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# KING KONG

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DREAD SCOTT

# DREAD



# SCOTT

# revolution,

*I make revolutionary art to propel history forward. I look towards an era without exploitation or oppression. I don't accept the political structures, economic foundation, social relations and governing ideas of America.*

It's direct, succinct, no-nonsense, matter-of-fact, positive, energetic, and after reading it, no one should doubt the seriousness of the endeavour, the belief in the cause, and direction his art has followed and will continue to follow. His art is a reaction to history, and the reaction to his art has made history. In this way he does indeed propel history forward. He actively invites comment, and his art work is structured to get a reaction. And no matter how much emotion is invested in the cause, there is so much thought committed to his work, that the actual creative process ensures his art is something which goes beyond the moment of protest to the essential truth within.

# evolution,

His website is a tightly assembled tool to get over his thoughts, and show his work to good effect. It's clear what he wants to achieve, and spending time on it is a worthwhile activity. Nothing wasted. All well worth the effort. And the TED talk is concise, human, and one of the best I've ever watched. Dread Scott continues to make the art of protest relevant to today's America. Irony can only get you so far in dealing with clear injustice. And although he admits that Art too has its limits in bringing about societal change, I feel that without the art of protest and the commitment it brings with it, then Art in America runs the danger of becoming simply decoration and no longer capable of disruption.

# resolution...

Opposite: Dread Scott, What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?, 1988.

Installation for audience participation: Silver gelatin print, books, pens, shelf, active audience, US flag, 80" x 28" x 12".

Courtesy the artist and NOME.

Nick Byrne: Do you have hope for America?

Dread Scott: I have hope for the future. I don't have hope for America. I don't like America. In fact, I kind of hate America. I think it's caused tremendous harm. Since its inception. It was a country founded on slavery and genocide. I mean, they wiped out whole peoples and then brought a labour force to work on the land that they colonized and stole, and it's a country that's based on exploitation and oppression. And to this day is holding the world hostage through various wars and occupations, threat of nuclear war, and, you know, the despoiling of the climate to the point where there are wild-fires burning and killing people in Maui, Greece and Italy. And whole sections of Africa are increasingly unlivable, and it's only getting worse, and the US response overall is "we're going to lease more places to drill in the Arctic and pump more oil and build bigger cars". And even if we go to more electric vehicles, these are going to be bigger and more require more energy to move people, so even if it's clean energy, it's going to require more energy. America has this terrible, monstrous parasite that is causing tremendous harm and it always has, and although I don't have hope for America, I do have hope for people radically changing the world, both people in this country, but also around the world. I mean, I'm sort of saying that today's Empire is tomorrow's ashes, and this has held true for millennia, and particularly in this era. I think it is possible for humanity to - I mean, there actually is enough common abundance - to feed, clothe and shelter people of the world, for humanity to actually be caretakers of the planet and all the species on it. The impediment to that is capitalism in America is one of the main bastions of that. So I do have hope that people can confront this and change it at the same time. Things are not looking very good right now. I mean, it would take revolutions in key parts of the world for that to be real, for that ideal to be realised. And I think the more rising trend is fascism, and deeply rooted in religious fundamentalism. You look in the United States, it's Christian fundamentalism that's on the rise, if you look at Iran, there are the mullahs that are desperately trying to cling to power with a particular brand of Islamic fundamentalism. But that's also rending tremendous horror on much of Africa right now. And you have various forms of fascists that are rising in Italy, in the Netherlands, and in Sweden, and Austria and Hungary. Also in parts of South and Central America and some of Indonesia, it is not very good right now, and that is posing tremendous challenges to people. I mean, how are we going to wrench a better future out of this, right at the very time when the old norms are not capable of holding the center in a certain sense. And yet, forces that could actually wrench a bright future out of that are not really

capable of a coherent programme that's gaining the following of hundreds of thousands or millions of people. I sort of have hope, in a sort of strategic sense, but in a very practical sense, I think we're headed for some pretty dark times.

NB: I agree with the extent and consequent dangers of political and social polarisation in countries across the world. I have also think people can be too relaxed with a segmentation of their country, particularly the US. The idea that the liberals can live on the East and West coasts, and key places in between, and the bigots can stay in the vast central lands, and each to their own!

