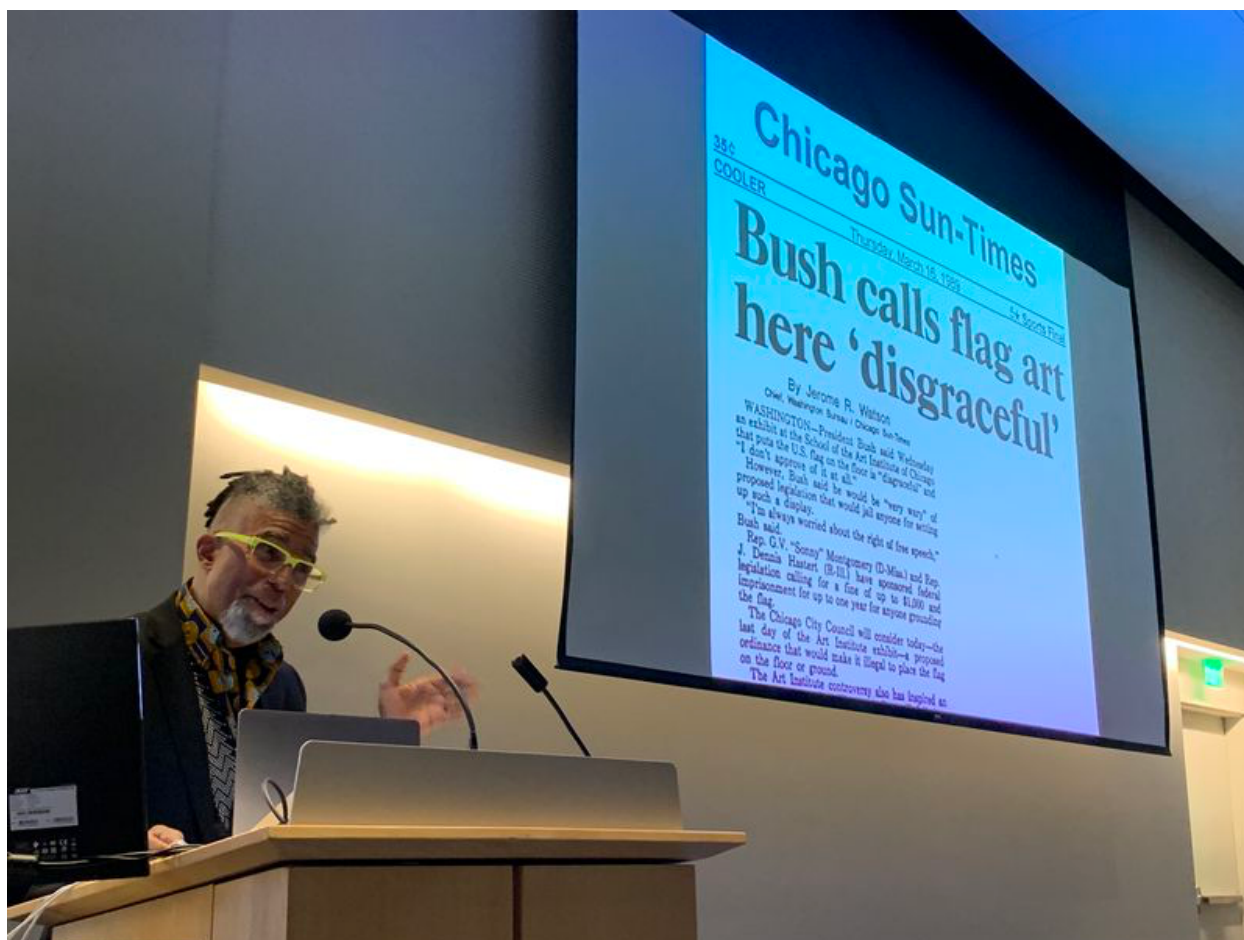


Battling oppression with capitalist ‘blood money’: Radical artist Dread Scott spreads revolutionary message at CWRU-Cleveland Museum of Art symposium



Published: Dec. 23, 2022, 7:30 a.m.

Artist Dread Scott critiques capitalist system that funds his work

By **Steven Litt, cleveland.com**

CLEVELAND, Ohio — It isn't every day that an American artist strikes a blow for free speech successfully as a plaintiff in a First Amendment case decided by the U.S. Supreme Court.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

But that's just one of Dread Scott's many accomplishments as one of the nation's most proudly transgressive and anti-racist artists.

In a career spanning more than three decades, Scott, based in Brooklyn, N.Y., has pricked the nation's conscience over its history of slavery, white supremacy, police violence against unarmed Blacks, and inequities caused by capitalism.

