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JOYCE J. SCOTT  
**TRUTHS AND VISIONS**

JANUARY 29–MAY 24, 2015

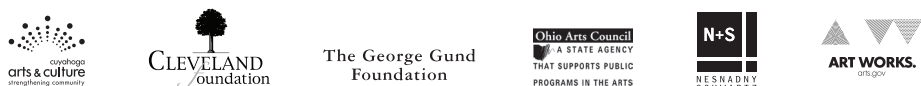
JOYCE J. SCOTT  
**TRUTHS AND VISIONS**

January 29–May 24, 2015  
Toby Devan Lewis Gallery  
Organized at MOCA Cleveland by  
Patterson Sims, independent curator

**Joyce J. Scott** (1948, Baltimore, MD) lives and works in Baltimore. Solo exhibitions of her work have been held at the California African American Museum, Los Angeles; Baltimore Museum of Art; Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach; and American Craft Museum, New York. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at Museum of Art and Design, New York; Houston Center for Contemporary Art; Bronx Museum, NY; Kentucky Museum of Arts & Design, Louisville; and Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. Collections holding her work include The Detroit Institute of the Arts; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and Philadelphia Museum of Art.

**Patterson Sims** (1947, Philadelphia) lives and works in New York City. His distinguished career as a museum professional includes the positions of Director, Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey; Deputy Director for Education and Research Support, Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Associate Director for Art and Exhibitions and Curator of Modern Art, Seattle Art Museum. Sims was the first curator designated to oversee the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, where he worked from 1976 to 1987. He was a co-curator of four Whitney Biennial exhibitions. Sims currently serves as the Chairman of the Board of Independent Curators International and works with several artist foundations.

All 2015 exhibitions are funded by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and Leadership Circle gifts from the Britton Fund, Doreen and Dick Cahoon, Victoria Colligan and John Stalcup, Lauren Rich Fine and Gary Giller, Joanne Cohen and Morris Wheeler, Margaret Cohen and Kevin Rahilly, Becky Dunn, Barbara and Peter Galvin, Harriet and Victor Goldberg, Agnes Gund, Donna and Stewart Kohl, Toby Devan Lewis, Marian and Boake Sells, and Scott Mueller.



FRONT COVER: *Inkisi: St. John the Conqueror*, 2009, glass bottles, coral, beads, and mixed media, 18 x 15 x 14 inches. Photo: Michael Koryta. BACK COVER: *Ancestry Doll: 3*, 2011, crochet jumpsuit, African (Malawi) figures, beads, thread, 23 1/2 x 15 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches. Photo: Michael Koryta. OPPOSITE: *Lynched Tree*, 2011/2015, plastic and glass beads, blown glass, thread, wire, wooden pole, metal armature, dimensions variable. Installation view, Goya Contemporary, Baltimore. All images courtesy of the artist and Goya Contemporary, Baltimore.



JOYCE J. SCOTT

# TRUTHS AND VISIONS



LEFT TO RIGHT: *The Gatherer of Wood*, 2009, seedbeads, thread, pipes, drift wood, 7 1/4 x 13 x 3 1/2 inches; *SHHHHH!*, 2012, Nigerian wooden object, plastic and glass beads, thread drawing, fabric, 33 1/2 x 18 1/2 x 17 inches. Photos: Michael Kortya. Courtesy of the artist and Goya Contemporary, Baltimore.

*Truths and Visions* samples the last decade of sculpture by Joyce J. Scott, a Baltimore-based visual artist, performer, and educator. Made typically of beads, glass, and found objects, Scott's works often express rage about human violence, African and African-American history, bigotry, injustice, and gender inequality. Yet, they also radiate beauty, humor, and inspiration.

The exhibition is dominated by the hanging sculpture *Lynched Tree* (2011/2015), which debuted as an outdoor installation at Prospect.2, an international art biennial in New Orleans. This powerful sculpture, atypically large for Scott, has had three subsequent installations and is transformed again through its presentation in MOCA Cleveland's Toby Devan Lewis gallery. Evoking the horrendous mob hangings of African Americans from trees that occurred in the United States from the late 18th century into the 1960s, *Lynched Tree* is monumentally restated by Scott as an extinction of nature.

At once exquisite and repugnant, the work seductively manifests the complex intent and impact of Scott's art. As she explains, "I try to make something very beautiful, very comely, something alluring that someone wants to come to, and then they realize it's about race or sex or whatever. I just can't help myself. I am a product of a most wonderful life. I MAKE ART, but there is no release from the day-to-day hints through culture that my blackness is in some way an impediment, my sheer existence an irritant. It all itches me. Art is my scratch." Scott describes herself as "a muckraker and audaciously proud of it," and her work unquestionably evokes emotion and response.

The following interview took place in December 2014. It is excerpted from a full version, which is available in the exhibition's catalog.