DS: Well, I think first off, that's a dangerous illusion if you think that New York is some sort of bastion of liberalism. You know, all you have to do is look at the fact that a homeless street performer got choked to death in front of a crowd of subway riders, and nobody came to his defence. And the mayor's first response was "Well yes, but, I mean, everybody is afraid on the subways". And for those that don't know about this incident, the victim was a homeless man, a Michael Jackson impersonator, a street performer who was choked to death by a white vigilante ex-marine on a subway car in the middle of the day, about three months ago. There was a bunch of other riders on the car, and the homeless guy might have been a little annoying, he was upset, but then to be choked to death in front of a crowd of onlookers, and that that action is defended by the mayor, all this is indicative of the times. So even if you think, oh, I live in this real bastion of liberalism, it's just not true. Ask all the women who suddenly don't have access to abortion - yes, it's an issue most concentrated in the south - but that there are lots of people in lots of states, and there's lots of big cities in parts of America that just cannot get reproductive care. And this is a cancer that is spreading, and it will come to you. So in a narrow sense, it's an illusion, but more than that, it is a parasitic illusion that results in an attitude of, who cares what happens to everybody else is fine? I mean, me and my little clan might be okay in New York City in Manhattan, but who cares? What happens to millions and millions of people? And that's a shameful bargain if that's what people are trying to make with themselves to say that it'll be okay. And more than that, so much more is possible. I mean there was a time when people thought, well, okay, this system is really fundamentally unjust, and we need to change it. And so you look at the 1960s, which is a global movement, but looking particularly at the United States in the late 50s and 1960s, people said, we're going to end legalized systemic discrimination against Black people that has been the bedrock of American society. And many people thought, well, you radical activist, you're not, you can't do that. And while racism wasn't, and white supremacy hasn't been end



Dread Scott, Slave Rebellion Reenactment, Performance Still 5,2,1, 2020, Archival Inkjet Print, 51 X 76cm. Courtesy the artist and NOME, Berlin.

ed, largely legalized discrimination against Black people was outlawed in 1968, and being able to vote happened by 1964. But by 1970, it was over, and lots of people, including a lot of good white people, you know, went against norms and traditions to actually change that. And it wasn't just everybody looking out for themselves or trying to find an enclave where they would be okay. But people were saying, no, we need a radically different world. And that's possible, this is unjust, and we're going to defy the law, we're going to break the law, we're going to risk our lives, we're going to harbour other people, we're going to do what it takes to get to a just world. And they largely accomplished that goal. It's in the context of still living in a society that is a capitalist, imperialist society that is parasitic, and which at that time was waging war on the people of Vietnam. And to this day, the system is saying—All those victories you won in the 60s, we hate that, and we're going to drag you back to where people are legally being disenfranchised in large parts of the country, because of their race, so that a small group of Republicans that are aligned with overall fascists can keep in power, and this is very explicit. I mean, even I forget what the place was - I think it's a county in Alabama - that was found to be so discriminatory in their electoral maps that they were ordered by the US Supreme Court to change, and they basically said, no, we're not going to. You know, these are people that are trying to undo any gains that happened in the 60s and any transformation that happened to the basic way America works. Since its inception, these people are very serious, they prefer the 1850s or 1820s, or even 1950s to now. And that has particular implications for the LGBT community, has particular implications for women and has particular implications for Black people and other people of colour. And so, if progressive white people actually want to be progressive, they need not to side with a tiny handful of rich white people that are trying to sort of reestablish the American ideal that was based on slavery and genocide, and the white supremacy that underlay that.

NB: Do you think it's harder now to protest, to change things and inspire people because so many are simply tired, frustrated and disillusioned? They feel totally powerless and feel nothing will really change?

