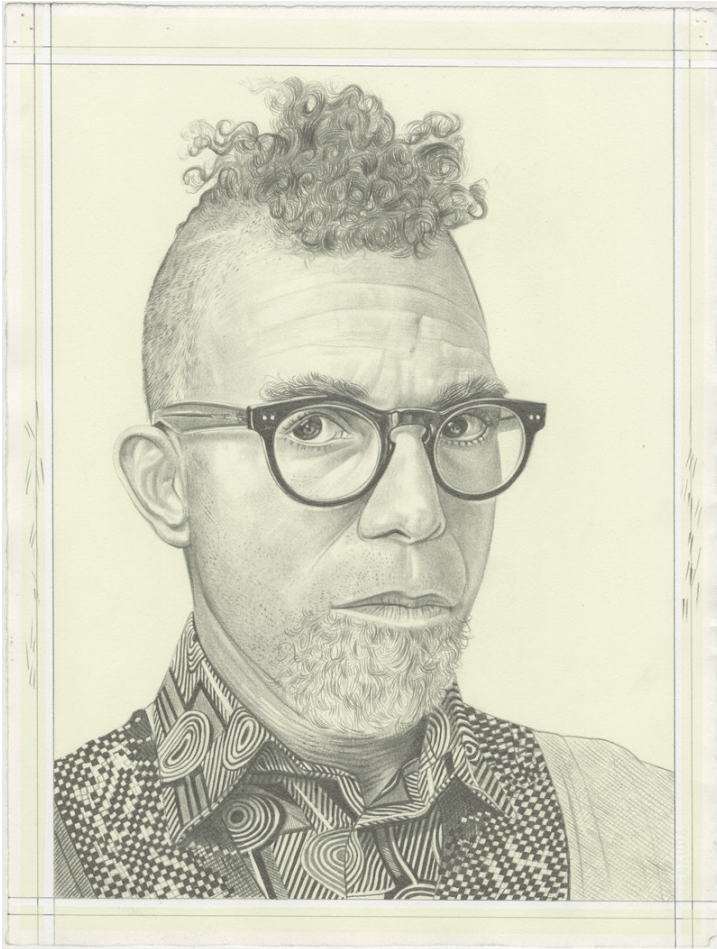


CRISTIN TIERNEY

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

## Dread Scott with Charles M. Schultz

“As an artist, I have the freedom to imagine and that imagining can actually help historians focus on questions that they might not have been looking at.”



Portrait of Dread Scott, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

# CRISTIN TIERNEY

NEW YORK CITY

## **Cristin Tierney**

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There are those who believe a work of art doesn't exist until it is discussed. As a young artist in Chicago, one of Dread Scott's first audiences was the Supreme Court of the United States from whom a discussion on the merits of a work of art can stimulate a populace. The particular aspect of Scott's work that disturbed them: standing on the American flag. The sitting President made a statement; the conversations led to change. Dread Scott (b.1965) was just getting started. Since then his performance work has inspired and provoked a generation of artists for whom political and historical reckoning are central to their practice. On its most fundamental level much of Scott's work comes down to how a person engages an environment: What they do, or don't do. At his current show at Cristin Tierney gallery two major works are on view and the discussion that follows focuses closely on them. One work is a set of six large performance stills that capture Scott's army of the enslaved—hundreds strong—as they marched through the river parishes of Louisiana to a celebratory gathering in New Orleans's Congo Square. This project was years in the making and involved hundreds of volunteers who collectively imagined a different outcome to a historic rebellion of enslaved people. The second artwork in the show is a video titled *White Male for Sale*, in which a middle aged white male stands on a plinth at an active intersection in Brooklyn.

There was much to discuss and Scott was just returning from Maine, where he was invited to be a Senior Fellow at the Lunder institute. We connected on a Sunday afternoon and spoke for longer than either of us anticipated. I was curious to learn why Scott decided to make *White Male for Sale* a non-fungible token and what compelled him to sell it in an auction as opposed to releasing it online the way nearly every other artist has done. Our discussion begins here and moves to a consideration of his 26 mile journey leading an army through plantations, past petrochemical operations, and into the heart of New Orleans. On the way we consider the relationship between history, memory, and imagination.

