

CRISTIN TIERNEY

# HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

## Dread Scott Celebrates a Long-forgotten Rebellion as a Moment of Resilience

Merging past and present Scott magnifies what has been reduced in American history to a plaque on a highway.

by Taylor Michael



Dread Scott, "Slave Rebellion Reenactment Performance Still 1" (2020), 39 3/8 x 59 1/8 inches, edition of 2 plus 1 artist's proof (photo: Soul Brother; all images courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York)

Dread Scott explores the possibilities of Black resistance in *We're Going to End Slavery. Join Us!* On view at Cristin Tierney Gallery, the stills of *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* unpack the 1811 German Coast Uprising, in the New Orleans territory, as an inflection point in the struggle against slavery rather than just tragedy. The

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exhibition brings Louisiana in 1811 to New York City in 2021, giving viewers a glimpse at the price 500 enslaved people were willing to pay for their dignity and freedom. Using powerful imagery, folding in archival research, and merging the lines between past and present Scott magnifies what has been reduced in American history to a plaque on a highway.

The layering of meaning in Still 1 brings viewers to the heart of Scott's interest in this slave rebellion. Black re-enactors march past an oil refinery sitting on a former sugar plantation. They're marching toward freedom, away from death while chanting, among many other phrases, "Freedom or Death." Scott recreates the moment the historical leaders Charles Deslondes, Gilbert, Quamana, Jeamine, and Marie Rose planned for in secret for months, the moment the enslaved might rise up as they did in the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), and make a new nation for themselves. This potential registers in the faces of the re-enactors as a solemn but proud countenance. They carry muskets and sacks filled with the essentials that they'll need for a two-day journey toward emancipation, as puffs of refinery emissions spew toxic chemicals over the stretch of land now known as cancer alley. Marchers make the historical contemporary by wearing tennis shoes, and flannel shirts to protect them from the cold air and marching alongside the relatives of Oscar Grant, who was killed early New Year's Day in 2009 by BART Police in Oakland, CA.



Dread Scott, “Army of the Enslaved Flag (Adinkra)” (2019), hand-sewn cotton appliqué, 41 x 52 inches

Dread Scott has waited years to unearth this long-forgotten rebellion, and celebrate it as a moment of resilience and power. Scott’s engagement with the German Coast Uprising took place 400 years after Africans arriving in the colony of Virginia in 1619 were enslaved, more than 200 since 1811, and 20 years since his last solo gallery show. The exhibition features six performance stills and a flag used in Scott’s community-engaged performance project, which took place on November 8 and 9, 2019. Scott and other Black artists, friends, and Black and Indigenous Louisianans recreated the largest slave rebellion in United States history. They marched 24 miles from Laplace through St. Rose, finishing in New Orleans. Performers dressed in period garb walking past residential neighborhoods, strip malls, and oil refineries, and stopping at two public viewing areas: Bonnet Carré Spillway in Norco and along River Road in New Sarpy.

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The community-engaged performance doesn't recreate violence. Instead, the performers imagine a nation built by the formerly enslaved by waving flags, familiar symbols of independent statehood. At the time of the rebellion documenters noted that the rebels had flags, but did not see the importance of describing them or investigating their meaning. Scott, along with the costuming team, used existing knowledge about the religious customs and symbols of the enslaved tribes brought into the Louisiana Territory from Congo, Angola, Yoruba, Ibo, and other West African regions, as well as Haiti and other parts of the United States, to speculate. What symbols would an army of rebels carry on its way to freedom? The one flag on view, "Army of the Enslaved Flag (Ogun)," is a grass-colored fabric with white and black triangles bordering the longer ends of the rectangle, with a stylized machete in the center. The machete is also a sword: both the tool of their enslavement and a weapon of Ogun, an Orisha followed by warriors. Like the other images from the performance, it's simple yet powerfully suggestive of various layers of meaning.



Dread Scott, "Army of the Enslaved Flag (Shango)" (2019), hand-sewn cotton appliqué, 36 x 60 inches

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The biggest change Scott made in the re-enactment was its conclusion. On January 11, 1811 the slave owner's militia and US federal troops put down the rebellion. They captured the leaders and quickly executed some of them, while using others who took part as an example, publicly torturing them to protect against copycat rebellions. The United States troops decapitated these brave soldiers and placed their heads on spikes along the Mississippi River. In contrast, Scott ended the reenactment in Congo Square with a cultural celebration that included a Second Line Parade and other musical performances.

Still Five shows the marchers in New Orleans on their way to Congo Square parading between cars in the French Quarter. Their flags and weapons are raised in victory but their faces don't show jubilation. There is marginally more joy in Still Two when the marchers reenact overcoming one of the militias as opposed to the photo taken in New Orleans at the end of their two-day journey. The same expressions of triumph are visible in photos of protestors marching for freedom and liberation in the Summer of 2020. Even as they celebrate, in 2019, this rebellion's moral and financial dent in the institution of slavery, all those involved in Scott's emotional re-enactment know there's far more to be done to realize the dreams of the enslaved who died for their freedom.

*Dread Scott: We're Going to End Slavery. Join Us! continues at Cristin Tierney Gallery (219 Bowery, New York City) until December 18th.*