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The Artist Who Burned the U.S. Flag Raises a New One in Venice

Dread Scott's unabashedly activist art once led to a Supreme Court ruling on free speech. Now during the Biennale, he tackles racist immigration policies.

By Zachary Small - Reporting from New York and Venice - May 1, 2024, 5:00 a.m. ET



The Brooklyn-based artist Dread Scott has opened an imaginary agency in Venice, "All African People's Consulate," as a comment on European immigration policies.

Nobody would accuse the activist-artist Dread Scott of being a diplomat. He would rather dismantle power structures than sustain them. But the "All African People's Consulate," he has created as a conceptual artwork along the Grand Canal during the 60th Venice Biennale has quickly become a solid gathering place for the Black community in a city that hasn't always been hospitable to people of color.

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The exhibition is dedicated to an imaginary union of African countries that would protect the rights of its citizens to freely move around the world. It highlights a more difficult reality — one where 30 percent of Africans applying for visas in Europe’s Schengen Area are rejected, which researchers say is the highest refusal rate of any region.

Experiences with the fictional agency may differ. People from Africa, or with African ancestry, receive “passports” and citizenship registration. Others receive a short visa and invitation to be a visitor in the community that Scott is hoping to foster during the Biennale, the international art exhibition that runs through the fall and includes 90 national pavilions (this is one of the many collateral events happening in the city). Already, the artist has issued nearly 190 passports and 250 visas through his program.



The flag outside the “All African People’s Consulate.” National banners have been a running theme in Scott’s work, which seeks to undo systems of power. Matteo de Mayda for The New York Times

“We are challenging the notion that Europeans can decide when and where Africans can move,” Scott explained. “But we hope it will also be a place to hang out. It’s somewhere where visitors can listen to the Nigerian singer Mr Eazi or get recommendations for the best Ethiopian food.”

The consulate is mostly staffed by Black Italians, organized by Jermay Michael Gabriel, an artist originally from Ethiopia who supported the artist’s project because it resonated with his own experiences in the country.

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“I have an Italian passport because I was adopted by an Italian family. Otherwise I could have died in the Mediterranean Sea like thousands of other immigrants,” Gabriel said. “Europeans are supposed to stand for democracy and inclusivity. But this is not present for Africans. How can we speak about inclusion when Italian embassies don’t usually give visas for Africans?”



Scott at the exhibition, which imagines a union of African countries that would protect the rights of its citizens to freely move around the world. Credit - Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times.



A visa from the fictional agency. Credit - Matteo de Mayda for The New York Times



And it's passport for the imaginary "All African People's Community." Matteo de Mayda for The New York Times

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It's probably the most optimistic image of the future that the artist has ever produced, in a 35-year career that has seen his work censored more times than he can recall.

Indeed, death threats have accompanied him since the first days, a 1989 college [installation](#) at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, titled "What Is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?" that ignited a political firestorm by asking visitors to step on the American flag.

"Disgraceful," said President George H.W. Bush at the time. "Desecration," said Senator Bob Dole of Kansas. Outside the exhibition, angry veterans [hosted](#) daily protests. Scott burned another American flag outside the Capitol Building in Washington with other activists, sparking a legal battle that [ended](#) in 1990 with a landmark Supreme Court 5-4 ruling that the new federal law against vandalizing the flag was unconstitutional.

Those events helped forge a new persona. Born Scott Tyler, the artist adopted the pseudonym that paid homage to Dred Scott, the enslaved Black man who, with his wife, Harriet, unsuccessfully [sued for their freedom](#), an 11-year struggle that ended in 1857.

Scott has since become a godfather of art-activism whose installations have made discussions of police brutality and racial justice less taboo.

Almost 35 years later, Scott stands under a flag of his own creation, in shimmering reds and greens. It waves above the murky waters of Venice at the "All African People's Consulate."



Scott was arrested in 1989 after he set fire to an American flag on the steps of the Capitol. A legal battle ended with a Supreme Court ruling that a federal law against vandalizing the flag was unconstitutional. Credit - Charles Tasnadi/Associated Press

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Symbols of Power

Scott likes to tell people that he shows art in museums and major street corners, “with or without permission.” The artworks are often polarizing and blunt.

In 2008, he said he received another round of death threats after opening an installation at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Art, in Brooklyn, called “The Blue Wall of Violence,” showing six silhouettes representing Black people as shooting targets. Below that was a wooden coffin affixed with three police batons that the artist had rigged to strike its surface every 10 seconds.

The Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association called for the exhibition’s closure and the museum’s defunding on its opening day.

“The artwork was a way of calling to task figures who were supposed to represent safety and security, but have been seen as figures of surveillance, fear and violence,” said Kimberli Gant, now a curator at the Brooklyn Museum who helped organize the original exhibition with Laurie Cumbo, currently the city’s cultural affairs commissioner.

“Dread is very vocal in his beliefs,” Gant added. “People might equate that with being an aggressive person, but he is very soft-spoken. He is a father, and he is concerned about the world he lives in.”

Image



Scott’s installation, “The Blue Wall of Violence” (1999/repeated in 2008), includes shooting-target silhouettes with outstretched hands holding objects like keys, with a coffin below. Credit - Dread Scott

Born in 1965 into a middle-class family on the South Side of Chicago, the artist learned his way around a camera through his father, the photojournalist Scott Tyler. But it was his mother, Joyce, and her interest in the Black Panthers that piqued his early fascination with community activism. After dropping out of high school only a few credits shy of graduation, he started attending classes at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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“They were apparently not as discerning as M.I.T. or Caltech,” Scott said with a laugh. “They didn’t ask many questions about whether I graduated high school. I slipped into a degree program.”

