

frieze

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William Scott's Close Encounters of a Human Kind

At Ortuzar Projects, New York, the artist's radiant portraits of travellers on 'citizen ships' maintain 'an abiding faith in the power of the human spirit'

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BY SAIM DEMIRCAN IN REVIEWS | 23 SEP 20



Self-taught artist William Scott's paintings – a selection of which are gathered at Ortuzar Projects in his first New York exhibition since 2009 – have an immediate, eye-catching appeal that is currently reinforced by the brutal realities of the outside world. Fanciful, vibrant portraits in bright acrylics depict a wide range of subjects, including Scott himself in a variety of imagined parallel lives. In several paintings (from the undated and ongoing series 'Another Life'), he appears as a choir boy, a Lakers basketball player named Billy (with Magic Johnson's number 32 on his jersey) and a high-school date. He sports a large Afro in many of these – a hairdo he apparently has never had in real life. The imagery and style of the 1960s and '70s seem to be a cultural touchstone. The design of African American women's lifestyle magazine *Essence* might account for Scott's arrangement of text and image, which is not altogether dissimilar to the layouts of front covers. In the painting *Untitled* (2020), hung beside a trio of papier-mâché masks of Spiderman, Herman Munster and Darth Vader (*Untitled*, 2019, *Untitled*, 2018 and *Untitled*, 2019) – the last of which Scott dons in the 2013 video, *Beautiful Peace on Earth* – he appears again, underneath the words 'The Stone', which might be the name of a church (Scott is an observant Baptist). Like the fictional personas nearby, he is larger-than-life here, dressed in a top hat and surrounded by crosses – somewhere between superfly and a religious leader.



William Scott, *Untitled*, 2020, exhibition view, Ortuzar Projects, New York. Courtesy: the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York

All of the figures in Scott's paintings are clearly identified by name, further contributing to a general sense of community in his work. This is true of a number of works featuring the 'Skyline Friendly Organization', a mode of transportation that posits the Unidentified Flying Object as something more genial – S.F.O. as opposed to U.F.O. (The acronym refers, in part, to the artist's Bay Area upbringing – San Francisco International Airport is abbreviated to SFO.) Scott lives in San Leandro and has worked with Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, a celebrated non-profit organization that provides professional support for artists with developmental disabilities. While some of these 'citizen ships', as the artist calls them, retain the familiar shape of a flying saucer, they have come to earth offering 'wholesome encounters' rather than close ones of a third kind. Scott's visitors aren't extra-terrestrials but Black people, smiling and radiating a fluorescent glow. For instance, in *Untitled* (2014), two figures named James Curtis and Angela Linda are positively beaming.



William Scott, *Untitled*, 2014, installation view, Ortuzar Projects, New York. Courtesy: the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York

The persons in these paintings are not necessarily real – or, at least, not yet. They are a people yet to come, who are, significantly, human, representing a super-community that has crossed the space-time continuum to bring us peace. The artist's intergalactic travellers aren't alien or threatening misconceptions of ethnicity but friendly and humane earthlings. The towering, benevolent figure of Linda Deena Ross in *Untitled* (2020), standing before a city skyline surrounded by spaceships in front of an audience of silhouetted heads, is held in reverence; the words 'God Woman is Divaempire' arc above her head like a crown.

Many of the paintings' free-floating words and phrases run the outlines of figures or curve to fit around imagery. Scott's repetitive language can sometimes sound like religious proclamations. 'Inner Limits' is one such recurring phrase and, while it reads as an obvious inversion of the science-fiction television series *The Outer Limits* (1963–65), its usage here suggests an act of exploratory self-reflection rather than a fantasy about the universe's fringes. Within its pop-inflected utopianism, Scott's work maintains an abiding faith in the power of the human spirit.

William Scott, ***'It's A Beautiful Day Outside'*** runs at Ortuzar Projects, New York until 26 September 2020.