**Charles M. Schultz (Rail):** What inspired you to make a non-fungible token?

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Dread Scott, *White Male for Sale*, 2021. Courtesy Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York

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**Dread Scott:** I was relatively ignorant of the whole NFT world. I mean I know the work of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy but when Beeple sold that NFT for millions of dollars, that's when I really wondered, what is this? I thought about the term "fungible," the "F" in NFT. There are a lot of scholars on slavery, particularly starting in the '90s, talking about both how central slavery was in turning people into commodities, and making them "fungible" and exchangeable. They described how enslavers and people traders thought about this: "how does one person you haven't seen relate to another person you haven't seen?" The Portuguese and Spanish came up with this concept of a "piece of India," which basically is this notion of an idealized slave. For taxation and for sales, you bought pieces of India. Looking at more recent history, in the 18th and 19th century in the United States, you have slave traders' documents where they are trying to buy or sell number one slaves, number two slaves, number three slaves, which is just ranking people who are unique, discrete individuals against this concept of an idealized slave. The history of capitalism is completely bound up with fungibility.

And so I hear this word and this concept tied to art, and think this would be an interesting way to talk about the history of capitalism, the history of slavery, the history of white supremacy, but also how capitalism turns everything—including art—into commodities. Very quickly, I mean literally within a week, I thought, oh, "white male for sale," that's a way to engage this question.

**Rail:** The piece was auctioned at Christie's. Can you tell me more about that decision?

**Scott:** The auction at Christie's is actually part of the concept of the art work. The video is the hook in a sense, but the auction was foundational to the work. Just the idea of an auctioneer saying, "We've got a white male for sale, what's the next bid?" that was really important. That was how the piece raised a social question that wouldn't have been possible if it had been sold on Nifty Gateway or OpenSea, or any of the digital platforms where NFT transactions typically take place.

**Rail:** So then, do you consider the auction house, or the auctioneer, collaborators?

**Scott:** They were a collaborator, yes, the auctioneer perhaps more reluctantly than the auction house. I never talked with the auctioneer. Christie's made a video with their education department to support the sale. So they were a willing participant, which, you know, artists and auction houses always have an awkward relationship, and to sharpen the point a bit, I don't think I've ever had any work that's come up for auction. So why would Christie's do it? Well, one reason they would be interested, or one of the reasons, is because they engaged and liked the conceptual nature of the artwork. Surely there were other motivating factors, but I'm less interested in those.

**Rail:** Were you in the room when the auction happened?

**Scott:** They have these things called "skyboxes." I guess mostly they're for collectors or bidders to hang out in, I was there with Cristin Tierney. There was one auctioneer who was coming in and out and making sure we were happy and had tea and coffee and stuff like that. It was weird. It was like looking down on the set of a show. There were people filming everything, because the auction couldn't be in person and had to be live-streamed thanks to COVID.

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**Rail:** I have always thought of auctioneers as performers, obviously with different intentions than a performance artist like you, but still, did you find any connections there?

**Scott:** Not as much as I might have liked, but I mean, as soon as the work came up for auction, and the auctioneer said, “white male for sale, can I accept bids?” That was enough.

**Rail:** Let’s talk about the work itself, the composition of it. I’d like to focus on two details: the location you chose for the performance and what looks like a wedding band on the man’s hand.

**Scott:** The key thing about the location is that it’s a Black section of Brooklyn. If I happened to live in Chicago, it would have been a Black section of Chicago. What’s important is that it is Black; it is urban; and it is not super specific. It is just Black anywhere USA. Some people said, “Hey, if this was really serious, he would be naked,” or “he’d be beaten up,” but first off, it’s not set in the past, it’s set in the present. And anyway, that’s a misconception. Now the fact that the man is married, well, whatever, you can be married and be enslaved. And just to be really historically specific, when enslaved people were sold in many regions of the country, particularly in a metropolitan city like New Orleans, they would be dressed up largely as house servants, which served a couple purposes, one being to disguise differences—people traders did this to drive up prices.

