

CRISTIN TIERNEY

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Dread Scott: *Goddam*

By Ann c. Collins



Dread Scott, *Pirate Jenny (Gold)*, 2022. Screenprint and gold leaf on canvas, 56 x 84 inches. Courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney.

“The name of this tune is *Mississippi Goddam*,” Nina Simone announced during her 1964 concert at Carnegie Hall. “And I mean every word of it.” A response to the assassination of Medgar Evers and the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in which four little girls were killed, events which had occurred the previous year, Simone’s expression of grief, frustration, and anger became an anthem of the ongoing Civil Rights Movement; its debut marked a sharp turn towards the political in the singer’s career. Nearly sixty years later, artist Dread Scott links Simone’s songs of protest to the present-day, creating four large screen-prints on canvas in which contemporary images acknowledge the continuation of hatred and violence directed towards Black Americans, women, and LGBTQ+ communities.

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Goddam (2021), the exhibition's titular work, centers a photograph of the White House on a silver ground over which maps of Texas, Minnesota, Florida, and Georgia—hotbeds of brutality and murder—have been printed in yellow, black, and blue. The word “Goddam!,” written in red letters in what looks like the artist's hand, repeats over the picture five times. Straightforward and immediate, the work echoes the distress of Simone's lyric, acknowledging the futility of national demonstrations in a country whose legislative policy continues to marginalize its Black citizens. The central image of the White House speaks to the previous presidency's blatant disregard for human safety and dignity as well as the current administration's inability to stem the ongoing murders of innocent Black Americans despite the Black Lives Matter movement and years of organized protests.

Pirate Jenny (Gold) (2022) references a song from *The Threepenny Opera* written in 1928 by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht which Nina Simone reinterpreted in 1964. The lyrics tell the story of a woman working in a hotel who is routinely humiliated by its guests. In her song, she foresees the arrival of a ship and band of pirates who will murderously avenge her before setting sail again with her onboard. Scott's modern-day Jenny wears the apron of a waitress and stands smiling against a gold ground while around her small renderings of a pirate ship and its crew of swashbucklers battle a police car. On the left side of the picture, Scott repeatedly prints a photograph of a man standing on a smoking police car in a Black Lives Matter protest in a Warholian questioning of the impact of photographic images: Does the transmission of the photograph create social change? For that matter, is there any hope that the pirates on their way or are they a mere fantasy in Jenny's mind?

The title *Four Women (Yellow)* (2023) alludes to Simone's song of the same name which rails against the legacy of slavery and its reduction of Black women into stereotypes. Rethinking the terms of image and individuality, Scott arranges duotone photographs of four women side by side, each looking directly at the viewer. One woman is fashionably dressed in a corduroy jacket, cropped trousers, earrings, and block-heeled boots. She could be a student, or maybe a young professional. Next to her, a middle-aged woman adorned in a flowing dress of African print fabric stands with her arms crossed over her chest. A third woman wears a camouflage jacket, black jeans, and lug-soled boots. Her right hand is clenched in a fist. The last woman in the line-up wears a stretchy, off-the-shoulder dress and Nike sneakers. Her hair hangs in long braids down to her waist. She coyly holds her hand to her chin. While the women appear poised and relaxed, the work's title complicates the image, infusing it with the same histories of slavery,



Dread Scott, *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free*, 2023. Body print, screenprint, gold leaf, tar and feathers on canvas, 84 x 68 inches. Courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney.

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reconstruction, and Jim Crow that echo through Simone's song. Yet Scott's positing them over a background of gold-leaf elevates the ordinary to the iconic; his four women are venerable, modern-day saints or queens.

The artist literally becomes the subject in *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free* (2023), a mixed-media work for which Scott covered himself with charcoal before laying on his canvas to create a full-body print which he embellished with plummy wings. A round moon of gold-leaf casts a murky shadow behind him, conjuring a sense of magical possibilities, new beginnings, journey's taken under its light. Riffing on Simone's cover of a Billy Taylor song, Scott seems poised to rise up and fly away, yet a band of tar painted along the lower edge of the picture stuck through with feathers tethers him in place. Is this an image of hope or despair? In a country whose legacy of inequity and hatred monstrously cycles back upon itself, will one ever be able to exist without the other?