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Inspired by Harriet Tubman, an Artist Takes Glass to Extremes

By NANCY PRINCENTHAL | JAN. 4, 2018



Credit Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

It might seem that hand-threaded beads and blown glass wouldn't lend themselves to depicting rank ugliness. Nor to provoking unruly laughter. But Joyce J. Scott's art — angry, raucous and shamelessly gorgeous — proves just how sharp glass can get. The exhibition of her work now at Grounds for Sculpture, in Hamilton, N.J., is a revelation, inviting covetous attention to what often turn out, on close inspection, to be brutal subjects: vicious racism, violent misogyny. And it signals a marked change of direction for a sculpture garden that had long deserved a reputation for being a little lonesome, and a little odd.

Called "Harriet Tubman and Other Truths," the show is the largest to date for Ms. Scott, a recent MacArthur "genius" award winner. It surveys decades of art making, from the exuberant jewelry for which she is best known to the figurative sculpture to which she is now most committed. The exhibition also includes a focused homage to Ms. Tubman, the fearless Underground Railroad "conductor," organized with the guest curator

Lowery Stokes Sims. (The main survey was curated by Patterson Sims, no relation to Lowery.) The work they assembled, Gary Garrido Schneider, the Grounds for Sculpture director, said, is a “catalyst” for transforming an institution not previously associated with politically pointed art.



A view of the “Harriet’s Closet” installation, which is presided over by a glass-beaded portrayal of Tubman as a haloed Buddha, seated in full lotus position and spilling jewels from her hands. An elegant black dress from around 1900 and recent works are also part of the display. Credit Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

A glass-beaded portrayal of Tubman as an extravagantly haloed Buddha, seated in full lotus position and spilling jewels from her hands, presides over the entryway to the installation “Harriet’s Closet.” The “Closet” combines vintage material — an elegant black dress from around 1900, an old trunk, a vanity — with such recent work of Ms. Scott’s as the quietly devastating “Shackles/Heart and Hand,” a blood-red blown-glass heart linked by a chain of golden beads to a beaded feminine hand of pearlescent, deathly white. It seems to be a testament to the soul-crushing, forced intimacy of slave and mistress.

Tubman is also represented in two monumental outdoor figures, a new mode for Ms. Scott, whose work is generally modest in scale. The first is armed with a long rifle, and further fortified with a bronze-colored patina (over high-density foam) and piercing eyes. But shadowing her from behind are “haints,” or ghosts, in the shape of obscure objects netted in beads, hung high on nearby trees. The second Tubman, bigger and rougher, is formed of rammed earth meant to erode over the course of the exhibition, “just as our memory of Tubman has dissipated over time,” the artist said in a phone conversation from her home in Baltimore. Again,

there is a massive rifle, this one made of resin studded with assorted trinkets; similarly, the pseudo-bronze one bears flowers. Beat those swords into plowshares, Ms. Scott suggests. Or, like a latter-day flower child, fix their attitude problem with daisies.



Ms. Scott's "Araminta With Rifle and Veve," from 2017, is a monumental outdoor figure armed with a long rifle and further fortified with a bronze-colored patina (over high-density foam). Credit Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

Ms. Scott's two heroic Tubmans may bring to mind David Hammons's searing Nelson Mandela sculpture (1987) in Atlanta, with its granite head and barbed wire hair, and, inevitably, Alison Saar's bronze portrait sculpture of Tubman, installed in Harlem in 2008. But Ms. Scott suggests another connection. "Harriet Tubman makes me think a lot about my mother," she said, referring to Elizabeth Talford Scott, a quilter whose glorious work is sampled in this exhibition — "picture books made of cloth," as her daughter has described them. She was "a forthright person," Ms. Scott said. "I do believe she would have run to freedom on the train."



Another rifle-totting outdoor figure, “Graffiti Harriet,” also from 2017, is made of rammed earth meant to erode over the course of the exhibition, “just as our memory of Tubman has dissipated over time,” the artist said.
Credit Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

She was also, Ms. Scott said, “my first art teacher.” Having made beadwork in grade school — “sewing beads into fabric or using that Girl Scout/American Indian loom,” she explained — Ms. Scott worked with textiles early in her career, weaving, quilting and making garments. By the mid-1970s, she was creating free-standing sculptures of beads, a pioneer in the now thriving realm of art that raids the territory of craft. But a major motivation for her loyalty to handcraft is sustaining a tie to forebears who were blacksmiths, woodworkers and basket makers (and sharecroppers, picking cotton and tobacco) — and, most important, to her mother, with whom she lived until her death in 2011.