DS: Well, I think some of the most powerful protests and rebellions of my lifetime, and I'm 58, happened in response to the lynching of George Floyd. And all across the country, in the midst of a pandemic, millions of people said, they don't want to live in a society where the police wantonly and brutally and murder Black people and endure forced white supremacy. And they had discovered for those that didn't already know, that that's what the norm is. A lot of Black folk already knew that, a lot more Latinos knew

that, a lot of indigenous people knew that, a lot of good white people knew that, but sometimes forgot. And people all over the country, in big cities and small towns, in places where they didn't even have Black people, knew that too. They thought, I don't want to be thought of as this racist jerk, or I don't want to be in a society that has racist jerks that run it. And we're going to protest. And I mean, there were major demonstrations, some coordinated, some spontaneous, there were cop cars that were turned over and set on fire, there were police buildings burned, there were people that wrote articles, there were all sorts of protests, and it was very courageous and really inspiring. And I think the people that have grey hair, like myself, can sometimes romanticise how active we were, and I don't. I don't think we mean, honestly, if we had done a better job, we wouldn't be in the mess that we're in today, then youth wouldn't be having to fight the battles that we fought effectively 30 and 40 years ago. And you know, I think it is possible to protest now, I think, at the same time, as in the 1930s, and in the 1960s, and 1970s, and 1980s, which is when I was sort of growing up. The powers that be, were paying a little bit of attention, and both had some necessity and ability to make some changes. I mean, it's like when, after the Detroit rebellion that happened in 1967, in response to police killing some people, suddenly there were jobs in the auto factories for Black people in Detroit, who'd been locked out of those jobs for a long time. There were government jobs that suddenly opened up to Black people that weren't available before. That sort of brought about a desire to, or capacity for the government to listen to people and back down off of some oppressive relations. That doesn't exist anymore. And the system doesn't care anymore. They're like, we're not changing a damn thing. For anyone, if you want social justice, and you believe in the rights of oppressed people, we're not paying any attention to that. The only solution we have is more brutality, more police, more law. I mean, you know, Biden openly said, oh, you people wanted to Defund the police, we need to fund the police. And that's supposedly the good guy. That's the Democrat. And I think it's very honest, that that this system, our bedrock, is based on brutality and on an overwhelming use of the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence. And that's what this system, that's the foundation of it, it's not democracy, in some abstract sense, it is democracy based on, we have guns to back that up, and hopefully, we'll get what we want at the ballot box. And if we don't, we'll just throw out the ballots. Because I mean, the Republican Party is basically openly saying voting is a problem. We know we are the minority, you know, we have a minority of people that support us, we don't care about that, we are going to rule and so, I think that that you can protest now, but it doesn't matter, you know it's an illusion that it's

really going to lead to much change. Which presents a real problem then, what do you do? And what does an artist like me do? And I think that art by itself doesn't really ever change anything, but it is part of how things change, when people see the see the world differently, it is part of bringing hope to people. I mean, I tell people jokingly that Joe Strummer kept me alive when I was a kid and saved my life, and I never met Joe Strummer. The Clash was playing at the time when Reagan was the President of the United States and contesting and fighting with the Soviet Union in ways that could destroy the world in nuclear war and Thatcher was doing all the monstrous things she was doing in England, and there was this band that was saying, no, you youth can see that this is terrible. You guys are right, the people who are running the countries are insane. And that matters to me. Our art can give hope to people, but it also helps people see the world in different ways. And those people, including the artists change the world. Art doesn't change the world. But people actually can understand the world differently. So when I did a project like Slave Rebellion Reenactment, which reenacted the largest rebellion of enslaved people in the history of the United States. It was 350 Black and indigenous people marching for two days, on the outskirts of New Orleans with muskets and machetes and sickles and sabres and period costume, chanting "On to New Orleans. Freedom or death. We're going to end slavery. Join us!". It changed how people saw the question of slavery and slave rebellion and the agency of the enslaved. And so people suddenly saw themselves not as victims or broken wretches, or "why did our ancestors allow this terrible thing to happen to us?", but more, "wait, we were the freedom fighters that had the most radical vision of freedom!" in the United States, at that time, we were the descendants of those people, those people had a vision for getting free, and we can apply that in the present. And so I think that this change, of recognising that slavery is foundational to the United States, but also recognising that the enslaved actually have some agency and capacity to radically transform things, now that's the important thing. Like when I do a piece such as "A man was lynched by police yesterday", which sort of updates a flag used by the NAACP, a civil rights organisation that was founded by WEB DuBois in the 1920s. They used to fly a flag as part of an anti-lynching campaign that said, "A man was lynched yesterday" trying to eliminate the scourge of lynching. Lynching mostly doesn't happen anymore in the United States the way it did. Lynching was foundational, there were over 4400 incidents of racial violence terror that happened from 1865 to 1965. That was a common thing which sort of terrorized the entire Black community in the north and the south, but it was largely eliminated by the 1960s. But the police have inherited this terrorizing role