The hip-hop group Public Enemy formed the soundtrack of his young adulthood, and he became exposed to modernist photographers like Roy DeCarava, political artists like Leon Golub and Hans Haacke, and radical collectives like AfriCobra. But he credited books like Toni Morrison’s “Beloved” with his political awakening. “I was trying to look at what America is and how to get free,” said Scott, who, at 59, still dresses like a goofy undergrad from the 1980s, with a goatee and a fluffy sprout of hair.

After the flag controversy, his art failed to become commercially successful. Through the 1990s, he earned his living as a freelance computer programmer and graphic designer. Then he started telling his story on the lecture circuit and receiving grants from arts organizations that helped him cobble together a steady income — enough to raise a child with his partner, the artist Jenny Polak.

In 2016, Scott was installing a new flag outside Jack Shainman Gallery in Manhattan, white letters on a black background that read, “A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday.” It was a response to the police killing of Walter Scott (no relation), an unarmed Black man shot in Charleston, S.C., but it also referenced a flag that waved outside the headquarters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in the late 1930s, that read: “A Man Was Lynched Yesterday.” (The N.A.A.C.P. eventually removed it after being threatened with eviction.)



Scott’s protest banner at the Jack Shainman gallery in New York in 2016. Credit - Santiago Mejia/The New York Times

Dread Scott’s version of the flag “brought more hate and the possibility of violence than I ever had witnessed before in the history of the gallery,” said Jack Shainman, the art dealer.

“The landlord threatened to evict me,” he added, “I was also worried about the safety of our employees.”

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The artist Hank Willis Thomas, who helped curate the exhibition, said that Scott may have indirectly influenced the Black Lives Matter movement through his artworks.

Yet during the height of those protests, Scott said he couldn't find an American museum to show his flag about police killings — including the Whitney Museum, which acquired and showed a copy in 2017.

And Scott said that other artworks have been effectively banned in the United States, which he called a byproduct of tapping into the roots of racial injustice. "I'm a revolutionary and my work asks people to rethink the cohering ideals of American society," Scott said.

Diplomacy at Work?

Five years ago, Scott staged a slave rebellion re-enactment, known as the 1811 German Coast uprising, with participants marching through 24 miles of southern Louisiana. Their path through former plantations and new petrochemical factories largely retraced the steps of some 500 enslaved people of African descent, who marched toward New Orleans in an unsuccessful attempt at securing their freedom.

"It was my best work," Scott said, reflecting upon the nuance.

In 2021, Scott displayed costumes, photographs and props from the march at his first solo gallery exhibition in more than two decades at Cristin Tierney Gallery. But he was also proud of the flags he designed for the march, with an image symbolizing Ogun, a Yoruban god of war, and an Adinkra image used by some Ghanaians to represent hope and confidence.



Participants in "Slave Rebellion Re-enactment," Scott's community-engaged performance through southern Louisiana in 2019. Credit - Dread Scott; Photo by Soul Brother

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Scott's "Army of the Enslaved Flag (Ogun)," 2019, hand-sewn cotton appliqué. The flag, based on an image of a sword of a Yoruba deity, was carried as part of "Slave Rebellion Re-enactment." Credit...via Dread Scott and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York

Independent for most of his career, he joined the Cristin Tierney Gallery last year.

"What artists like Dread need is somebody to say, 'OK, we believe in the project, and we will help iron out the budget by floating the cost of this project until the fund-raising comes in,'" said Tierney, who helped raise \$375,000 for Scott's Venice exhibition. She said the gallery sold smaller editions of the flag waving outside the "All African People's Consulate" for a donation of \$10,000 to help fund the project.

One of the major sponsors behind the consulate is [the Africa Center](#) in New York, which has advised Scott on what languages and images to include on his conceptual passports.

"The rhetoric that we see around migration is often heated and exclusionary," said Uzodinma Iweala, the Nigerian-American chief executive of the center, who is stepping down this year. "But Dread's work stands out because it creates an interactive experience that could get more people thinking than a round table at Davos."

Jermay Michael Gabriel still remembers the 2017 death of [Pateh Sabally, a Gambian migrant](#) who drowned in the Grand Canal as [onlookers shouted](#): "Go back to where you came from." And last year, three Ghanaian curators involved in the Venice Architecture Biennale were [denied visas](#) by the Italian government as [legislators passed](#) a sweeping crackdown on migration in the country.

"When I spoke to Dread, I was crying," said Gabriel. "The idea of the consulate brought a sensation of having a space for Black people and getting to feel comfortable when our bodies are uncomfortable in this country."

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Scott's imaginary passport for the "All African People's Community." Credit... Matteo de Mayda for The New York Times

Scott is still getting comfortable with this level of support, though he noted a certain irony to his profile rising abroad when American institutions have largely spurned him. Despite his impact on artists and activists, Scott has yet to receive a solo exhibition at a major museum in the United States.

"It would take courage," Scott suggested. "I've done the work of making the art — consistently for over 35 years. The real question of why my work isn't more visible and supported should be directed to curators and institutions."

Zachary Small is a Times reporter writing about the art world's relationship to money, politics and technology.