

Baltimore City Paper

Our Bodies, Our Selves: Joyce Scott's Solo Show Contorts Identities

Marcus Civin

October 17, 2012

On Kilter

Goya Contemporary through Nov. 10

Joyce J. Scott, Baltimore native, is a sculptor and a philosopher. She ponders problems by engaging with materials. Her sculptural-philosophical practice is a kind of alchemy, an imaginative and intuitive transformation of forms. Her current solo show at Goya Contemporary brings to mind a zany shop selling small handmade objects or an episodic novel brought to life. The exhibition includes 15 small- to medium-sized figurative sculptures and three unique prints. Scott sculpts romances; she couples, mates, and defines figures by intertwining bodies with other bodies.

In "Shhhhh!," a nearly 3-foot-tall wooden Nigerian woman wears a beaded yellow sundress. Around her neck, she tolerates an otherworldly trio of interconnected, part-alligator snake-limbed demons, also beaded. This stationary sculpture seems to want to float forward as the woman seeks desperately to glide across the room. Resting against her breasts, one of the green demon-subordinates reaches up and palms the woman's mouth in order to control her, to ensure her silence.

President Obama also appears in this grotesque pageant, as the subject of two monoprints, both from 2012. In "Obama, Golden Boy," the president is a hovering, disembodied sepia head. In "Obama Haunt," he is the chalky sketch of a similarly disembodied head. Obama is doubled and doubling. He is many-faceted: He is the future and he is a ghost.

In many ways, Obama is the perfect symbol for Scott's view of the self. In March 2008, at the Constitution Center in Philadelphia, then-candidate Obama said:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners, an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters.

Scott works in a similar vein. In her pieces, self is a unique and courageous declaration of multiplicity. In her hands, the old adage, "Be yourself," becomes "Be yourselves." The self is a sometimes abrasive mixture, a particular arrangement of histories, a compromise between ancient parts. The individual self is a confluence of paths. Conspiratorial multitudes haunt the earthly body. Competing legacies collect at the body, hanging out and around, pressing into the skin, digging in. The haunted body teeters on outsized arms and outsized legs. One body glides forward, wearing a veil and a long, pretty dress, eyes straight ahead, arms tight to her sides.

"Ancestry Dolls: 1" and "Ancestry Dolls: 2" have 18th-century English children in place of hands. Where baby doll arms and legs should be, they sprout entirely separate figures. For legs and feet, "Ancestry Dolls: 1" has Ghanaian wooden sculpture figures, and "Ancestry Dolls: 3" has sleek upside-down Malawi figures. If this doll could walk, she would walk on Malawi heads; the heads would look up at her red face as she clomped along on top of them.

All bodies are fundamentally unmanageable and always irregular. The body barely holds

together various selves. Every body is unusual. Scott highlights irregularity, threading together beaded skins. Beaded skin is permeable and shiny, patterned and porous. Sweat beads up, leaks out. Or maybe this beaded skin is most like the skin of a berry, a raspberry or a blackberry; it is a tight composition of tiny, juicy nubs, coming together to make African, Asian, European, American skin—all corpuscular, multi-colored.

Scott does not shy away from all the problems that come with skin. On a polite white shelf sits "Mammy/Penis," from the *Still Funny* series. The 3-and-a-half-inch-tall collectible Mammy figure holds a beaded pink dildo. She looks like she might be a salt or pepper shaker; Her dress reads "Charleston, South Carolina." She represents a city or a latent, pervasive desire hidden near the heart of that city. Whether she wants to do the job or not, she holds a penis, perhaps in a defiant gesture. She is armed with a terrible weapon. The dick is not a dildo: Mammy castrates.

Scott's disturbing, disarming "Ancestry/Progeny" is anything but subtle. It is a rough, heartbreaking, and human encounter. An almost 8-inch dark beaded head protrudes from the gallery wall. Coiffed and wearing a good, floppy blue hat, her pink lips seem to snarl. Her heavy, accusing, narrowed eyes look down on prim, porcelain, 12-and-half-inch-tall master and mistress figures. The three look not much alike, but they are blood. Bright and white, the couple feigns bafflement but both know full well how this young woman came into the world and who has tried to keep her down. They know how they have interfered; they know what they have wrought on the families who tended to them. Like it or not, directly or indirectly, these Americans are her ancestors. She, simmering, is their child. She is like them and completely unlike them.

Joyce Scott invokes multiple conflicts and confrontations. At turns blunt and sly, she suggests a complex, body-centric epic, a history and a present and a good deal of mourning.