On Wednesday, Dec. 14, Scott discussed his work as a conceptual, political, and performance artist in a 90-minute presentation and Q&A discussion at Case Western Reserve University's Tinkham Veale University Center, co-organized by CWRU and the Cleveland Museum of Art.

The tall, slim artist, who sported fashionable bright yellow glasses and who had his hair shaved close on the sides with dreadlocks in the middle, clicked through dozens of slides and videos documenting his installations, artworks, and performances.

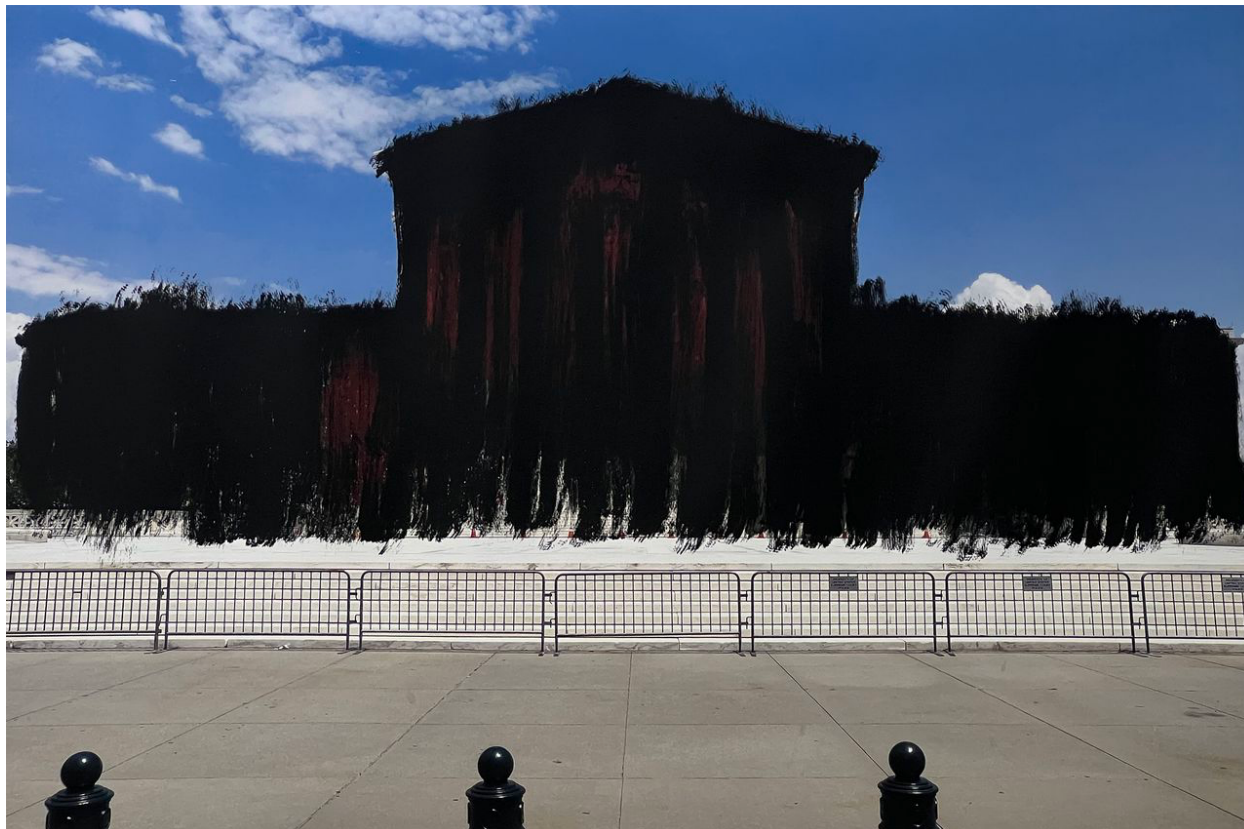
His crisp articulation and courtly poise didn't scream radical. But Scott's words left no doubt about his politics among his audience of roughly 150 people.

"I make revolutionary art to propel history forward," he said. "I look towards an era without exploitation and oppression. I don't accept the economic foundation, the social relations, or the governing ideas of American society."

At the same time, as Scott acknowledged in an interview with Cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer before his presentation that his ability to criticize American capitalism and racial injustices is rooted in philanthropic support and legal rights based in the very same system.

"I view what I do as money laundering," he said. "I take blood money from bad sources and clean it up and do something good with it."

Scott's professional name is part of his project to raise awareness of America's painful history some would prefer to overlook. The name calls attention to that of Dred Scott, the plaintiff in the notorious 1859 Supreme Court ruling written by Chief Justice Roger Taney that helped provoke the Civil War.