that the lynch mobs used to carry out. Police kill people at five times the rate people were killed during the height of lynching. And so this positing that there is this continuation of this white supremacist legacy in that they've taken off the hoods, and they put on blue uniforms and badges, that is actually something which both people, viscerally kind of felt and kind of knew. But synthesizing that the way that artwork did actually enabled people to say, yes, that's the problem that we're facing. And so I think art can help people, you know, understand and see the world in new ways. And on that basis, people can, change things, even though I think it's increasingly difficult to change things in a radical way, even while there are real openings because the old society is being torn up. And the question is, what's going to replace it? Will it be a really further reactionary order? Or will it be a revolutionary change that's fundamentally in the interests of people.

NB: Looking at ways of getting your message across effectively, do you feel that you've got more of a chance through multimedia of new ways of communicating than you had before? As an artist and educator, do you manage to get your message out to schools to colleges? Do you feel that although the world is a disaster, at least I can get my message out? I can reach more people. Is that the case?

DS: Well, I think there's a sort of a funny situation. The work that I make is really loved by all sorts of people, especially just ordinary people on the streets, my work shows in major museums, and on street corners. Sometimes I have permission to do it, sometimes I don't. But all sorts of people, including those that don't consider themselves art lovers, or patrons, or fans of the art, they really like my work. And this applies to the ordinary high school kids in Florida, college kids in Idaho, you know, people in housing projects in Chicago. And some people in the arts like it too, but my work is not as celebrated in the arts, in the way that some, some art or artists are. I'm not Kara Walker, or Kerry, James Marshall, artists whose works, I really, really appreciate. But those artists, I mean, they're in major collections, they sell for tremendous money, they have monographs that are written about them. And so it's easy for that kind of work to disseminate. They don't so much need websites, because they have the whole machinery of the art world that promotes their work. My website, my Instagram account, actually, is how a lot of students find my work. You know, and that's really good. It's not that that my work is unknown, far from it. I mean, I know that if you're a student on a basic law course, you're going to study my work if you're doing a question about freedom of speech, there's constitutional scholarship around that. Then, if you're an activist who's fighting against police brutality, you may have a child who's now graduated from college, but when they were in college, in high school,

