

Auctions

Artist Dread Scott's First NFT Is a Video of a White Man Atop an Auction Block. He's Taking It Straight to Christie's

"This is a really rare opportunity to buy a white male for sale," said the artist. "They don't come up very often."

Taylor Dafoe, September 14, 2021



Dread Scott. Courtesy of the artist.

This spring, the phrase “non-fungible token” (NFT) exploded into the popular lexicon seemingly overnight, leaving many of us scrambling to wrap our heads around the concept. But artist Dread Scott was thinking about something else. To him, the word “fungible” had an eerie ring to it.

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The term, he recalled, was used in 1980s-era scholarship about the slave trade in Portugal and Spain. Between the 16th and 18th centuries, those countries employed a system whereby slaves—called “pieces of India”—were measured in relation to an ideal slave. If a 25-year-old male was a top-tier piece, a 40-year-old woman was a third-tier, perhaps.

In other words, slavers attempted to make people fungible.

Now Scott is attempting to do something parallel with his first NFT: a looping video of a generic white man atop an auction block in modern-day Brooklyn. In the 70-second-long work, several Black people pass the man—who, not for nothing, looks a lot like Jim from *The Office*—but no one acknowledges his existence.

Titled *White Male for Sale*, the artwork is technically a standard NFT, but also something more—a discomfiting performance piece that implicates the very platform hosting the work. That would be Christie’s, where Scott’s work will be auctioned off in a special sale on October 1.

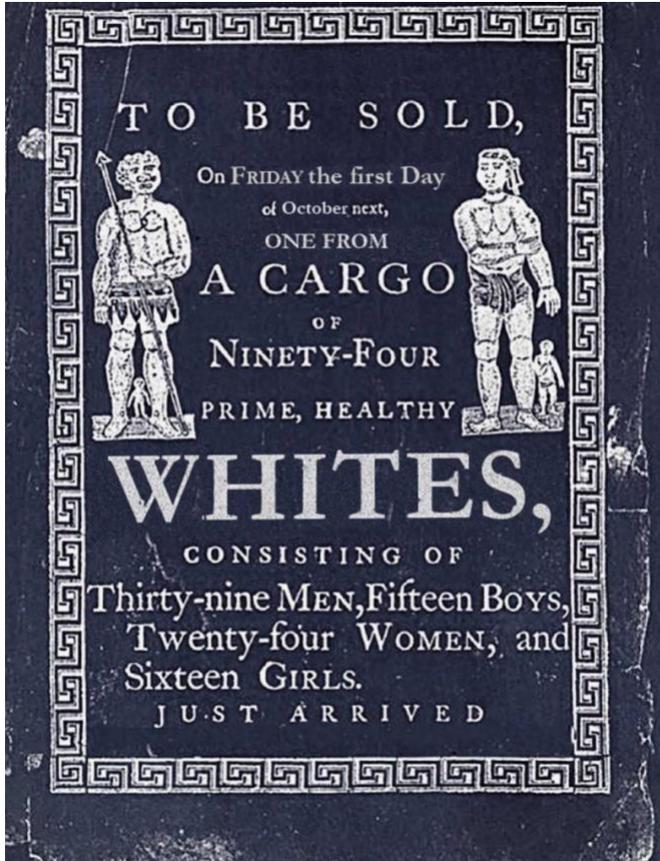
“This is a really rare opportunity to buy a white male for sale,” Scott said, matter-of-factly, to Artnet News. “If you have money to buy one, you should do it—they don’t come up very often.”

The artist’s gallerist, Cristin Tierney, approached the auctioneer with the idea of Scott’s piece earlier this year, explained Barrett White, Christie’s executive deputy chairman of postwar and contemporary art.

“It was immediately clear it would be a major artwork, both for its contemporary and historical commentary as well as for the fascinating combination of disciplines and materials—video, performance, an NFT, and the act of incorporating the auction itself as part of the work’s larger medium,” said White. “Christie’s is the platform for Dread’s vision to be completed, and we are honored to host this extraordinary artwork and the dialogue it will generate.”

By pointedly involving Christie’s, the artwork seems to establish a direct line from the slave trade to today’s auction houses or to the NFT market. But that’s not the artist’s sole intention; neither Christie’s nor NFT impresarios like Beeple are the primary target here. Instead, what’s on trial is something larger.

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Dread Scott's poster *White Male for Sale* based on a found advertisement for a slave auction. Courtesy of the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

“Capitalism is the connection,” Scott told Artnet News. “It’s about the thinking behind a system that can lead someone to say, ‘Wow, if we produce more sugar, we could make a lot of money. How do we do that? Well, we’ll occupy an island and then import laborers and sell them as any other commodity.’”

He stated, “The work is talking more about American history and capitalism than a particular view on auction houses or NFTs, per se.”

Scott explained that he has no say in the pricing for the piece (it’s being consigned by Tierney), but offered up a guideline: \$2,064,000, or the average lifetime income of a white male, aged 35, if he worked to retirement age at 68. The sum is therefore roughly equivalent to the maximum labor one could extract from such a person, “if you owned him,” Scott said. (Christie’s has not publicized the estimate, saying only that it is available “on request.”)

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An installation view from Scott's exhibition "We're Going to End Slavery. Join Us!" 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

Prior to its offering at Christie's, *White Male for Sale* will be on view at Cristin Tierney, where Scott is also about to open his first solo exhibition in 20 years. "We're Going to End Slavery. Join Us!", as the show is titled, also features film stills and flags from the artist's ambitious 2019 performance project *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, for which he hired hundreds of Black actors to recreate the German Coast Uprising of 1811. So named for the area of modern-day Louisiana where it occurred, the uprising is today considered to be the largest rebellion of enslaved people in American history.

["We're Going to End Slavery. Join Us!"](#) is on view at New York's Cristin Tierney Gallery, 219 Bowery, 2nd floor, September 17–December 18, 2021.