

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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Art Interviews

Dread Scott's Visual Ballad to Nina Simone

The artist talks to *Hyperallergic* ahead of his New York exhibition *Goddam*.
Briana Ellis-Gibbs | March 8, 2023



Dread Scott, "Pirate Jenny (gold)" (2022), screenprint and gold leaf on canvas (all images courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery unless otherwise noted)

The African-American singer, songwriter, pianist, and civil rights activist Nina Simone has inspired artist Dread Scott for years. In an exhibition at New York's Cristin Tierney Gallery opening April 28, *Goddam*, his art will now be in conversation with Simone's music. The show will feature screenprints and paintings inspired by four of her revolutionary songs: "Mississippi Goddamn" (1964), "Four Women" (1966), "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to be Free" (1967), and "Pirate Jenny" (1964).

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Scott, a quiet yet humble man, opened the door to greet me during a recent visit to his Brooklyn studio, which resembles a warehouse at first appearance but gradually reveals his small, warm workplace. Born Scott Tyler in 1965 in Chicago, Illinois, the artist adopted his professional name after Dred Scott, an enslaved person who sued for his freedom in the North via the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case of 1857. Scott wants his name to remind people that the racism and exploitation that led to the Supreme Court decision, which denied Black citizenship and upheld slavery, persists in America; in his latest series of works, he asks viewers to question how they contribute and conform to that reality.

Simone is “a badass ... an OG,” Scott says. “I mean, she’s really skilled as a pianist, but the questions that she decided to take on really speak powerfully to the conditions of people but also their strivings to be free,” Scott continued. “And there’s a tremendous amount of heart in her work. I wanted to pay tribute and sort of lift up some of her songs, but also connect people with some of [her] important ideas. I felt like the time had come.”



Dread Scott in his Brooklyn studio (photo Briana Ellis-Gibbs/Hyperallergic)

Before Scott became the 2021 Guggenheim Fellow for Creative Arts and the 2020 United States Artists fellow, he began his career as a photographer when his father, a photojournalist at the *Chicago Defender*, gifted him his first professional camera at age 12. His passion for visual art grew through his younger years, so much so that when he did not have the grades to attend college to study science and his parents asked him what he wanted to do after high school, he didn't stop to think before immediately answering: photography.

His parents introduced him to photojournalists as well as architectural, fashion, and fine art photographers, one of whom advised him to take classes at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago (SAIC). That's where Scott fell in love with the medium.

As a student and artist during the Reagan administration, when the Black unemployment rate was double that of the White unemployment rate and the median income for Black households was 42 percent below that of White households, he aimed to not only make beautiful art but also art that sparked conversation.

“I grew up in Ronald Reagan's America, which was a nightmare. Either you got into the narrow-minded selfishness and greed and American chauvinism that was Reagan's America, or you didn't,” he said. “I didn't, and so I started to look for philosophy and politics that expressed how I understood the world, and a friend turned me on to Malcolm X, particularly *Malcolm X Speaks*.”

Later, he learned of Mao Zedong's “Little Red Book,” which was published by the People's Republic of China military newspaper from April 1964 until about 1976; it included quotes from Mao's books and speeches and photographs taken by Hou Bo.

“Growing up in America I had repeatedly been told that Russia was the Evil Empire and that Communism was the worst thing that had ever happened to humanity,” Scott said. “So I was a bit skeptical of the Red Book, but I read it with an open mind. And I found that the people who lied about how great America was — I could clearly see the misery that America caused for so many people — also lied about Communism.”

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“I could see that the Soviet Union was like America in many ways and not at all revolutionary. But what Mao wrote about in the Red Book was radically different than what was going on in the USSR and in China in the 1980s,” Scott continued. “It challenged a lot of the dogma of communism and opened a door for me to want to engage more about what Marxism was about, and how humanity could get free and end exploitation and oppression.”