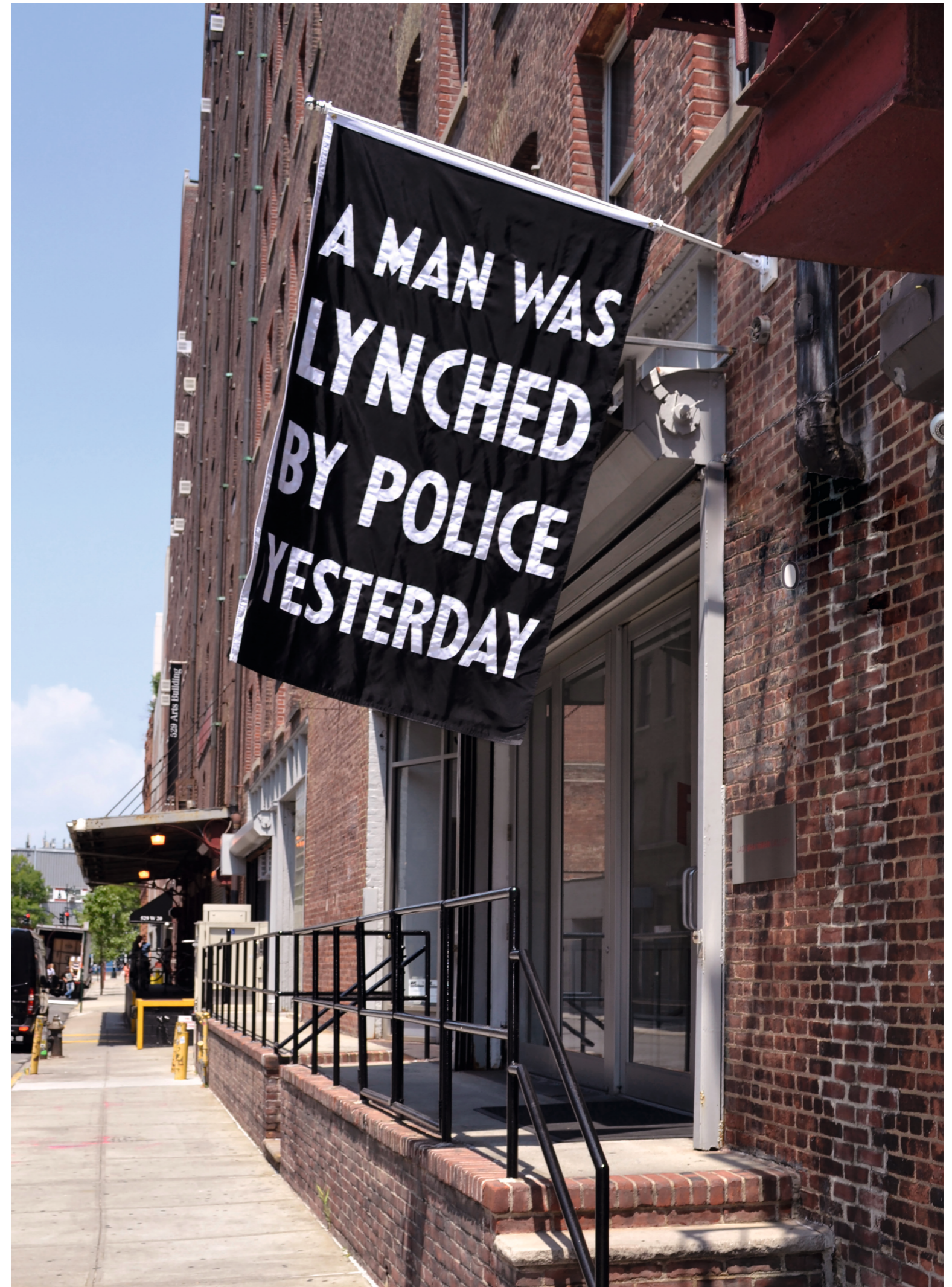
but particularly in college, there were a lot of his activist friends, their activist friends, who were also really interested in what I was doing. And so there's a way in which the work does reach people, precisely because of the internet. And it gets around some of the art world relations that are tied to commodities, which treat everything as "what sold for how much at the latest art fair". You know, I've been at art fairs there that are important and are great, but they're, in many ways, largely just giant shopping malls. And it's not the best way to see art and you can end up judging art by what sold for the greatest amount. That's what I mean, when a movie comes out, we are now told, what was the opening Box Office Weekend? Who cares? I want to know, was the movie any good? I mean, it's like saying that the latest Transformers movie is better than a small art film that actually talks about something, simply because Transformers has sold more tickets. I think that's the wrong criterion for looking at culture. Likewise, it's the same thing with visual art. I think that a lot of the art world is dominated by who sold for what, and then that's what gets shown in whatever museum, and whichever Biennial and then it all becomes a complicated dance. I don't have anything against the commercial art world, I sell work too. That's what I do, I'm an artist, but we often conflate economic value with value. And so in that context, the ability to have sort of an online presence is sometimes helpful, including to reach people in different countries where my work doesn't travel as much.

NB: I know there is so much you could say about the commodification of art, particularly American Modern Art. I have mixed feelings about collaborations between fine artists and fashion designers, that sort of bypass and cold-shoulder actual textile designers. In the end it can boil down to an overpriced T-shirt!

DS: But the thing is I like T-shirts! And I mean, I think there is a culture that's beyond visual art. And I think artists are part of that, and we always have been...but the thing is, I think there is now a conflation. I mean, if visual artists are into doing something with Armani, or BMW, great for them, the car will probably be interesting, the clothing might be interesting. But a show of clothing or a show of design on a car is not the same as what people are doing in a performance on the streets or an artwork in a museum or gallery. And, you know, it's like there's a relationship, but I think we shouldn't confuse that. The idea that something that gets made because some corporation wishes to sell some widgets is not the same as something that is made because of the intrinsic aesthetic and ideas behind it.



Dread Scott, *White Male for Sale*, 2021, NFT:  
Single Channel Video and Live Auction.  
Courtesy the artist and NOME, Berlin.



Dread Scott, *A Man Was Lynched By Police Yesterday*, 2015,  
Nylon, 84" x 52-1/2".  
Courtesy the artist and NOME, Berlin.