The New York Times

Sanford Biggers, in his Harlem studio, works with antique quilts, disrupting them with bold paint strokes, or a grid, or cutting into them. “They’re portals,” the artist said. “I consider them between painting, drawing and sculpture, and a repository of memory. Gioncarlo Valentine for The New York Times

Cracking Codes With Sanford Biggers
By: Siddhartha Mitter
August 14, 2020

“You don’t have to follow the norms,” says this artist who makes wrenching sculptures transformed by gunfire and radically altered heirloom quilts. A studio visit sheds light on his personal journey.

One afternoon in June, the artist Sanford Biggers, having returned to the city after a stretch bunkered out of town with his wife and young daughter to avoid the pandemic, opened up his expansive basement studio in Harlem for a socially-distanced visit.

Mr. Biggers is a specialist in many styles, and several were in evidence. A shimmering silhouette made entirely of black sequins, for instance, towered along one wall; it depicted a Black Power protester drawn from a late-1960s photograph.

There were African statuettes that Mr. Biggers purchases in markets, then dips in wax and modifies at the shooting range — a wrenching sculpture-by-gunfire that he has exhibited as multichannel videos. There were also busts from a series he is making in bronze and another in marble, with artisans in Italy. They merge Masai, Luba, and other African sculptural traits with ones from the Greco-Roman tradition.

Most of all, there were quilts — stretched against the wall, piled onto pallets, in scraps on the cutting table. For over a decade, Mr. Biggers has been working with antique quilts alongside his other media. He disrupts these heirlooms with bold paint strokes, adorns them with imagery, cuts into them to inspect the void. “They’re portals, in a sense,” he said. “I consider them between painting, drawing and sculpture, and a repository of memory — the memory of the body.”

Quilt pieces in progress. “I sit with these quilts for months or years before I can make a single mark. And then it’s led by what the material is going to give back,” he said. Gioncarlo Valentine for The New York Times

The quilt, vernacular object par excellence, proved to be rich terrain for what Mr. Biggers calls “material storytelling.” As the full scope of his quilt work comes into view, it sheds new light on his long-held concerns — with the Black experience, American violence, Buddhism and art history — and reveals interior dimensions of his personal journey.

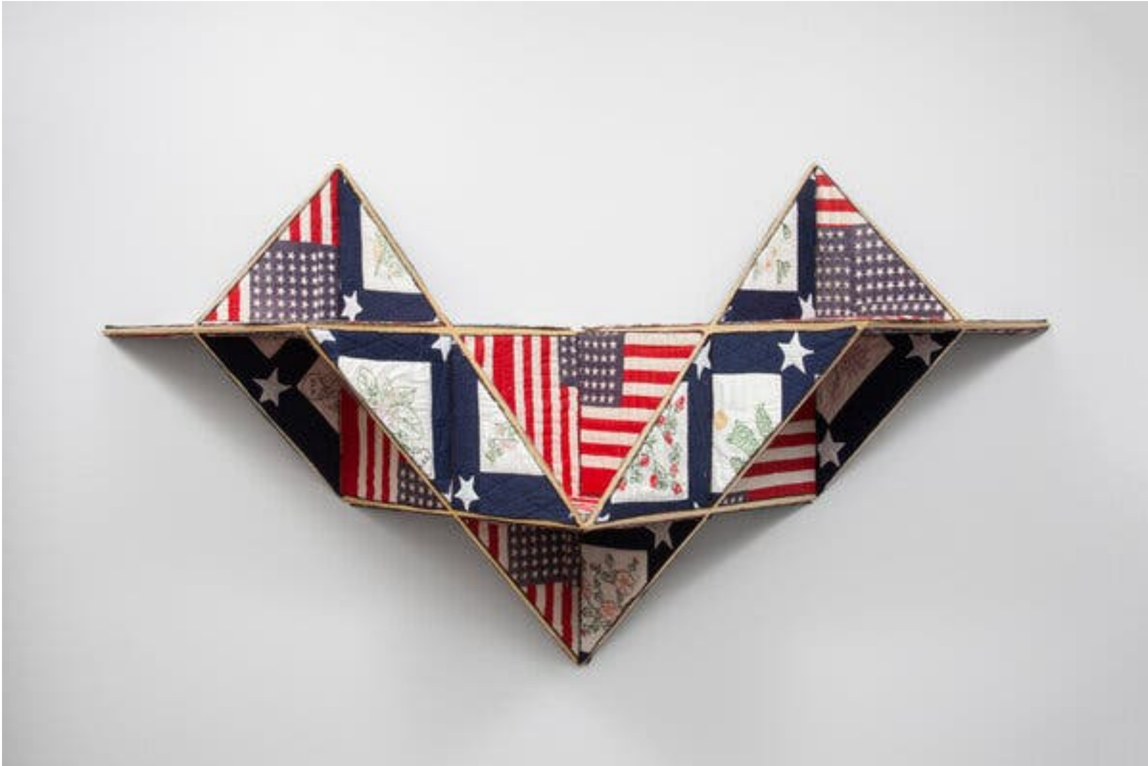
Mr. Biggers made his first two quilt works in 2009, installing them at Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. One of the vintage quilts had a flower pattern; the other was plaid. On each, he transposed from a historical map the locations of the church and safe houses from the Underground Railroad, marked them like stars in a constellation, and connected them with charcoal and oil stick.

The reference was to a theory that holds that people along the Underground Railroad shared crucial information in code through quilts hanging at safe houses and other way points. Scholars have found little validating evidence, but for Mr. Biggers, the fact of folk knowledge, even when it’s apocryphal, has worth in itself. “It’s more important that the story endures,” he said.