**Rail:** I couldn’t tell what time of day it was when you shot the piece, but the passers-by don’t seem too interested. It’s a banal scene, and it’s also been slowed down. That decision interested me too. Why was it important to slow down the visual tempo of the piece?

**Scott:** I’ll talk about that. But first, the question of banality. During times of enslavement, selling enslaved people was common. It was not an extraordinary thing. If the foundation of your society or economy is slavery, then you’re going to have everyday things like slave auctions. As for the pacing, the footage was shot at 120 frames per second and played back at 30. So it plays back at quarter speed. That was important because I wanted people to be able to focus on the mundane, banal elements of it. But it was also an aesthetic choice. You know, I come out of visual art and I want something nice to look at, something beautiful addressing something horrible. If it was normal, it wouldn’t force you to question what you’re looking at. Oh, wait, I’m looking at a person potentially being turned into a commodity, and what does that mean? And it’s a white guy being turned into a commodity. There’s a level of dark humor, I think, and having the pace slowed down sort of amplifies that.

**Rail:** Yeah, I agree with that. Or at least that was my experience with the work. Its slowness imbued it with an uncanny quality. I’d like to switch tracks now and talk about the main body of work in your show at Cristin Tierney’s gallery: the flags and the photographs from *Slave Revolt Reenactment*. The performance project was an epic undertaking, and we see a trace of it in the exhibition. It was years in the making; it involved hundreds of people. There is already quite a bit of reporting on the project, so I want to talk about some aspects that haven’t been well covered. To open it up, I have a broad question for you: What surprised you? What did you learn in the process of creating the artwork that you didn’t expect to learn?

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Dread Scott, Slave Rebellion Reenactment Performance Still 4, 2019. Pigment print, 39 3/8 x 59 1/8 inches. Courtesy Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

**Scott:** A main motivating reason for me to do this project was to put the question of Black liberation and Black joy on the map, or put it back on the map. I knew this was a project about freedom and emancipation, but I don't think anybody realized how deeply it would resonate and connect with people, the reenactors in particular.

There was a moment when people, particularly young women, started chanting, "Ashe, Ashe, Liberté, Liberté." It was the end of the second day, people had been together for about 30 hours, or 32 hours at that point. And just for some logistical reasons, we got stuck when we first got to New Orleans. And so these people who've been together just spontaneously broke out into this chanting and cheering. I always knew that the work would be a success when it was not a Dread Scott project, when it was in the hands of the other reenactors, when they had made it their own. And at that point, that idea was better than any idea I had. And it wasn't written in, but it became the best part of the whole two-day thing. It was amazing, it was the most free, beautiful, Black space I've ever been in. And that was something that was created by the collective and communal process, and was not, you know, coming out of my head.

And then there were other things I learned along the way. In developing the project I really learned how a white supremacist understanding of US history has led to internalized trauma for Black people and how much this project could lift free people from that trauma. I learned this in

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the making of the project. This particular slave rebellion started with a man named Charles Deslondes, who was one of the main leaders. He had freedom of movement, perhaps because he was an overseer, so he could go from plantation to plantation, and he used that freedom to basically recruit the people who became his lieutenants. And those people in turn recruited other people on their plantations. Mirroring that structure, I talked with a relative handful of people and they, in turn, spoke with others to bring more people into it. One of the ways that I did that was to speak at colleges and universities, particularly a lot of historically Black colleges. A typical talk might have a historian or two and me, and students would get assigned to come to it. A lot of times they would come up and say, "Look, this was an assignment. We didn't want to come to this. We didn't want to hear another thing about slavery, but when we learned that it was about slave rebellion, we actually really wanted to be there." Part of what they were hesitant about was really a question deep in their hearts: What's wrong with Black people? Why were our ancestors slaves? Not why were they enslaved, but why were they slaves? Why did they allow that to happen? Which when you look at it, you know, gets into the world, why are Black people poor? Why are we in housing projects? Why are we hustlers? Why are we drug dealers? Why are we in prison? Why do we have "broken families?" and all the racist stuff that's put down on people. That gets internalized, and this project sort of lifted that weight.

