



## Joyce J. Scott presents 'Harriet Tubman and Other Truths'

by Janet Purcell Nov. 1, 2017

A stunning exhibit of works by MacArthur 'Genius' Fellow Joyce J. Scott opened recently at Hamilton's Grounds For Sculpture and it is a breakthrough for the sculpture park. The more than 50 works by Scott on display form a wholly different genre from what is usually shown there.

Scott's works on display range from blown and molded glass sculptures that incorporate her highly detailed use of beads to a vast array of beaded sculptures meticulously worked using the ancient peyote stitch method. This collection of objects created by Scott includes another "first" for Grounds For Sculpture--quilts. Quilts that were pieced and stitched by her mother, master quilter Elizabeth Talford Scott with whom she lived from birth to her mother's death in 2011.

Also entirely new is a site-specific installation, "Harriet's Closet," evoking thoughts about what the private life of liberator Harriet Tubman may have been like. Displayed above the entrance to the installation is a beaded avatar depicting Tubman as Buddha. Step inside and you will be amazed by the oversized beaded quilt tumbling forth from a vintage trunk. Included among period accoutrements that suggest an imagined Tubman "dream boudoir," is Scott's largest flat beadwork piece to date. "Nuanced Veil," is an open-work free-form design which, according to exhibition materials, speaks to "Harriet Tubman's numerous freedom journeys, transporting slaves from the darkness of bondage to the light of freedom."



The exhibition moves from two floors in the Domestic Arts Building outdoors to the Water Garden where an imposing ten-foot tall Tubman figure stands on a field of quilts while dangling behind her in a tree is a life-scale figure and "haints" festooning other trees completing "Lynched Tree." Also outdoors is "Graffiti Harriet," at fifteen feet, the tallest sculpture Scott has made. Built with soil, clay and straw, embedded with beads and found objects, and bearing graffiti, it is meant to eventually decompose and fall to the ground.

These new works based upon Harriet Tubman by Scott provide the setting and framework for her woven and glass narratives on display indoors. That her unsettling works focusing on racism and rape, on slavery, misogyny and classism are created in the beauty of sensuous Murano glass and intricate bead work is a dichotomy that works. The viewer is drawn first to the exquisite

work of art, then, in contemplation, the truth is revealed and the viewer is taken to a deeper level of thought. That Scott can take these enormous truths and tell them with the use of tiny colored seed beads is a feat rightly recognized by the MacArthur Foundation in their honoring her with their prized Genius Fellowship.

Coupling beads with luxurious hand-blown glass in "Someone's Been Bleachin'" Scott addresses the fact that some people of color lighten their skin color and says "how pernicious racism can be, causing one to strive to approximate the appearance of one's oppressor." For this sculpture, Scott imprisoned, protected and isolated a pale West African carved female figure in an amber bell jar with a beaded black male head positioned on top.

Her small beaded "Man-Eating Watermelon" effectively addresses ugly racist stereotypes while a case displaying beaded faces and distorted bodies in her "Day After Rape" series jars us to look at these injustices.

Look at the messages Scott's work convey, but also don't lose sight of her excellent artistic abilities. Really look at "Breathe," a hand-blown Murano glass with beads and thread. Look at the soul-satisfying wine color of the woman, look at the snake crowning her face, the cornrows that define her as a white baby emerges from her body. Yes, this tells about misogyny and white male dominance, but don't overlook the fluidity of the form, the intricacy of the sculpture and beadwork.

For years Scott collected traditional African wood sculpture. Following her mother's death she created "Pretty Girl Veiled." For this, she created a mourning veil of glass beads in which she hides a white child. Accompanying text panel says her intention "was to invoke an era now returned in the US, when abortion was not legal and for poor black women neither entirely safe and usually too costly to afford." Again, this is a poignantly beautiful sculpture where the "Pretty Girl," a Nigerian wooden object is garbed in exquisite gown of patterned plastic and glass beads. Beauty revealing truth.

In a statement posted near a continuously looping video of Scott and her work, she says, in part, that her work is not meant to be openly offensive, "but that does happen. I skirt the borders between comedy, pathos, delight, and horror." "War Woman 1" embodies an African sculpture with thread, wire, dice and cast glass guns, portraying a woman trudging "through a minefield of penises, their coordinate guns, and heads without bodies." On her back she carries a large enflamed human heart.

Using leather, beads and fabric, Scott created a standing black woman holding a white child to address the fact that black women have often been brought in by white parents to raise their children. Scott says about this sculpture, "Nanny Now, Nigger Later," the black nanny was "a beloved 'member of the family.'

Yet later, after their time as essential, devoted caretakers is past, the nanny...becomes a figure of racist disdain."

This is an astounding exhibition. It seduces your eyes. It plays with your mind. It marries ugliness and beauty. And much like the haunts of Harriet Tubman's day, it will haunt you.