

The Defining Artworks of 2021



BY: THE EDITORS OF ARTNEWS
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After a tumultuous 2020 that involved the beginnings of a pandemic and worldwide upheaval, the art world began to slowly go back to a form of normal in 2021. Along with that shift came a number of developments that brought art-making in new and unexpected developments. There was the rise of a new medium, and there was the return of performance art. There were artworks that spoke to a continued reckoning with systemic racism, and there were powerful pieces that offered forms of healing in a time when illness was prevalent. There was no shortage of creativity on display. The list below, featuring 15 works that defined this year, attests to that.

Despite the fact that some were able to get vaccinated and resume social activities, not everyone went back to traveling internationally. Possibly for that reason, some cast their eyes toward artworks of the past and considered them anew. For that reason, this list includes several works that were produced decades ago but speak to the current moment.

To look back on the past 12 months in art-making, below is a survey of some of the most important artworks made or presented in a new light in 2021.



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Dread Scott, *White Male for Sale*, 2021.

Photo : Courtesy Cristin Tierney Gallery

In White Man for Sale, Dread Scott met the moment yet again in one of the year's most resonant works, a send-up of the craze for NFTs (non-fungible tokens), which took the art world by storm in 2021. Scott has repeatedly used his performances and sculptures to address the African American experience in the United States since the '80s. He returned to these themes in a decidedly different way with this low-tech piece, which sold via Christie's in October. In it, a video loop shows a white man standing on a wooden block near a bustling Brooklyn intersection. In an artist statement, Scott said of the work, "The term fungible resonated differently for me due to its use by scholars of the history of slavery. People are inherently non-fungible. But as slavery became an integral part of developing capitalism, enslavers sought to make people fungible." In a moment when it seems like just about anything can be sold as an NFT, Scott makes a powerful statement about what that actually means, particularly when the buying and selling of NFTs has largely been led by white men. —Maximiliano Durón

CRISTIN TIERNEY