The point is that all along people who were enslaved were resisting, and that speaks to the present moment. If you know that people resisted in the past, you can conceive of yourself and people like you resisting in the present. And you can also understand that what was done to your ancestors in the past is also what is being done to you now. It's not something that you must willingly tolerate.



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Dread Scott, Slave Rebellion Reenactment Performance Still 1, 2019. Pigment print, 39 3/8 x 59 1/8 inches. Courtesy Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

**Rail:** You're describing a relationship between history, memory, and imagination. How the elevation of one enables the flight of the other.

**Scott:** Yeah, that's true. After the event there was a reenactor who was asked what they thought about it all. And they said, "I think I got a chance to portray somebody that most people don't know exists." This question of understanding the past—knowing that there were freedom fighters in the past and that slave rebellions were common, not exceptional—it definitely affects your imagination. The fact that people may not know a person like Charles Deslondes exists limits their capacity to dream about being that person in the present and changing the future. And that dream is really critical.

The fact that white people did terrible, monstrous things during slavery is not news. What's news is that people fought to get free and had a vision and a plan to do that. And that affects now. The people who were the rebels identified the problem: it's that we're enslaved. The solution is to end slavery, not just make it a little bit less terrible. Now let's go about the heavy, difficult, and complicated work of figuring out how we can successfully do that. And that has implications for people dreaming now. This project was hopefully helping people to ask, "what if?" "What if" for the past, but also "what if" for the future.

**Rail:** What about the costumes? I understand they were made in sewing circles, and that lots of community engagement went into that effort. Can you describe that phase of the project?

**Scott:** The making of the costumes was really important. If you ask what enslaved people wore, a lot of people will answer, "oh, burlap sacks or some cheap clothing." And yes, the clothing was very cheap, but it wasn't burlap sacks. When you're led to believe all slaves wore burlap sacks, or whatever, it takes away their humanity and makes them an undifferentiated mass. It leads back to the falsehood of human fungibility. We wanted to challenge that and give enslaved people back their humanity, and we also wanted to be historically accurate. We had a costume department that was led by the brilliant Alison Parker. We did a lot of research together. We looked at historic paintings and prints, but one source that turned out to be very specific were runaway slave advertisements. If you believed you owned a human being and they left, you would describe very accurately what they were wearing, if you wanted to get them back. So we had professionals interested in design, but we also used every layer of the project—including the costume—as a way to go meet people and talk about this history.

**Rail:** Is there a particular story that sticks out to you?

**Scott:** One of my favorite stories is of a guy, Ron Bechet, who is an artist and who was the chair of Xavier University's art department at the time. He invited me to speak with some of his classes and he wanted to participate. And he wanted to involve his mother, but she's probably in



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her 80s. She was not going to be able to walk 26 miles. So they made a costume together. That was something a mother and son could actually do, and that's a very touching story to me.

There was also a crew of people who started a sewing circle in Chicago. They got in touch with us, and said, "We heard about this project, we want to participate, we'd love to make costumes." I think they made about 10 costumes and sent them down. And so, you know, the project enabled the kind of situation where people could just find a way to connect that they otherwise might not have if we had just hired costume designers and said, "Okay, go make 350 costumes."



Dread Scott, *Army of the Enslaved Flag (Ogun)*, 2019. Hand-sewn cotton appliqué, 36 x 54 inches. Courtesy Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

**Rail:** You said earlier that achieving historical accuracy with the costumes was important. One of the flags, the one with Ogun's sword, is notably out of sync with the historical timeline. So how did you decide where to be accurate and where to be inventive?

