

Elegance With Muscle

Joyce Scott, Drawing a Bead on Racism

By Jo Ann Lewis

Special to The Washington Post

Most artists, seeking a tough medium in which to make political statements about racism and sexism, probably wouldn't choose colored glass beads and thread. In that respect, Joyce Scott is unique. Born in Baltimore, daughter of a respected quiltmaker, and granddaughter of migrant farmers forced to make everything they owned by hand—including their crocheted weed shoes—she learned early to wield a needle.

In her captivating first solo at the Corcoran's Gallery One, she has also learned to brandish it in soft figure sculptures fashioned from tiny glass beads, thread and wire. Exploiting the element of surprise, Scott first seduces viewers with the shimmering color and sensuousness of her beadwork, and then delivers her message, sometimes with a wallop of pathos, often with a twist of ironic humor that forestalls retreat.

Lured by surfaces, however, we are sometimes clobbered as we move in close. One of the most elegant forms, "Power Pump," for example, turns out to be a lavishly beaded iridescent penis, the ultimate icon to the black male stereotype. Nearby, a black beaded head



Joyce Scott's "Big Mama" (1991).

See ART, B6, Col. 1

Scott's Beaded Figures at the Corcoran

ART, From B1

in a glass case takes a wholly unexpected twist when we read its title: "Rodney King's Head Was Squashed Like a Watermelon," 1991. King, the black victim of the widely seen, videotaped police beating in Los Angeles last March, is shown with his head collapsed, his limp red-beaded tongue hanging from the corner of his mouth. Or is it blood?

In "Power Pump" and several other works made especially for this show, Scott set out specifically to mock stereotypical views of African Americans, inspired to do so by the white marble busts that dot the Corcoran's atrium walls and stand as white stereotypes. Her "Big Mama,"

for example—anything but big—is shown as a svelte nude, bedecked with a lapis ribbon in the manner of a beauty queen. And in "Buddha Delivers Basketball to the Ghetto," she fabricates the moment this game was born.

Most poignant and subtle of all these works, however, is "No Mommy Me," which portrays a black woman playfully holding aloft a gilt-edged white baby in diapers, while her own little girl sits on the floor behind her, seemingly in distress as she tries in vain to attract her mother's attention. Referring to an all-too-familiar situation affecting Hispanic as well as black women today, this work has great carrying power, especially in the detailed figure of

the little black child. By no means ignored, she is beautifully dressed in a blue beaded frock, which contrasts sharply with the mother's drab black gown. "Madonna" also portrays a woman torn between two children—one pink, one brown—one at each breast. Her head is surrounded by the beaded golden nimbus of a saint.

There are lighter moments, like the punning "Man-Eating Watermelon," a switch on one of the oldest of American racist stereotypes—that of black man as lazy watermelon eater. Here, we have the watermelon consuming the leg of a black man who vainly struggles to extricate himself, not only from the watermelon but from the stereotype itself.

"Mulatto in South Africa," one of Scott's most ambitious narratives, grapples with the hopelessly tangled web of racist issues and dilemmas elsewhere. Starting with a basic wreath of beaded figures, one white, one black, one mulatto, she interweaves among them such collage elements as a tiny photograph of a multiracial family and a "Whites Only" beach sign. The bloody practice of blacks "necklacing" black collaborators with burning tires is also confronted in a work of especially grim irony, given the jewel-like beauty of the glistening blood and the title, "Necklace Party." But it is that central irony—that packaging of evil and stereotype in the guise of beau-

ty—that gives all of her best work its punch.

A second gallery in this show takes a retrospective look at Scott's range and versatility in other media, and it is impressive. Most are narrative works made of handmade paper, but not all. One wonderfully satisfying wall piece, "Melanin Maze," is a pure abstraction made from stitched black cotton.

More typical of Scott's two-dimensional work is "Dem Bones," made of handmade paper pulp with embedded sequins, beads and other collage elements, and built around the found printed image of St. Martin de Porres, who wields both broom and crucifix on behalf of the hospitalized sick. Bones levitate in the surrounding space, reminders of death. This line between life and afterlife is a subject Scott explores in several other works on view.

Of what propels her art to cover

this broad gamut from race and sex to love and death, Scott says: "It's important to me to use art in a manner that incites people to look and then carry something home—even if it's subliminal—that might change them."

A half-hour video portrait of Scott and her mother, Elizabeth, shown continuously just down the corridor from the exhibition, sheds a bit more light on the artist. A catalogue, basically a conversation between Joyce Scott and Corcoran contemporary curator Terrie Sultan, has also been published, and is available free in Gallery One.

The show, which is titled "Joyce Scott: I-con-no-body/I-con-o-graphy," will continue at the Corcoran through Nov. 17. The artist will give a free slide lecture on her work tomorrow at 6:30 p.m. at the gallery. Reservations are necessary and can be made by calling 202-638-3211.