Family in general and motherhood in particular are primary subjects in the main survey, starting with a 1983 quilt made by Joyce and Elizabeth Scott that offers a loving portrait of the extended clan. But many of the younger Scott’s representations of maternity are more barbed. A small 1991 figure of a woman fashioned (uncharacteristically) from black leather bends over backward — literally — to support a silvery-white beaded baby who dances on her chest; nearly lost against her dark skirt is a brown child, its tiny hands extended in an unanswered gesture. The deep scarlet, bead-crowned blown-glass figure in “Breathe,” seated cross-legged and imperially calm, has pulled a clear glass baby out of her body by its triumphantly outstretched arms. Mother regards child quizzically; it’s not clear whether rapture or heartbreak is afoot.

If Ms. Scott’s engagement with maternity is full of ambiguity, the sculptures in the series “Day After Rape” are simply, uncompromisingly harrowing. Made of dainty seed and glass beads, they show one woman hog-tied, another impaled on a barked branch. Bright red beads of blood puddle beneath exposed genitals; small white eyes are frozen wide. A couple of these sculptures employ tobacco pipes: the pipes’ bowls become buttocks; stems serve as legs. In a discussion of this series, Ms. Scott emphasized that the pipes, which had belonged to a friend’s grandfather, had been sucked long and hard. Close inspection confirms it. Indeed you can’t make out what these sculptures are about without coming closer than you feel you should — and seeing things you won’t soon forget.



Works from Ms. Scott's "Day After Rape" series. Credit Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

No less ferocious are sculptures addressing racism. "Rodney King's Head Was Squashed Like a Watermelon" depicts an oversize severed head made of big black beads, collapsed like a deflated tire. The green-lipped, bloodied mouth is wrecked, the eyes knocked out of joint. Horrifically, the damage somehow only makes it more alive. In "Head Shot," a Coke-bottle-green cast-glass fist grips a glass pistol whose barrel is thrust into a brown beaded head, its eyes crazed with fear. A tiny beaded black figure swings by one foot from a wind-tossed tree in "Catch a Nigger by His Toe," a lethal image fine as filigree.



Sculptures addressing racism include "Rodney King's Head Was Squashed Like a Watermelon," from 1991.
Credit Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

PETER BLUM GALLERY

These images are a far cry from the art most strongly associated with the Grounds for Sculpture. Founded by the pharmaceutical heir and sculptor J. Seward Johnson, its graceful 42-acre sculpture garden is dominated by Johnson's towering, hyper-realist cast-bronze figures based on Impressionist chestnuts. Amid these kitschy wonders are estimable sculptures by the likes of Kiki Smith, Elyn Zimmerman and John Newman, many produced on the premises — as were Ms. Scott's two monumental Tubmans.

Three years ago, the Johnson family transferred the real estate and art at the site to the nonprofit entity that runs its sculpture park and 20,000 square feet of exhibition space. Mr. Schneider, then newly hired, is shepherding its transformation. Situated between Princeton and Trenton, it serves a wide public, including a range of African-American and immigrant communities.

By reaching out in advance to both the Grounds for Sculpture board members and those in the community about Ms. Scott's work, Mr. Schneider has successfully assuaged (so far) any concerns about its most violent representations of racism and misogyny.



Ms. Scott's "Lynched Tree" is situated high in a tree as part of the "Araminta With Rifle and Veve" tableau at Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton, N.J. Credit Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

Clearly Ms. Scott, whose work is too little known, was a bold choice. But her work is anything but inaccessible. For one thing, some of it is very funny, as in a tableau positioning two porcelain figurines of colonial-era gentry before a regal, glowering jet-black face looming above them, their graceful postures bespeaking total incomprehension. Irresistible, too, is the sheer beauty of so many of the sculptures, especially those recent examples involving blown-glass components (many made at the Berengo workshop on the Venetian island of Murano). The jade green "Buddha (Earth)," its chest inflated as if by an awed intake of breath, is characteristically sublime.



"Buddha (Earth)," from 2013, is included in Ms. Scott's "Harriet Tubman and Other Truths" show at Grounds for Sculpture.
Credit Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

The Buddha appeals to Ms. Scott because "he wasn't a god," she said. "He worked really, really hard to evolve and have this greater enlightenment." But the artist, who remains fiercely devoted to the Baltimore neighborhood where she grew up, refers just as often to Christianity. "I was raised in a Pentecostal Apostolic church," she explained. "A storefront church. My godparents were the preachers. When I became obstreperous in the congregation as a child, my godfather would pick me up and preach with me on the pulpit. I did street ministry with them, playing the tambourine and singing. Now, that has a lot to do with me as a performer" — notably, as half of the combustible, hilarious Thunder Thigh revue, most active in the early 1990s — "but it has also always grounded me very much in the spirit — in the joy of it. And the truth."

That word, featured in this exhibition's title, is key. Ms. Scott, discussing the "Day After Rape" series, emphasized that it was a very important subject for her to take on. "Because it's challenging?" she was asked.

She replied without hesitation, "Because it's the truth."