

HYPERALLERGIC

In His New Works, Sanford Biggers Finds a Future Ethnography

In his new series, the artist has created 60 works created directly on or made from pre-1900 antique quilts.

By Seph Rodney
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Sanford Biggers, "Reconstruction" (2019) antique quilt, birch plywood, gold leaf 38 x 72 x 19 inches, collection of Martin Nesbitt (image courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago; photo: RCH Photography)

One of the things that contemporary artists like to do to burnish their credentials is make a case for how complex they are as thinkers, makers, and interlocutors. Sanford Biggers doesn't explicitly make this claim. He doesn't need to. His work is so magpie, so multivalent in its complexity that in criticism written about his work the complexity is typically taken for granted but rarely explained. He has previously shown work influenced by his interest in the Black experience for people in the United States; the almost ubiquitous violence of this nation; his study of Buddhism (and the mandalas associated with this spiritual practice) and the Pattern and Decoration movement. Biggers also explores experimental music, quilts and textiles, sacred geometry, power objects that obtain their significance from ritual use, and what he terms "future ethnography."

All of these subjects might be doctoral dissertation topics, yet he flits from each to each paradoxically relying on intuition *and* conviction. He started out as a painter but he has grown into a syncretic compiler of all these interests and avenues of study. For the upcoming exhibition at the Bronx Museum of Art, *Codeswitch*, he has narrowed the medium bandwidth to focus on quilts. (Well, sort of, the museum indicates that the show consists of about 60 “quilt-based works” which include mixed media paintings and sculptures created directly on or made from pre-1900 antique quilts.) This choice gives me a way in to find out how quilts elucidate how he thinks through the above themes. In March, I spoke to Biggers when the exhibition’s spring opening was looming, before the global pandemic had fully touched down, to get some clarification on what binds together these disparate topics, concerns, and ways of working. What I found was that the quilts give Biggers a way to understand himself within an historical trajectory, a formalist genealogy, and the demands he places on himself.

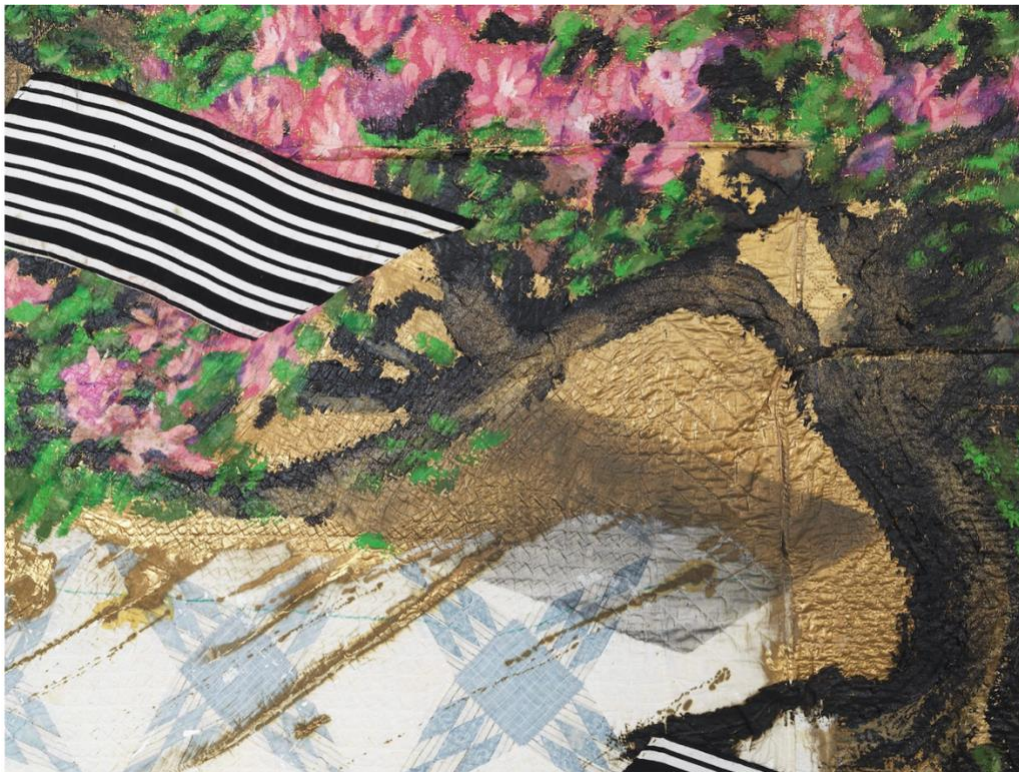


Sanford Biggers, “Harlem Blue” (2013), Antique quilt, additional textile, fabric treated acrylic, spray paint, 88 x 88 inches (image courtesy the artist)

In the process of deciding on the show's title, Biggers told me that he realized:

I asked my work to do a lot. It has to satisfy certain formal criteria, certain art historical criteria, certain social criteria. In that respect I figured that the work itself actually has to code switch to borrow the term that's often used to refer to how people in our society have to switch various [linguistic] codes to handle different environments, work environments, social environments, and so on.

