MATERIAL DREAMS: JOYCE J. SCOTT AND ELIZABETH TALFORD SCOTT AT GOYA CONTEMPORARY AND THE BMA

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Three small stones are carefully bound with red and orange thread to the center of “Hourglass,” a quilt by Elizabeth Talford Scott. They sit atop a yellow snakelike coil, amongst a dark field patterned with purple and red coils with stones bundled to them too. Above and below this field, like guards, are two sets of hourglass shapes, stitched with earthy, floral and paisley designs. Geometric shapes populate the area surrounding the field, which is all reined in by a hot-sun-orange border printed with palm trees. The symbols relate to the artist’s childhood, growing up in a sharecropper family on a South Carolina plantation where her grandparents were born into slavery. One of Elizabeth’s responsibilities as a child was to keep watch over the heated stones that kept pots of stew warm throughout the workday. The clusters of stones in this quilt represent those that conducted heat, but here they also read like worry stones that you’d thumb in meditation or prayer.

For the highly dimensional and textured quilts that Elizabeth Talford Scott, the late mother of Baltimore artist and MacArthur fellow Joyce J. Scott, made later in her life, motifs such as fields, coils, pathways, stones, and hourglasses help tell her life story. Except it's not so much *telling* as it is sharing a feeling or mood, a gesture at specific memories.

The everyday materials that Elizabeth transformed to create these works hold potent dual meanings for her life and her family's reality as formerly enslaved people and laborers, and as enduring, skilled creators, craftspeople, and artists. Buttons and a preponderance of found fabric reference her father who'd bring home those materials on the way home from railroad work; rocks and fields suggest labor, palm trees for the south, stars for escape. Through deep abstraction, Elizabeth drew upon memory to chronicle her family's story and encoded it in symbols, offering respite and imagination and futurity while engaging the past.

Elizabeth Talford Scott, "Hourglass," cotton and synthetic ground, cotton and metallic embroidery threads, glass beads, plastic and metal objects, rocks (1984) at the Baltimore Museum of Art (Left: detail)

The two related shows featuring Joyce J. Scott and Elizabeth Talford Scott—*Hitching Their Dreams to Untamed Stars* at the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) and *Reality, Times Two* at Goya Contemporary—highlight this creative lineage with a digestible selection of the prolific artists' work from the early 1970s to the '90s, and of Joyce's through the present day. They also offer a loose narrative of making something—in community with others, often out of on-hand materials, with excellent craftsmanship—because it needs to exist, because its critical engagement can benefit the world, at least as the first drop in a ripple.

Located in the small Berman Textile Gallery of the BMA's American Wing, *Hitching Their Dreams* feels like a coda to the abundance of *Reality*. But what rings loud to me in both spaces is the artists' dedication to detail, every stitch and bead intentionally, lovingly

secured. It can feel gauche to talk about art and love at the same time—a holdover perhaps of the western-white-supremacist-capitalist art world's tendency to divide art from culture and craft and life—but in their respective practices, Joyce and Elizabeth Scott have re-emphasized the value of art suffused with devotion and care, and the change that can emerge from that.

Not that the content of these works is particularly tender or soft—in Joyce's case, it's often brutal. Typically what sticks to my ribs for days or years after I see her work are the intense images and acts of violence depicted or implied. Joyce is celebrated for her mastery of beading, sewing, and glass-blowing and for her dexterity in creating disturbingly gorgeous pieces of art that challenge white supremacy and racism, sexism, and the other -isms that provoke violence. A common line about her work is that it's a one-two punch; she draws us in with impeccable craft and colorful, gleaming materials and then, once we're seduced, the implications of both blatant and covert violence—be it through guns, stereotypes, colorism—become clearer.

Joyce J. Scott, "Inkisi #2," cast glass; glass, plastic, and clay beads; thread, wood, wire (2011).
(Photo courtesy of the BMA)

But of course, there's even more to explore; the artist also analyzes the spiritual aspects of the human condition using a mix of religious and cultural iconography. Her "Inkisi #2" (2011), on view at the BMA, references the Kongo peoples' traditional nkisi or "power figure," a sacred sculptural object or vessel inhabited by a spirit and used for divination, protection, and healing. Joyce took a found wooden figure ("originally made in Nigeria for export," the wall text says) and clothed it in a hoopskirt of beads, glass, metal charms and

medallions with totemic eyes, hands/fingers, and penises—to see, to work, and to procreate, the artist explained.

Nearby, her “Cobalt Rain” (2011) references Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction, protection, and creation. With the assistance of the living-dead skeletons enmeshed with him, Shiva’s blue-beaded arms wrestle with a light-skinned, upside-down figure who has just given birth. The baby, whose dark skin is mostly made of clay, was born into this chaotic cycle, immediately yoked by the red cord snaking the deity’s neck—the cord an extension of the little red devil atop Shiva’s head. Shiva’s lower half disintegrates into a glinting shower of rain which, like the god, can be both generative and destructive.

