



## Joyce J. Scott Employs the Beauty of Beads to Raise Issues Such as Violence and Racism: 'My Best Voice is as an Artist'

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Oct 26, 2018



IN THE HANDS of Joyce J. Scott, the possibilities of glass beads are endless. She uses beads to tell stories, raise challenging social and political issues, and celebrate her mother. A quilt artist, Elizabeth Talford Scott (1916-2011), taught her daughter to sew with beads when she was five years old.

Scott's early exposure was enduring. Over a five-decade career, she developed a unique, bead-based art practice. Many of Scott's imaginative works are made solely with beads and thread. Others are elaborate mixed-media works combining beads with blown glass, found objects, fabric and a variety of other materials including photographs, bone, wood, and clay. She's ventured into printmaking, installation, and performance, but primarily concentrates on multilayered bead works in the form of jewelry, wall hangings, and figurative sculpture.

Her greatest recognition has come in recent years. On view at the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in New York, "Maryland to Murano: Neckpieces and Sculptures by Joyce J. Scott" (2014-15) was organized by Lowery Stokes Sims, who was then chief curator at MAD. Scott was named a MacArthur "genius" Fellow in 2016. Her largest and most ambitious exhibition to date, "Joyce J. Scott: Harriet Tubman and Other Truths," was presented at Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton, N.J., earlier this year.

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The expansive survey, co-curated by Sims and Patterson Sims, featured 60 works made from 1970 to 2017. A special installation and commissioned outdoor sculptures paying tribute to Harriet Tubman were included in the show, in addition to a series of textile works made by Scott and her mother. The catalog published to accompany “Harriet Tubman and Other Truths” is the most comprehensive volume to date documenting Scott’s artwork. Peter Blum Gallery in New York is hosting Scott’s latest exhibition. About 20 of her beaded sculptures are displayed on white pedestals throughout the gallery. Wandering among the works replicates a journey through her oeuvre. The exhibition, “What Next and Why Not.” features works made since 2000. They exemplify her practice, bridging the gap between craft and contemporary sculpture.



*Installation view of “Joyce J. Scott: What Next and Why Not” at Peter Blum Gallery, New York (Sept. 27-Nov. 10, 2018). Shown, in foreground, “War Woman II,” 2014. | Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo by Etienne Frossard*

BORN IN BALTIMORE, Scott has lived and worked in the city nearly all of her life. In 2015, Freddie Gray was killed in police custody three blocks from projects where she grew up. The uprising that broke out in the wake of Gray’s death unfolded steps from her current home, a row house where she also keeps her studio.

Scott talked about the experience and her West Baltimore neighborhood in an interview with co-curator Lowery Stokes Sims that was published in the catalog for “Harriet Tubman and Other Truths.”

“How did all this affect me? Well, I am an African American woman who decided to never run away from herself as a black woman, to never leave her community, and the uprising is happening right outside my door,” she said. “People are walking up and down North Avenue. The CVS pharmacy is on fire and they are using my fire hydrant to put the fire out. I see preachers in a prayer circle, right outside my living room window.”

In many ways, her work reflects her hometown. She is best known for her beaded sculptural works wedding visual beauty with harsh content.

“I’d like my art to induce people to stop raping, torturing, and shooting each other. I don’t have the ability to end violence, racism, and sexism...but my art can help them look and think,” Scott said in a 2015 interview with co-curator Patterson Sims, which is quoted in the catalog.

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Looking back to her earlier work, for "Rodney King's Head Was Squashed Like a Watermelon" (1991), Scott employed all black beads to form King's severed head and misshapen face. Green beads distinguish his lips and she used red ones for his bloody mouth and tongue. The base of "Headshot" (2008) is a green glass hand pointing a pistol in the air. The hollow interior is filled with loose bullets and a disembodied head composed of glistening brown beads is perched on the end of the handgun's barrel. The top of the head is exposed to flesh, as though it's been blown away by a gunshot. "Sex Traffic" (2014) features a tiny yellow-beaded figure. With its wrists tied together and bound to its knees, the figure is straddling the barrel of a sleek, glass-blown red rifle.



JOYCE J. SCOTT, "War Woman II," 2014 (African sculpture, fused and painted mosaic glass, glass/plastic beads, wire, thread, metal keys and cast glass guns, 25 x 18 x 18 inches / 63.5 x 45.7 x 45.7 cm). | Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York

Lynching, domestic violence, and racial stereotypes are all fair game for Scott, who also invokes wit and irony in her work. "The things that give me a hard time. The things that I am interested in. The things that pressure me and that give me great release are the things that I really want to talk about. They are the reasons why I make the art a lot of times," Scott said in a MacArthur interview.

"That's why I talk about politics and racism—the great bane, I think, of the human race. That's why I talk about it, because it's chewing on me all the time and my best voice is as an artist. It's not as a preacher. I'm none of those things. I am not a politician. I'm none of those things. But I am a good artist and that allows me to speak through my art."

She has a BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art and earned an MFA at the Instituto Allende in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico (1971). In the nearly half century since, she has participated in more than two-dozen residencies, traveling all over the United States and beyond to hone her technique and master indigenous methods.