Documentation of Obliterated Power (Supreme Court) a screen print by the American artist Dread Scott. Courtesy Dread Scott

Taney, writing for the majority, found that Dred Scott, an enslaved man who sued for his freedom in Missouri because he had previously lived in the free state of Illinois, had no rights under the U.S. Constitution because, he wrote, people of African descent were not U.S. citizens. The ruling also declared that Congress had no right to halt the spread of slavery.

Dread Scott's well-received presentation at CWRU was the keynote for the biennial Keithley Symposium, a program organized by the museum and the university to highlight the role of art in contemporary society.

This year's topic, "Monuments and Memory," featured a day of lectures and panel discussions on Thursday, December 15 by artists and scholars focusing on how history is commemorated in public space.

That's a fraught subject at a time in which Ivy League universities are chiseling the names of slave-owning politicians from their buildings, and Southern states are pulling down statues of Confederate soldiers and generals.

Scott made no claims about anticipating the wave of public art created in response to the police murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, in Minneapolis in 2020. But his

CRISTIN TIERNEY

presentation showed that he has been creating a vivid art of protest long before the Black Lives Matter movement.

In 2016, Scott hung a banner outside the Jack Shainman Gallery in Manhattan saying, “A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday.”



Dread Scott's work, "A Man Was Lynched By Police Yesterday" was displayed in New York in 2016. Courtesy Dread Scott

It was an updated version of a banner hung from the headquarters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) on Fifth Avenue in New York between 1936 and 1938 to protest the lynching of Black people across the U.S.

“By and large it’s very good that Black people aren’t set on fire or hung from trees anymore,” Scott said at CWRU. But he added, “the police play the same role today that lynch mobs played at the turn of the century.”

In 2019, Scott organized a re-enactment of an 1811 slave rebellion in Louisiana by recruiting 300 participants to march in formation 24 miles toward New Orleans along the Mississippi River in period costumes. The re-enactors carried muskets, machetes, sickles, and sabers.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

“It was quite a sight to see if you were just going home from work or shopping,” Scott said.

He said he conceived the project as a response to Civil War re-enactments staged by present-day Confederate sympathizers who celebrate the “lost cause” mythology of noble state’s rights motivations behind the war.

Scott set his critiques of American racism within a broader skepticism about the country’s political system, and global capitalism.

In a 2010 performance piece, “Money to Burn,” Scott provoked New York police to cite him for disorderly conduct as he burned singles, fives, tens, and twenties in front of a mid-day crowd on Wall Street in lower Manhattan.

He earned headlines in 1989 at the outset of his career as an undergraduate at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with his work, “What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?”

The installation, which became part of the culture wars over the role of art in U.S. society, prompted viewers to answer to the question raised by the work’s title by writing responses in a notebook set on a shelf over a U.S. flag spread on the floor below. The work, in essence, asked viewers to decide whether to stand on Old Glory while writing in the notebook.

President George H.W. Bush, who campaigned in the 1988 election by visiting flag factories, was outraged by the installation, according to contemporary news reports, although he said he’d be wary of outlawing such works on free speech grounds.

Scott soon thereafter participated in a flag-burning demonstration on the steps of the U.S. Capitol, which inspired Congress to enact the Flag Protection Act of 1989. The law would have prohibited flag burnings and works like Scott’s installation.

After the U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C. upheld the law, Scott and other plaintiffs appealed to the Supreme Court, which struck it down.

The case highlighted a central conundrum of Scott’s work, which is that he operates within a democratic and capitalist system that protects free speech and nourishes the arts, even as it produces inequality and injustice.

In the interview before his presentation, Scott said he was unaware that the Keithley Symposium was named for Cleveland museum supporters and donors Joseph P. and Nancy Keithley.

The Keithleys recently donated more than \$100 million worth of art to the Cleveland Museum of Art, a gift made possible by Joseph Keithley’s success as the head of Keithley Instruments, the Solon-based company founded by his father, Joseph F. Keithley, in 1955. (An exhibit of the Keithley Collection is on view at the museum through January 8.)

CRISTIN TIERNEY

In other words, a successful Cleveland capitalist provided the funding for a presentation by Scott, the anti-capitalist.

“I don’t really care that much,” Scott said in the interview. “I’m happy the university and the museum have the funding to put on radical programming.”

His point, he said, is that he’s trying to question “what sort of world places the wealth of nations into the hands of individuals?”

Speaking of the Keithleys he said: “if a museum like the Cleveland Museum of Art wants to function, they have people like that on their board.”

But he went on to say that “I do think people would be far better off in a society where the wealth of society would be in the hands of the people.”