

Brooklyn Museum



Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

Judith Scott—Bound and Unbound

October 24, 2014–March 29, 2015



Judith Scott— Bound and Unbound

About the Artist

Born in Columbus, Ohio, with Down syndrome, Judith Scott (1943–2005) was also largely deaf and did not speak. In 1987, after living for thirty-five years within an institutional setting for people with disabilities, she was brought by her twin sister, Joyce, to Oakland, California, where she was introduced to Creative Growth Art Center, a visionary studio art program founded to foster and serve a community of artists with developmental and physical disabilities.

During her first few months at Creative Growth, Scott drew colorful, repetitive circular and spiral shapes on paper, sometimes incorporating images cut from magazines. Her sculptural work started after the fiber artist Sylvia Seventy showed Scott several textile-based processes, including weaving and embroidery with yarn and different types of fabric.¹ For the next seventeen years, until her death, Scott created extraordinary sculptures assembled from found and scavenged materials wrapped and tied in yarn, thread, and other fibers.

About the Exhibition

Judith Scott—Bound and Unbound features over fifty sculptures and a selection of works on paper created during Scott's time at Creative Growth. The retrospective situates the artist's work within the broader context of the disability-rights movement. As with the civil-rights and feminist movements of the sixties and seventies, disability-rights activists engaged in public and legislative protests with "the broad goals of equal rights, with an immediate focus on the essential need of securing safe and universal access in the public environment."² These efforts resulted in several landmark legislative acts, including the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, providing federal protection for people with physical and developmental disabilities.³ It is in this political and social climate that the Creative Growth Art Center opened, in 1974.

The exhibition also pushes beyond the role of biography, which is often seen as central to the interpretation of art created by non-academically trained artists with developmental disabilities, and investigates Scott's masterly formal use of found materials, color, texture, and form.



Description of the Artwork

This sculpture is made from several everyday objects. The largest, a wooden chair with royal blue paint, provides the structural framework. The chair's top and mid-rails (horizontal bars attached to the seat back) are wrapped with an abundance of raffia. Its arms, legs, and stretchers (bars that connect the front and back legs) are also bound with string and yarn in a variety of colors. The arms and seat of the chair are completely covered by a complex, dense bundle made from layers of twisted and knotted green, blue, black, and gray fabric strips. A white bicycle rim, tied in place with white string woven through its spokes, leans against the seat back. Colorful yarn stretches over the wheel hub and through the spokes to form taut, angular lines. Atop the fabric bundle, secured by layers of red yarn and fabric, is an upside-down woven basket.



About the Artwork

Scott's sculptures are densely layered, meticulously wrapped "cocoon," made from an assortment of found and scavenged materials. Yarn, thread, and other fibers were used "to sew, bind, wrap, and loosely weave a layered outer skin,"⁴ sometimes completely covering the original materials. Scott focused her attention on one sculpture for an extended period of time—weeks to months—continuing to build layer upon layer. Once a work was completed, she signaled to the Creative Growth staff for it to be removed, and she would begin another piece.

Questions for Viewing

Take a moment to look closely at this sculpture. What do you notice? How would you describe it to someone who is not looking at it?

What everyday objects do you see? Where do you usually find items like this? How does the artist Judith Scott change the function of these objects? How do they stay the same?

Describe the different types of fibers you see. Compare and contrast the color, size, and texture of these materials.

In art history, **formalism** is the study of works of art by analyzing and comparing their form and visual style—the way objects are made and their purely material aspects. This sculpture and others made by Scott are celebrated for being unique and aesthetically pleasing. Look closely for evidence of these four principles of formalism:

Balance: The way that visual elements—such as line, shape, color, and texture—are organized and arranged. There are three types of balance: **symmetrical**, **asymmetrical**, and **radial**. Symmetrical balance occurs when you divide an artwork in half, and each side mirrors the other. Asymmetrical balance occurs when each side is *not* the same. Radial balance occurs when various elements form a pattern around one central point.

Proportion: The relationship of various elements to one another, such as their relative size or location.

Repetition: The use of an element again and again.

Movement: How elements are handled to create a sense of motion. Sometimes referred to as rhythm.

How has Scott used each of these principles in her artwork?

What steps do you think the artist went through to assemble her sculpture? What would need to be done first? What step would be last? What do you see that makes you say that?

Describe all the textures you notice. If you could touch them, what would they feel like? How are these materials useful for making art?

Classroom Activities

Strings and Things

Scott used a number of everyday materials that came from a variety of places, including her home, as well as from the Creative Growth Art Center, where she made her art. Materials like these are often called “found objects,” because they are items not normally considered art, and often already have a non-art function.

Gather materials from your home and places you visit regularly. Choose items that have different textures, shapes, colors, and sizes. Share your selection with a classmate. Discuss how you might create a sculpture from them that uses at least one of the following principles: balance, proportion, repetition, and movement. Use tape, string, or rubber bands to assemble your sculpture. Experiment with stationery supplies that Scott used in her earlier works, such as paper, glue, crayons, and colored pencils, to add further decorative elements.