**Scott:** Well, the thing is, I approach this as a visual artist doing an art project unlike, say, Civil War reenactors who want to get all the surface details exactly right. Those are people who really love history, or at least a certain aspect of history, and they're very serious about it. The costumes are accurate, the spectacles are accurate, the shoes are accurate, the troop movements, right? That's what they're focused on, transporting an audience from our present into the past—but they

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get the key question of the Civil War wrong. For me, I was much more concerned with the social question. That's what motivated us to get costumes right, so we could get to the social question, so people can think and rethink questions of slavery, but also, more importantly, about freedom and emancipation. This gets back to giving enslaved people their humanity back. If you saw a bunch of people with, you know, inaccurate, but very well looking burlap sacks, you would have one vision versus if you saw people with all this diversity of costume, some of which may not be perfect, you get a different vision.

Another thing, Civil War reenactment usually takes place in a field or someplace where participants and the audience don't really see anything contemporary. For me, this clash with the modern was foundational to the work. Five years before the project happened, I knew the image I wanted: This army of the enslaved marching past oil refineries. The project is transporting this army of the enslaved from the past into our present; bringing the freedom fighters from the past into our present, and specifically into cancer alley, a place that is perpetuating the toxicity and harm towards an African American community.

**Rail:** What about the flags? How did those designs come about?



Dread Scott, *Army of the Enslaved Flag (Adrinkra)*, 2019. Machine-sewn fabric flag, 39 x 51 1/2 inches. Courtesy Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

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**Scott:** We know that the enslaved army carried flags because there was a general at the time, General Wade Hampton, who wrote to the governor, Governor Claiborne and said, “they’re 500 brigands in the field, they’re marching information under flags.” And so we knew the size of the rebellion and we knew they were marching in formation. But the General didn’t write down what the flags were, and it would be highly unlikely that they would have been American flags or French flags, which would have been the two colonial powers that people were fighting against. But we don’t know what they were, so I had to imagine what flags people might have carried.

You know, I worked with historians a lot on this project and because they're historians, they have to be accurate with anything they write. But as an artist, I have the freedom to imagine and that imagining can actually help historians focus on questions that they might not have been looking at. And so now a historian might say, “Well, actually, we've never thought about what they flags might have. How would we go about figuring that out?” Of course, some of the history is actually unknowable, but in some instances using artistic license can actually shine a light on history, or into its gaps.



Dread Scott, Slave Rebellion Reenactment Performance Still 6, 2019. Pigment print, 39 3/8 x 59 1/8 inches. Courtesy Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

**Rail:** I imagine you had many images of the performance. What guided your selection of the six photos on view?

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**Scott:** I mean, it's basically a question of, how do you present performance? How are you going to tell the story? How do you bring your work into a broader conversation? With a lot of my performance work I choose to use still images as opposed to video, but then the question changes: Do you use one image or thirty? Part of why I use still images a lot instead of video is because still images allow an audience to bring more of themselves into the work.

And so with six images, for example, there's one that is a scene of the army of the enslaved marching past an oil refinery. What happened before? What happens later? Where are they? There are all these questions the audience can think about. There's another one where a person who could be an enslaver is being attacked on a porch. It's a moment that leads to speculation. Well, okay, what happens to this person? How did it get this far? Then there's the photo where there's an enslaver-looking person, a dead white guy in a field, and his body is flanked by shouting Black and Indigenous people. And so the question is, you know, whether killing the white person is transgressive or celebratory, and it can be both.

**Rail:** I liked that your selection varied between images that kept the focus tight on the action, and others that pulled back and included the media and the audience. It enabled me to move into the imaginary territory of your performance, to think about and ask some of those questions you brought up, but also to see the structure of the event. To recognize it as a performance, like you said, using the language of reenactment.

Earlier we spoke about history informing imagination, and before we wrap up our conversation, I want to learn a bit about your personal history. I'm curious to hear you describe what life was like growing up in the late '70s and '80s in Chicago.