So the artist wants to speak in several tongues, with different interlocutors, simultaneously. The quilts allow him to do just this: discuss apocryphal oral histories of the Underground Railroad that include supposedly coded quilts; model sacred geometry (a practice generated by Islamic scholars that reveres the divine through the creation of very complicated geometric diagrams); allude to the profligate visual extravagance of Pattern and Decoration; and the remixing and sampling of inherited cultural patrimony that is the signature postmodern move. So, the fundamental conceit of the exhibition is that the work speaks in different codes simultaneously, allowing the artist to move among different and distinct discourses without sacrificing relevance to his audiences.



Sanford Biggers, "Bonsai" (2016) antique quilt, textile, paint, tar, 69 x 93 inches (courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen; © Sanford Biggers; photo credit: Object Studies)

I asked Biggers about a specific work, "Reconstruction" (2019) which consists of partitioned quilts which looked to me then and now like it contains bits and pieces of the US American flag, all arranged along an asymmetrical and multi-angular wooden platform. I asked him about the work's ambitions and his answer made me understand that he doesn't choose to remix disparate materials and signs to demonstrate his facility with a prevailing technique of art making. He

doesn't work this way to be in fashion. Rather, with this piece he means to manifest a truth that in this season of heightened political combat is essential to remember:

So that piece actually is a quilt or maybe two quilts. Neither of them were American flags, but they did use the color scheme and certain star and stripe motifs. So, part of it was, honestly, that piece was deeply formal and it was [created by] thinking about the ways in which America can be perceived or experienced. That every "American" has their own story. None of our stories are the same, but all of them equally valid as American stories. And by cutting and mixing those up, it becomes the myriad which is the American tapestry. And by calling it "Reconstruction," obviously it's a very convenient double entendre, but I was thinking of reconstruction because that's literally what it is: a reconstructed quilt with the reconstructed American flag motifs. So, it's a physical reconstruction and obviously references history as well.

I also asked Biggers to explain a particular phrase that showed up in the advance press for the show which reads, "These quilts are an archive of an ongoing material conversation that acquires new meanings over time and trans-generational palimpsest for a future ethnography." Knowing the term "ethnography" from my own experience in graduate school from a fair amount of reading about social science methods, I know what that term means to me (a kind of behavioral map of the people of a particular community, which begins to describe the unspoken rules of belonging to that community), but I wanted to know what Biggers means by the use of the term.



Sanford Biggers, "Moon Over Ninevah Bay" (2019) antique quilt, acrylic, assorted textiles; cleat / dibond, 68 x 6 inches
(photo credit: Serenade, © Sanford Biggers and Marianne Boesky Gallery, photograph by Object Studies)

He replied:

I've always had an interest in how history seems to change over time. Things that I grew up knowing as supposed facts have now been debunked and new evidence has shown that we didn't have the full story. And [this] causes me to give some degree of credence to vernacular histories, the griotic tradition of passing information down verbally. And that can be extended to being passed down through music, through materials, through food. So, as I'm looking at these quilts, the majority of them pre-1900 quilts. So, there's already a history there. There's already a story. There's already lives that have been touched by these. So me bringing them back into the dialogue and in contact with people just expands a tangible experience that people have with those same quilts that may have been forgotten, even thrown away if not for them being re-sampled and re-contextualized through this work. When I say future ethnography, I'm considering that we're somewhere midway in that trajectory. That were not the end point. There is still the future and how people read these [pieces] from the future and hopefully they'll be able to read our moment, but also the moments that preceded us.

This exhibition therefore promises to take us forward and back, to see the future and the past in this moment, in the disparate and sometimes ragged pieces that make up our own stories, that might have been thrown away, if they were not found and lovingly washed and reconfigured into a larger mosaic that is ultimately us.

Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch will open at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (1040 Grand Concourse, in the Bronx) on September 9 and continue through January 24. The exhibition was curated by Sergio Bessa and Andrea Andersson.