

CRISTIN TIERNEY

National Gallery of Art

FEBRUARY 24, 2023

Acquisition: Dread Scott



Dread Scott

I Am Not a Man, September 9, 2009

inkjet print

sheet: 55.88 x 76.2 cm (22 x 30 in.)

National Gallery of Art, Washington

Gift of Funds from Michael Findlay and Victoria Findlay Wolfe

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The National Gallery of Art has acquired two photographs by the multimedia artist Dread Scott (b. 1965), whose work engages with some of the most significant social questions of our time. Made possible through a generous gift of funds by Michael Findlay and Victoria Findlay Wolfe, *I Am Not A Man* (2009) and *On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide* (2014) depict key moments from two of Scott's performances that confront the legacy of racism in the United States. These pictures, the first works by the artist to enter the collection, reflect not only Scott's desire to push formal and conceptual boundaries, but also his deep awareness of how history informs the present. His compelling images refer to seminal events from the Civil Rights Movement and promote critical reflection on contemporary events.

I Am Not A Man was performed in 2009 on the streets of Harlem. Scott, dressed like a Civil Rights protester, walked for an hour wearing an iconic but altered sign that read "I AM NOT A MAN." His performance appropriates but inverts the message "I AM A MAN" first carried by Memphis sanitation workers while on strike in 1968. Pointing to the importance of Civil Rights protests as well as to their limitations, Scott was challenging the idea that the United States had entered a post-racial period after the election of Barack Obama. Intentionally stumbling and even losing his pants at one point during the performance, Scott staged these humiliating scenes to call attention to the ongoing negation of Black lives in American society. The sign and his actions elicited a spectrum of reactions from passersby, including two police officers, as seen in the photograph. The work resonates with several pieces in the National Gallery's collection, including Glenn Ligon's 1988 painting *Untitled (I Am A Man)* and press photographs of the sanitation strike.

On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide was taken during a performance where Scott attempted to walk forward while being battered by the intense spray from a fire hose. Alluding to the 1963 Civil Rights struggle in Birmingham, Alabama, where high-pressure water jets were used against nonviolent protesters and bystanders, Scott's actions acknowledge all ongoing struggles toward justice and equality. In 2014 the protests in response to the death of Michael Brown at the hands of Ferguson, Missouri, police were specifically on his mind. This photograph captures the artist with his hands up protectively, bracing himself as he endures being sprayed by local firemen who agreed to participate in the event. Scott also uses the term genocide in the artwork's title, bringing attention to the ongoing struggles for Indigenous sovereignty and the country's brutal history of colonial settlement.