from a lynched figure.

“Graffiti Harriet” was been made from earth, and is beaded and graffitied with the words from Frederick Douglas’s letter. At 15 feet — her tallest work to date — the sculpture is expected to deteriorate during its winter in New Jersey. Made with assistance from artists at Grounds For Sculpture, including Clifford Ward and Autin Wright, it will fade as Harriet’s memory does but some semblance will endure.

With the exception of the blown-glass pieces and the works created for Grounds For Sculpture, Scott makes no preliminary drawings but works intuitively. She recalls how her mother invited many women in to drink her homemade wine and tell story after story as she quilted. “The brain and hand and heart are threaded together,” she says. “It’s a vision and responds to what the materials do.”

Scott is also a performer who has performed with the “Thunder Thigh Revue — For Fat Women Only and the Men Who Have the Guts to Come/Attend” or “Our Egos are Bigger Than Our Asses.” The duo formed in “the Post-Black Power era of Reaganomics and Marvel Comics.” “Walk in My Drawers,” a one-woman show, also toured nationally. Scott confesses to having been a shy child. “I sang in the choir but never the lead.” While attending graduate school in Mexico, she supported herself singing blues, pop, jazz, and spiritual music in clubs. With the Thunder Thigh Revue, she has performed throughout the U.S., Canada, Scotland, and Holland, using improv and comedy to address issues of racism and misogyny. “It is a vehicle to talk about issues I couldn’t easily do in visual artwork,” she says. “Some ideas work better in performance.”

The Baltimore neighborhood in which she has lived is “challenged,” she says. Scott lives and works out of two attached row houses, although getting around with a cane these days (she is awaiting knee surgery), she only uses the first of the three floors. Her office is in her mother’s former studio, and there are rooms for printmaking, for weaving, for sewing, for beading.

“The idea that I could be that girl from two blocks from where Freddie Gray started the end of his life, that I could receive a MacArthur Award and make art,” she says, “that is a giant thing that I must be responsible for.”

She is not the first MacArthur fellow from her neighborhood, she notes — Ta-Nehisi Coates grew up nearby, as did Anna Deavere Smith. She compares the award to “a big sloppy kiss. This means I can spread my radiance and keep working. It validates that I’m on the right track.”

Joyce J. Scott: Harriet Tubman and Other Truths, Grounds For Sculpture, 126 Sculptors Way, Hamilton. Through April 1, 2018. \$10 to \$18. 609-586-0616 or www.groundsfor Sculpture.org.