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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

A career of brutally honest, vibrant art is on display at Seattle Art Museum

By GAYLE CLEMANS
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Talking with Joyce J. Scott is like encountering her art — it's an experience that twists and sparkles with stories, ferocious honesty and humor.

"I'm an imp," Scott said. "Humor is part of who I am and how I rid myself of things, too."

For decades, the 76-year-old Baltimore artist has tackled brutal topics — racism, violence, misogyny — with humor, creating honest art that thrums with beauty. A solo exhibition of Scott's work ("Walk a Mile in My Dreams," at Seattle Art Museum through Jan. 19) brings together decades of the artist's signature beaded sculptures, textiles and wearable art. With nearly 140 works from the 1970s to the present, it's a tour de force.

Galleries showcase large-scale textiles, tiny beaded figurines and elaborately constructed necklaces. There are also comic books, bold prints, glass sculptures. Scott's performance history — especially her work in the 1980s with Kay Lawal-Muhammad in their Thunder Thigh Revue — is also highlighted, through videos, scripts and playbills. Interactive stations allow visitors to arrange beads or weave bits of yarn into a collaborative piece.

"It tells me I'm the right person for this job," Scott said, reflecting on the feeling of seeing decades of her work gathered together. "It shows me my youth, and my pursuit of what I really want to make, and who I want to be." She paused to laugh, then said, "I am tenacious."

On the one hand, Scott says some topics remain brutally relevant, decades into her career. On the other, Scott's work has changed and evolved, just as Scott has.

"These themes keep unveiling themselves because we seem to be a little stuck in our evolution. Racism hasn't changed. Our politics haven't really changed that much," Scott said. "The food



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"Lynching Necklace," 1998, by Joyce J. Scott.

we eat. Friendship. Joy. Those things keep evolving and maturing in my work."

Scott learned to embroider at 5 when her mother, the highly respected quilt artist Elizabeth Talford Scott (1916-2011), gave her "a passport through a needle and thread." Scott's early work focused on weaving and textiles, which will always have a place in the artist's heart — but the beads that she began incorporating into her fibers sent her down another path.

"Translucency was calling my name," Scott said.

Her renowned beadwork shimmers throughout "Walk a Mile in My Dreams," often rendering harsh realities into beautiful objects, encouraging us to linger, look, ponder. Race, gender, class and other bases for discrimination permeate Scott's work, with series that confront lynching, racial stereotypes,



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"Melon Medusa," a work by Joyce J. Scott from 1986, is shown at the artist's "Walk a Mile in My Dreams" exhibition at Seattle Art Museum.

sexual violence, gun violence and fatphobia.

"I'm an African American



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"Yellow Submarine" (2006) by Joyce J. Scott.

woman who comes from sharecroppers and a community that still experiences violence," Scott

"Joyce J. Scott: Walk a Mile in My Dreams"

Through Jan. 19; Seattle Art Museum, 1300 First Ave., Seattle; \$19.99-\$32.99, free for SAM members and children 14 and younger; accessibility info: st.news/sam-accessibility; 206-654-3100, seattleartmuseum.org

said. "Living through that kind of disastrous hell makes you search for beauty. It creates a real hunger for beauty, elegance and an unthrottled way of living."

For Scott, beads carry that beauty and more.

"I learn something so expansive from the smallest of things," she said. "A bead is a little humble thing. But to make a glass bead is so much work — traditionally, employment for many women — and then I use each bead to create a matrix, a collection of light, color and meaning."

Many of Scott's works have an assemblage quality, where beads, hair, blown glass, wire and found objects exist together.

In the exhibition's entry, a grand, recently created installation gathers objects of spiritual, familial and cultural significance. Items covered with beads, ribbons and crocheted yarn are interwoven with piles of books, sculptural heads and limbs, all contained by a large metal frame covered with quilts made by Scott's grandparents, mother and godmother.

Titled "The Threads that Unite My Seat to Knowledge," Scott has sat in this installation in this career-spanning show, surrounded by her heritage, surveying all that she's created.

"It's very satisfying. It's about making dreams manifest," Scott said. "But you know I'm not resting on my laurels. Look what this dream has shown me. I better go get another one."

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