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## PETER BLUM GALLERY

In 1976, at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, Maine, Scott learned the peyote stitch from a Native American woman. "...everything in my life changed. I was well prepared for the peyote stitch, because I could use all the other techniques I knew with this new one. It became a method of communication that combined my mom's skills with a needle and thread with this possibility of transmitting light through glass beads I would use. And since people all over the world do beadwork, it was once again another page in that global art book," she told Lowery Stokes Sims.

More than 25 years ago, Scott began working with glass. She participated in residencies at Pilchuck Glass School near Seattle in 1992. Years later, she did back-to-back residencies at Berengo Glass Studio in Murano, Italy (2011-12). It was shortly after her mother died and she was still grieving.

The artist was in South Africa, more recently. She spent time in Cape Town at Monkeybiz, which is devoted to reviving traditional African beadwork, and Ubuhle, a women's bead art collective in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. (Work by the women is featured in a major traveling exhibition currently on view at the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Va.)



JOYCE J. SCOTT, "Breathe," 2015 (hand-blown Murano glass, beads, thread, 20 1/2 x 19 1/2 x 16 inches). | Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York

CLOSER TO HOME, the many skills and techniques Scott has introduced to her practice throughout the years are evident in her exhibition at Peter Blum. Composed of red Murano glass, "Breathe" (2015) depicts a woman wearing cornrows, sitting cross legged as she gives birth single-handedly, pulling her baby from her womb by its arms. The baby's beaded umbilical cord is wrapped around the mother's neck.

"Harriet Tubman as Buddha" (2017) invokes two personas that have figured prominently in Scott's work in recent years. Standing more than three-feet tall, the elaborately beaded sculpture of Tubman portrayed as Buddha, seated in the lotus position with a halo, is on display at Peter Blum and was featured prominently in the Harriet's Closet installation at the "Harriet Tubman and Other Truths" exhibition.

Scott told the New York Times that she is drawn to the Buddha because "he wasn't a god." She said, "He worked really, really hard to evolve and have this greater enlightenment."

In the conversation with Lowery Stokes Sims published in the exhibition catalog, Scott said one of the gaffers she was working with at the glass studio in Murano asked her "Why are you doing Buddha?" She said, "Because I am an artist, and everything is available to me."

## PETER BLUM GALLERY

Sims later asked the artist why she decided to focus on Tubman in the Grounds for Sculpture exhibition. Scott said the former slave and freedom fighter reminded her of her mother, whose roots are in South Carolina. (Her father, Charlie Scott, was from North Carolina and worked as a crane operator in Baltimore.)

“...[Harriet Tubman] really makes me think about my mother. They were both thunderbolts. Neither of them was five feet tall. They were both dark skinned..., and they were go-getters,” Scott said.

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“My mom was one of those people who would have been on the Underground Railroad, dragging people out of the South. In fact, she did—she dragged herself northward, along with her entire family. And remember, this was long before the Treasury Department was talking about putting Harriet’s image on the twenty-dollar bill. So I chose Harriet Tubman because she is a great light for me, and she shows what you can be through all kinds of adversity.”

Indeed, the possibilities of beads are endless in the hands of Scott. The title for her exhibition at Peter Blum Gallery is adapted from a poetic statement by the artist, which emphasizes the creative promise she sees in the years ahead:

“Heart pounding, sitting as a lump while my head keeps beating to the rhythm of ‘what next and why not.’ In my 69th year and still confounded as if it’s all new. This thing—this creativity thang—is so tasty, so nutritious, that just the thought of never imbibing in its healing elixir makes me itch. I’m in the game for real, so I’ll keep on scratching.” **CT**

*TOP IMAGE: JOYCE J. SCOTT, Detail of “Harriet Tubman as Buddha,” 2017 (plastic and glass beads, metal, thread, yarn and rocks, 40 x 25 x 15 inches / 101.6 x 63.5 x 38.1 cm). | Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York*

**The exhibition “What Next and Why Not” is on view at Peter Blum Gallery, New York, N.Y. (Sept. 27 – Nov. 10, 2018).**

### BOOKSHELF

“Joyce J. Scott: Harriet Tubman and Other Truths” documents the artist’s exhibition at Grounds for Sculpture, her largest and most comprehensive exhibition to date. The volume texts by co-curator Patterson Sims and Seph Rodney, and an interview with the artist conducted by co-curator Lowery Stokes Sims, who also contributed an essay.

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JOYCE J. SCOTT, "Twins: Harlequin," 2016 (hand-blown Murano glass processes with fused glass, glass beads, seed beads, and thread, 18 x 12 1/2 x 7 1/4 inches). | Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York



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Installation view of "Joyce J. Scott: What Next and Why Not" at Peter Blum Gallery, New York (Sept. 27-Nov. 10, 2018). | Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo by Etienne Frossard

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JOYCE J. SCOTT, "Mommy" (from the Day After Rape series), 2009 (glass jar, glass beads, thread, 5 x 5 x 5 inches). | Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York



JOYCE J. SCOTT, "Celadon II," 2010 (blown, fused, painted and flame worked glass, glass beadwork, thread and wire, 30 x 10 x 10 inches /76.2 x 25.4 x 25.4 cm). | Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York



Installation view of "Joyce J. Scott: What Next and Why Not" at Peter Blum Gallery, New York (Sept. 27-Nov. 10, 2018). Shown, at center, "Family Matters, My Husband and My Baby," 2002. | Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo by Etienne Frossard