

Art Forum | December 2020

William Scott | ORTUZAR PROJECTS

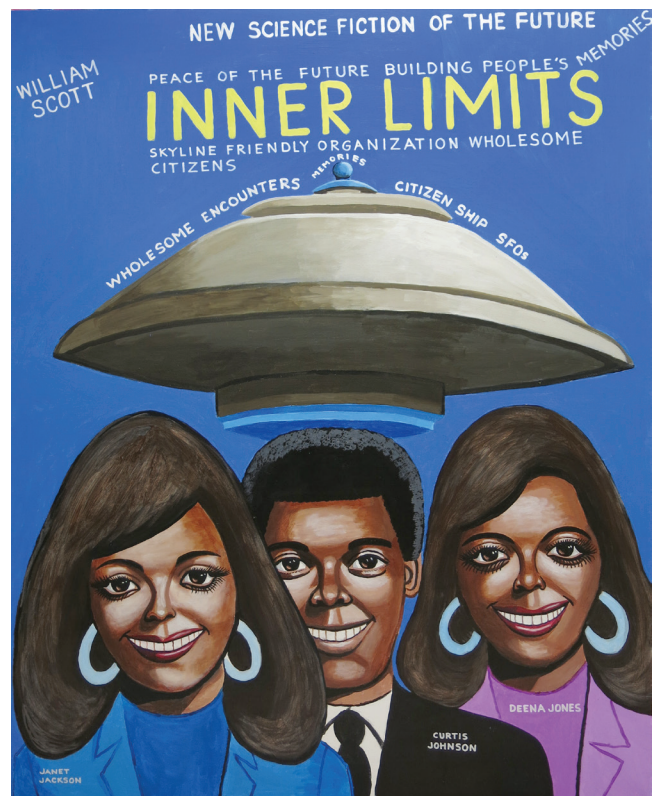
BY ALEX JOVANOVIĆH

A segment from a 1972 episode of *Sesame Street* features a very youthful Jesse Jackson engaging in a call-and-response with a racially diverse group of kids. Jackson recites a piece based on a poem by William Holmes Borders Sr. titled “I Am—Somebody,” a stirring anthem of Black pride that Borders, a civil rights activist and Baptist minister from Georgia, famously read in 1943 for a radio broadcast. Jackson’s choir repeats after him with gusto: “I may be poor, but I am—*somebody*. . . . I may be small, but I am—*somebody*. . . . My clothes are different, my face is different, my hair is different, but I am—*somebody*. . . . I am black, brown, white. . . . I must be respected, protected, never rejected. . . . I am God’s child. I am—*somebody*.” When they finish, Jackson instructs his enthusiastic charges to give themselves a well-deserved round of applause. It is a deeply affecting television moment, especially now, in light of the lethal racism, xenophobia, and Christian bigotry of Donald Trump’s America. This excerpt, almost fifty years old, feels like a transmission from an alternate and much better universe.

William Scott might be a benevolent emissary from this sunnier reality, on par with other bighearted Black visionaries such as extraterrestrial jazz maestro Sun Ra or pop music fabulist Minging Mike, “the soul superstar you’ve never heard of.” The self-taught artist’s exhibition at Ortuzar Projects, “It’s a Beautiful Day Outside,” was a radiant blast of faith, hope, and sci-fi weirdness. Across eighteen acrylic paintings on canvas and paper, a trio of papier-mâché sculptures, and a short video (the only titled work here), Scott marvelously exteriorized his rich interior world.

Among the first pieces one encountered upon entering the main gallery was a 2020 acrylic

portrait of a Brobdingnagian lady—who bears a striking resemblance to disco enchantress Donna Summer—rocking a studded cerulean blazer and matching skirt. This grande dame dwarfs the lit-up sky-scrappers behind her and the silhouetted throng at her feet. She is surrounded by six hovering UFOs, some of which have neatly rendered block-letter messages swirling around them—e.g., WHOLESOME ENCOUNTERS, CITIZENS MEMORIES, HEAVEN AND EARTH OLDIES AND FUTURE—statements, surely, of the unifying powers of pop music and the soothing, palliative effect of nos-talgia. Perched atop her glistening mane of ebony hair like an imperial headdress is a special announcement: GOD WOMAN IS DIVAEMPIRE. *Got it?*



William Scott, *Untitled*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48”

On an adjacent wall was a 2014 canvas: a triple portrait featuring, per Scott, an idealized version of singer Janet Jackson; a mystery man named Curtis Johnson; and one “Deena Jones,” who may or may not be the character based on Diana Ross from the 1981 musical *Dreamgirls*. Above them is an enormous Spielbergian spaceship from the SFO—the Skyline Friendly Organization, an interplanetary goodwill alliance. According to the artist, the three are cosmic ambassadors of a sort, enlightened beings from an advanced civilization consigned to earth in order to make our stupid, circumambulating ball of dung less—*ugh*—dung-like.

Some of the best pieces in this show are self-portraits. In one from 2019, the artist is a peewee basketball player, lookin’ sharp in his purple-

and-gold LA Lakers uniform. To the right of his resplendent Afro is written 1976 REBORN OF BILLY THE KID ANOTHER LIFE. ONE DAY IN THE NEW LIFE . . . LORD OF JESUS CHRIST. Elsewhere is a before-and-after picture from 2012. On one side, a grimacing Scott reveals a large and painful-looking scar on his chest. Opposite this is another version of the artist, but renewed and sans wound—beaming, confident. But perhaps the best self-portrait here is *Beautiful Peace on Earth*, 2013—the exhibition’s lone video—in which the artist walks the streets of Oakland, California, dressed as a happy Darth Vader who communes with birds and cheers up perplexed passersby. Bless you, Mr. Scott, with your humor, generosity, and sweet spirit. Now, please, *beam me up!*