Dread Scott, “What is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag?” (1988), photomontage, shelf, books, ink pens, American flag on the ground

His desire to change the world around him led him to produce a series of installations in which he asked participants to interact with his art, leading to his exhibition organized by SAIC's Black Student Association: *What Is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag?* The show featured an American flag on the floor and above it a photomontage with the work's title, a photo of South Korean students burning the flag, and coffins draped with American flags. On a desk, Scott placed a notebook where people could write messages about how they felt it should be displayed. Visitors had the option of walking on the flag to get to the notebook to leave a message, a controversial point for some political figures.

While residents from the Chicago housing projects waited in line for hours to see the exhibition, President George H. W. Bush called the exhibit "disgraceful" and the United States congress denounced it. The following year, the Bush administration cut federal funding to SAIC.

The United States government "found [the exhibit] very threatening and wanted to ban it. And [people waiting in line] were like, this is amazing; we don't normally think about contemporary and conceptual artwork, but this is awesome; this guy's fighting for us," Scott said. "And so I wanted to continue to make work like that ever since that happened."

Responding to "the so-called 'artist' who has invited the trampling on the flag," in the words of US Senator Bob Dole, US Congress passed legislation criminalizing the placement of a US flag on the floor. Months later, Scott and others burned the American flag on the steps of the US Capitol, leading to a landmark decision from the Supreme Court, *United States v. Eichman*, ruling that American government officials could not mandate patriotism.

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Dread Scott, "A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday" (2015), nylon, 84 1/2 × 52 1/2 × 1/8 inches

His subversive art expands from photography and flags to performance and printmaking. There's "A Man Was Lynched By Police Yesterday" (2015), which features a flag similar to the one the NAACP flew over their national headquarters in New York the day after someone was lynched; and "Dread Scott: Decision" (2012), a performance in which five naked Black men stood outside voting booths and viewers were asked to line up and take turns answering a series of questions, all while Scott monologued the Dred Scott decision. *Burning the US Constitution* (2011) was a series of three photos Scott took of himself doing precisely what the work's title declares.

Scott embodies the same rebellious spirit that defined Nina Simone's life and music. The "High Priestess of Soul," as she was known, fearlessly performed her songs, especially the 1964 hit "Mississippi Goddam," even after American states banned and radio stations refused to play her music. Scott argues that the songs continue to resonate today after the murder of George Floyd, the reappearance of stop and frisk, the government stripping women of the right to an abortion, and Florida laws banning the study of Black history. To convey his message in "Goddam" (2021), Scott placed the United States capitol building in the center of the canvas, the words "Goddam, Goddam, Goddam" written over it.

"It's just like, *god damn*, why are people tolerating this?" he said. "I think [Simone's] absolute disdain and irreverence toward the world around her is something that's really inspiring to me and the particular songs that are chosen."



Dread Scott, "Goddam" (2021), screenprint on canvas

To create "Pirate Jenny" (2022), Scott used Andy Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series technique of repeating the same image on a canvas with different monochrome colors saturating each photo. Scott mimics Warhol's use of duplication with images of people rioting and saturates the photographs he uses in red. A photo of a Black waitress next to them symbolizes American working-class women's struggles referenced in Simone's song, and the use of gold references the gold ground seen in paintings of religious leaders during the late Middle Ages in Italy to "flip the script on what power is."

Two other works by Scott included in the forthcoming exhibition, "Four Women" (2023) and "I Wish I Knew" (2023), are also inspired by eponymous songs by Simone and provoke introspection and critical thinking about the current state of America. Scott hopes the exhibition will move his audience to action.

"Instead of hoping that Joe Biden or Bernie Sanders, dying Dianne Feinstein, or whoever can save us, or even AOC, let's actually look at the ordinary people who were

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out in the streets demanding justice,” Scott urges. “I hope that people see this work and are uplifted, inspired. But also strengthened to want to radically and fundamentally change the world.”



Dread Scott, “Burning the US Constitution” (2011), suite of 3 pigment prints, each 46 x 35 inches

Editor’s note 3/9/23 11:30am EST: This article has been updated with additional information about the work “What Is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag?” The title of another work by Scott has also been corrected; it is “Goddam,” not “Mississippi Goddam.”