Interview your classmate about his/her artistic process. Use the following questions as a guide: How did you come up with the idea for your artwork? Describe the process you used for creating your sculpture. What was the easiest part? What was the hardest? What do you like most about your artwork? If you could change anything, what would it be? Switch roles and share your answers with your partner. What answers did you have in common? What was different?

Art Speaks Out

Joyce Scott wrote several poems about her twin sister's life and work. Here, she imagines what might lie inside one of Judith's intricate sculptures:

COCOONS

Perhaps inside each wrapped cocoon

Is a child unborn,

Who might have been hers,

Had she and the world been something different.

Perhaps inside each wrapped cocoon

Is a spirit protected,

Of an earthbound wingless being waiting to be born again,

When the whole world will be changed.

Perhaps inside,

The past is wrapped carefully in bright colors

Gently preserved.

The sanctuary wherein our love resides.

—Joyce Scott⁵

Select a sculpture from *Judith Scott—Bound and Unbound* and imagine what's inside it. Write a poem from the point of view of the artwork. Use one of these prompts to spark your imagination:

Before I became a piece of art, I was a ...

I became a part of this sculpture because ...

If I could talk, the first thing I would say is ...

People describe me as ... but I describe myself as ...

If I could be a different part of this sculpture, I would be ...

Inside this sculpture, I see ... I hear ... I smell... I taste... I feel ...

Share your poem with a classmate.

Resources for Students

"21 Children's Books to Celebrate World Down Syndrome Day": <http://www.babble.com/babble-voices/21-childrens-books-to-celebrate-world-down-syndrome-day>

A diverse list of children's books aimed at creating awareness and understanding of Down syndrome. Appropriate for elementary-aged and younger audiences.

The Museum of Everything, Exhibition #4.1: Judith Scott; episode of The Culture Show: <http://vimeo.com/45569615>

This 7½-minute film takes a behind-the-scenes look at a 2011 exhibition of Scott's work and contains interviews with Tom di Maria, Director of Creative Growth Art Center; James Brett, founder of The Museum of Everything; and Joyce Scott.

"Creative Growth Art Center"; segment from the PBS program *Spark*: <http://www.kqed.org/arts/programs/spark/profile.jsp?essid=4308>
Watch Scott create one of her sculptures in this 9½-minute segment, from 2003, documenting the history and mission of Creative Growth Art Center.

Resources for Teachers

Catherine Morris and Matthew Higgs, eds. *Judith Scott—Bound and Unbound*, exh. cat. New York: Brooklyn Museum and DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2014.

This catalogue features several essays along with images of all the artworks in the exhibition. The texts include an analysis of Scott's emergence within the framework of the disability-rights and feminist movements, an overview of how the Creative Growth Art Center fostered Scott's creativity, a comparison of her works with those of other contemporary artists, and an interview with Joyce Scott.

Joyce and Judith Scott: <http://www.hidden-worlds.com/judithandjoycescott/family.shtml>

This website, created by Joyce Scott, features a photo gallery as well as links to books, articles, and films featuring her sister's work.

Creative Growth: <http://creativegrowth.org/category/news>

This website provides information about Creative Growth Art Center's programs and exhibitions, and biographical information about participating artists, including Scott.

Museum of disABILITY History: <http://museumofdisability.org>

This website offers a timeline of the disability-rights movement in New York State; a virtual gallery of permanent exhibitions; resources, such as a glossary of appropriate terminology to use when discussing developmental and physical disabilities; and curricula for K-12 educators and students.

Notes

1. Matthew Higgs, "Judith Scott: Creative Growth," in Catherine Morris and Matthew Higgs, eds., *Judith Scott—Bound and Unbound*, exh. cat. (New York: Brooklyn Museum and DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2014), p. 31.
2. Catherine Morris, "Judith Scott and the Politics of Biography," in *Judith Scott—Bound and Unbound*, p. 14.
3. Ibid.
4. Lynne Cooke, "Peer Review," in *Judith Scott—Bound and Unbound*, p. 19.
5. Joyce Scott, "Cocoons," in Melissa Emery, ed., *The Museum of Everything, Exhibition #4.1: Judith Scott*, exh. cat. (London: The Museum of Everything, 2011), p. 14.

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Judith Scott—Bound and Unbound is organized by Catherine Morris, Sackler Family Curator for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, and Matthew Higgs, artist and Director/Chief Curator of White Columns, New York.

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Pages 1 (detail), 3 (right), and 7: Untitled, 2004. Fiber and found objects, 29 x 16 x 21 in. (73.7 x 40.6 x 53.3 cm). Creative Growth Art Center, Oakland, California. © Creative Growth Art Center. (Photo: Benjamin Blackwell)

Page 2: Judith Scott, 2004. (Photo: Anne Collier, courtesy of the artist; Anton Kern Gallery, New York; Covi-Mora, London; Marc Foxx, Los Angeles; The Modern Institute, Glasgow)

Page 3 (left): Judith Scott working at Creative Growth Art Center, 1999. (Photos: © Leon Borensztein)

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