**Patterson Sims:** *What was your early life like? Your mother was an artist. Did you feel destined to follow that path?*

**Joyce J. Scott:** I was an artist prenatally, the most glorious placenta. When I came out of my mother, I said to the doctor, "Move, you're in my light." I always knew my destiny. Art and theater have been my release and sanity.

My mom descended from South Carolina sweet grass basket makers. From her side of the family, my grandfather was not only a blacksmith, but he made pots, musical instruments, and quilts. When my great grandfather came out of slavery, he caned chairs and then taught blacksmithing. I have snapshots of me teaching art to my little elementary school friends. My mother, who settled in Baltimore, became one of the "main mothers" of the neighborhood. When kids were hungry, she would always feed and help them out.

I lived with my mother almost the whole time from when I was born until her death at the age of 95. We always rented until I was 23, when my mother and I saved enough to buy a house for around \$10,000 that I still live in today. About 15 years later, I bought the house next door for a studio and storage space. I have had one real job in my life, as a drug counselor. Being a drug counselor means you see the very best and the absolute worst of humanity. We "parted ways" when methadone was introduced. After that, I vowed to never work another job again, ever.

**PS:** *Your work is unabashedly beautiful and employs sparkling and seductive materials, but it also deals with ominous, disagreeable, and complex issues: bigotry, rape, murder, gender, religion, and spirituality.*

**JJS:** Don't forget ethnicity. I am very interested in raising issues. I skirt the borders between comedy, pathos, delight, and horror. I believe in messing with stereotypes, prodding the viewer to reassess, inciting people to look and then carry something home—even if it's subliminal—that might make a change in them. That's what happens to me. My art objects, performances, and teaching are my best way to reach others. I don't have the ability to end violence, racism, and sexism, to stop anybody from doing

anything. But my art can help them look and think. I seek opportunities to talk about how women—the very people who make human life—are considered expendable and disposed of. On the other hand, my beadwork might inspire mathematically or musically.

I am a loving person who was taught to be giving, yet I can be the worst demon—that's what humans are. What is inhumanity? Everything that I do comes from my human experience. Human ingenuity and genius have devised all kinds of horrible things and implements of torture, abuse, and pain. Have you ever examined a gun? Some weapons are incredibly beautiful.

**PS:** *Your series Ancestry/Progeny (2008-ongoing) also speaks to the interconnection of African art and belief systems and black, white, and Asian identity.*

**JJS:** I started these sculptures with the idea that you can't choose your grandparents, and they can't choose you. You're created, defined, and supported by your past, whether you like it or not. All that stuff happened in between, so you must live with it. My *Ancestry/Progeny* pieces are amalgams and mixtures. Using African carvings and Japanese ceramic figurines as body parts provides a global spin. I include ceramic European white gentry produced by Chinese and Japanese craftsman. This is what Asians think Europeans look like—and, for me, it's hilarious. My use of the pairs of figurines for arms and legs refers to Nigerian Yoruba twin figure woodcarvings, and expresses my ideas about your past actually supporting you in the present. Some of my earliest knowledge about these carvings was learned at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Maine in the mid-70s, where I was taught by a Nigerian Prince, Twins Seven-Seven (1944–2011), who was the last in a line of seven generations of twins. His ability to weave performance, storytelling, and printmaking/painting together was a potent example of the artist as artwork and art maker. Twins Seven-Seven had a full, unrestrained approach to being and was very reminiscent of my familial and community lifestyle.

**PS:** *Talk about the skulls on the skirt of SHHHHH! (2012).*

**JJS:** *SHHHHH!* means "don't talk." I was raised in a Pentecostal Apostolic faith. Death was always in our consciousness, but death meant transition, not the end. When I went to graduate school in Mexico, the Day of the Dead rituals there asserted that death was the next step up, a portal you passed through. I consider the clothing and coverings of my *SHHHHH!* figure to be a party that I was invited to and could bring friends. Those strange green serpent figures around her upper body and feet are hugging and protecting her.

**PS:** *Has the meaning of Lynched Tree changed for you in its different installations?*

I don't believe the meaning of *Lynched Tree* has changed so much, but with each installation it wears a different face. The core of the piece for me is about the immature feelings we have as a young, slowly evolving species. Hell, cockroaches are much older in history than we humans. The work addresses our brat-like dislike of what we don't understand or refuse to embrace because, if we accept the truth, then we must change or be proven wrong. We are know-it-alls, who misperceive and thereby disparage and destroy.

Humans have continuously destroyed nature and species no less brutally than whites lynched blacks from tree branches. It is the same impulse towards domination and extinction. For me, the need to express my confusion and revulsion for the stymied, wasteful, even self-destructive way of being that I am a part of erupts into my art: but better it erupts out than in. Amidst the eruption I'm trying to soothe and inform. *Lynched Tree* and my other works are made first for myself, then the viewer. I hurt, and I know I am not alone, even though making art can be a very solitary pursuit.