Install view of *Reality, Times Two* (Photo courtesy of Goya Contemporary)

Joyce J. Scott, “Gun Woman,” hand-blown Murano glass, beads, thread (2019)

At Goya Contemporary, the show-stealer is Joyce's "Gun Woman" (2019), a grotesquely gorgeous and loaded warrior made of mustard-yellow hand-blown Murano glass and beads. The woman emerges from a pedestal, holding up a serpentine tube that grapples an orange glass gun aimed off to the side, as if in ceremonious warning. Guns also grow out of her headpiece, both still pointing away from the viewer. But bursting out of her womb is a tangle of more snakelike forms with matchstick fingers on the three guns that this time point out to me, at my gut. "Gun Woman" could be a self-defense deity, a protector for the abused, who are often criminally punished for defending themselves against abusers or state violence. But there are a few more metaphors in these womb-weapons, in the defense mechanisms that develop after abuse, like emotionally armoring oneself for protection, and how unhealed trauma is inherited through generations, its manifestations wide-ranging. I proceed from her with caution.

Elizabeth's works are imbued with a preternatural balance of high energy and escape, grounding and calm. Among the two shows, most of hers are the oft-cluttered and loud ones that incorporate or imply maps, pathways, fields, and gardens. "Tie Quilt #2" (1991) at Goya is a delirious frenzy of neckties stitched together into irregular rows like a rogue farm, and further adorned with embroidery and buttons. The mostly horizontal rows lead you across the quilt, veering off the edge briefly but then looping down and back around, row by row, like following the weft of woven fabric.

"Flower Garden #1" (1989), on view at the BMA, is similarly wild with intensity, the pearlescent buttons, beads, scraps of velvet and corduroy getting lost amid the circular, musical fracas. With my face a safe six inches from the surface, I spy more palm-sized rocks, this time held carefully in place by plastic netting that grocers sell citrus in, secured to the fabric field like gems set in jewelry. "Plantation" (1980), also at the BMA, sets a calmer pace with its minimal color palette, a white ground patterned with dozens of colorful stars and a complex rhythm of winding roadlike stitches decorating the surface. It references coded maps for escape from slavery: the stars' positions on the quilt mirroring their placement in the sky, the surface stitching a path to liberation. The sewing needle left pinned to the quilt by the artist implies instruction: the path is undone, ongoing, and mutable.

Elizabeth Talford Scott, “Plantation,” cotton ground, cotton, wool, and synthetic blend appliqué, cotton and silk embroidery threads, metal needle, cotton lining (1980). (Photo courtesy of the BMA)

Growing up poor in the 1920s and ‘30s under the cruel regime of the Jim Crow south, Elizabeth learned early on how to create out of necessity—and in community. Elizabeth learned how to quilt from her parents; many in her family also quilted. Quilts were made with fabric scraps that one had on hand, and often in groups with family, friends, church members. Elizabeth taught Joyce how to sew when she was a young child too, instilling in her the urgency to create that runs in their family.

One of Joyce’s pieces at Goya pays homage to that relationship and it stands out for its utter difference from the artist’s more elaborate works. “Mother’s Hand” (1997), a sculptural, beaded portrait of the hand, seems small and delicate as it hovers behind a vitrine. At once ghostlike and corporeal, the deep brown beads and lighter toned fingernails offer a lively shimmer, the protruding metacarpals evidence of a busy life. In its stunning modesty, it has the effect of an off-the-cuff sketch or a study, one that captures an essence with a few decisive strokes, despite its complicated peyote-stitch construction. It serves as an intimate portrait of the woman who gave Joyce her life and legacy, and with whom she spent most of her life, in an Upton home/studiofor over 50 years, until Elizabeth’s death in 2011. Working side by side was a kind of history-making on its own, infusing both artists’ work with histories and memories, sewn with intention.

This is why the work resonates, and why the mutually influential relationship between the two artists is a worthy subject, a crucial one, not merely a saccharine tale of mother-daughter love. They were, in a way, each other’s foundation: Elizabeth encouraged Joyce to study art, and when Joyce left for grad school in Mexico in the late 1960s, Elizabeth finally picked up her needle and thread again herself after a long hiatus due to work and family. If not for her mother’s encouragement, would Joyce have pursued art? If not for her daughter’s ambitious pursuit, would Elizabeth have started quilting again?

Time wore on, and they worked and pushed, despite an art world that historically has sequestered African American art, craft, culture and tradition, that has not supported the people who create them. Joyce and Mother Scott kept at it—and they are but one pair. It's time for the art world to catch up.

Install shot at Goya. Left: Elizabeth Talford Scott, "A Person on a Swing," fabric, thread, yarn, buttons, rocks (1996). Right: Joyce J. Scott, "Swimmer," yarn, fabric, leather, buttons, thread (c.1976)

Reality, Times Two is on view at Goya Contemporary through July 16, 2019. *Hitching Their Dreams to Untamed Stars* is on view at the BMA through December 1, 2019.

Photos by author except where otherwise noted.

Featured image: install shot of *Reality, Times Two*, courtesy of Goya Contemporary.