**Scott:** Well, I ended up in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago because I am a high school dropout. I grew up in Ronald Reagan's America and I didn't fit into the elite private school I went to. I started in first grade and went up through, well, I was there for 12 years. First grade through 11th grade, twice. It was mostly white, but that wasn't even the main thing, there were huge class differences. I got a good education in terms of being able to read and think critically. But I just didn't fit into Reagan's America, where you were supposed to get into this narrow-minded greed and selfishness. I ended up in the punk music scene, and over time that became my community, my social circle, more than my classmates in high school.

Honestly though, for the last few years of high school I thought I was going to be a scientist, some sort of chemical engineer or computer scientist, but apparently if you fail out of high school, MIT and Caltech don't want you. So I decided I'd be a photographer because I grew up around cameras. Before I was born my dad was a professional photographer, and during my lifetime he was a serious amateur. I had crappy Instamatic cameras as a very young kid, and then when I was 12 they got me an SLR. You know, I just liked photography. And my parents said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "I'll be a photographer." I didn't know what a photographer was. I knew they took pictures, but I didn't know much more. And in what was a very loving move, instead of screaming "We paid all this money for you to be a doctor or lawyer!" my parents asked anybody they knew who knew a photographer to meet with me. I met with friends of theirs and other people my dad knew. I met architectural photographers and fine art photographers, I met fashion photographers, I met journalists. And one of them suggested I take

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classes at the School of the Art Institute. I was like, “Oh, you mean that place I get dragged to once a year that has the lions out front?” And so I went there, and I fell in love with the place.

Now the gap between high school and college is kind of vast, in a good way. It ended up sort of forcing me to be an artist and enabled me to think about what that was. I grew up with art in my life as much as any middle-class person would, but I would not say I wanted to be an artist. It just happened by accident. And it was great. And then the Whitney ISP, it happened a bit by accident too.

**Rail:** How did you learn about the Whitney program?

**Scott:** Okay, so I’m living in this loft that has four or five other people in it in Chicago. And I’d decided I’m going to move to New York. I felt I needed to get out of Chicago, I needed to go where the action was, at least culturally, and it was either New York or LA. I figured beyond the visual arts, there were people in the music scene, people like Chuck D of Public Enemy, who were living in New York, and I’d have a better chance to connect and maybe collaborate with people like that if I was in New York. So I’m talking about going to New York, and one of my roommates in this loft was applying to the Whitney program. I didn’t know anything about it. And I’m like, “Oh, they have cheap studios. Yeah, let me apply.” It was as simple as a cheap studio. I didn’t know what the Whitney program was until I got out here, I got interviewed, and then I realize, “Oh, wait, this is different than I might have known.”

There were aspects of it I liked; the fact that they were trying to ground concepts in sort of a radical theoretical framework was appealing to me. I read a lot of the things that are read there, but a lot of art and political theory is written by people who aren’t really trying to connect with a movement for revolution. Those authors weren’t thinking about poor Black people living in Compton, they weren’t thinking about actual contemporary white working-class people, you know, in the rust belt of Gary, Indiana or something like that. There was a big disconnect from the people who I was connecting with in the housing projects in Chicago. But I very much like that I did the program because I became friends with a lot of the people who were really interesting artists. My year had people like Michael Richards who died in the World Trade Center, Lyle Ashton Harris, Renee Cox, Mariko Mori, Dave Thorne, Jenny Polak, who is my wife now—the best thing to come out of the program.

I really am glad I met those people who became my friends. But the theory driving the program was not something that became central to my art making practice. I’m glad I learned about how that sort of material applies for some people, but a lot of the artists of color and also the queer artists, we bristled at some of what the Whitney was teaching us. If I had the Whitney program to do over as the gray-haired person I am now, I might have more ease of mind and a less combative approach than I did then. But it was a very combustible situation, which for some of us meant forming a community, and that drove a lot of our thinking about art.

## Contributor

[Charles Schultz](#)

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**Charles M. Schultz** is Managing Editor of the *Brooklyn Rail*.