This fall, an exhibition of nearly 60 of Mr. Biggers’s quilt-based pieces, titled “Codeswitch,” will open at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, before traveling in 2021 to Los Angeles — where the artist grew up — and New

Orleans. A separate fall show planned at Marianne Boesky Gallery in Manhattan, titled “Soft Truths,” will present new quilt works juxtaposed with his Afro-European marbles.

Sparked by his interest in hidden codes, Mr. Biggers’s quilts in turn reveal hidden connections amid his eclectic oeuvre. “It’s this series of works that has allowed me to read his other work well, and really come to terms with what it might be up to,” said Andrea Andersson, the director of the Rivers Institute in New Orleans, who curated “Codeswitch” with Antonio Sergio Bessa of the Bronx Museum.



From “Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch” at The Bronx Museum of the Arts in September, “Reconstruction,” a 2019 work created from an antique quilt, birch plywood, gold leaf. Sanford Biggers and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago; RCH Photogragraphy

Mr. Biggers, who turns 50 this year, is perhaps best known for his conceptual installations mingling pathos and dark humor. In “Blossom,” first shown in 2007 at Grand Arts in Kansas City, Mo., and later acquired by the Brooklyn Museum, an artificial tree bursts through a baby grand that he has converted to a player piano; it plays his arrangement of “Strange Fruit,” the haunting anti-lynching lament.

“Laocoön,” involving a massive, inflatable vinyl Fat Albert character prone on the floor, seemingly struggling to breathe — based on the Iliad character, depicted in Renaissance sculpture as an icon of suffering — caused some unease when it was shown at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2015 and the next year at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit for its apparent allusions to police killings of Black men and to the cartoon’s originator, Bill Cosby.

These works mobilized popular imagery and challenged viewers. When Mr. Biggers works on quilts, the approach is different: The concept is not in the final shape, but in the process. The work is improvisational, meditative, private.

“I don’t have a vision of what I want to put on the quilt and then hammer it in,” he said. “I sit with these quilts for months or years before I can make a single mark. And then it’s led by what the material is going to give back.” Mr. Biggers has chafed against the art world’s category silos, even while working his way through some of its prestigious precincts. He earned his master’s degree in the late 1990s at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, specializing in painting, but set that practice aside once he arrived in New York in 1999, as an artist in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

In “Freestyle,” the museum’s influential 2001 exhibition of new Black artists, he showed a collaboration with Jennifer Zackin, “A Small World.” A side-by-side montage of home movies from each artist’s childhood, it pointed to uncanny similarities between life in Black middle-class Los Angeles families and New York Jewish families, while underscoring the absurdity of enduring social barriers. The work was reprised in the 2002 Whitney Biennial.

In “Object Blossom,” from 2007, an artificial tree bursts through a baby grand that the artist converted to a player piano. It performs his arrangement of “Strange Fruit,” the anti-lynching lament. Sanford Biggers

“Object Laocoön (Fatal Bert),” 2016, based on the Iliad character, depicted in Renaissance sculpture as an icon of suffering, drew criticism for its allusions to police killings of Black men and to the cartoon’s originator, Bill Cosby. Sanford Biggers

Mr. Biggers was also making music — a talent he continues to cultivate, leading and playing keys in Moon Medicin, his avant-funk ensemble that includes Martin Luther and DJ Jahi Sundance, and is inspired by Sun Ra. “That might be his superpower,” said the poet Saul Williams, a collaborator and friend since their undergraduate days at Morehouse College in Atlanta. “His relationship to music is something that strengthens his work and emboldens his gaze.”

Meanwhile, Mr. Biggers was making work with a ritual charge. Multiple projects invoked mandalas, circles bearing geometries sacred in Eastern religions. Some were joyous and participatory, for instance, the patterned linoleum dance floors that he set up at break-dancing competitions around New York, inviting contestants, welcoming the scuffing.

Their title, “Mandala for the B-Bodhisattva,” marked the B-boy, or break dancer, as a kind of enlightened being. The concept enfolded influences from Mr. Biggers’s youth in the Los Angeles hip-hop scene (he rapped, DJ-ed, danced, and wrote graffiti), and his three years teaching English in Japan, where he got into religion and aesthetics and frequented monasteries.

The mandala turned mournful in “Lotus,” a suspended disc of etched glass with an intricate petal pattern, first shown in 2007. Up close, the petals turned out to repeat an 18th-century diagram of a slave ship hold. The image is one of various symbols — the tree, the piano, the clenched fist, the Cheshire-Cat smile — that he carries across formats, including quilts.

“I’m riffing on them like a jazz musician would riff on a song standard,” he said.

Mr. Biggers’s syncretism is its own method, with its formal fluidity, its propensity toward everyday materials and a certain dance away from fixed meanings. The painter Julie Mehretu, his close friend for over 20 years, described him as both an explorer and an instigator, inviting the viewer’s inquiry while already slipping to the next idea. “There’s always this embedded, implicit sociality in the material he uses, and in what he’s investigating,” Ms. Mehretu said.

In “South of Pico,” a study of Black art in Los Angeles, the scholar Kellie Jones called him an heir to the great multidisciplinary artists David Hammons and Senga Nengudi, their “peripatetic postminimalist aesthetic” and “relentless expression as performance.” She went on: “Biggers deflects. He becomes a facilitator. It is a way of escaping categorization.”

Sanford Biggers, “Object BAM (Seated Warrior),” bronze. He purchases African statuettes in markets, dips them in wax, and then takes them to a shooting range, and makes video pieces documenting the process. Sanford Biggers

Though based in New York, Mr. Biggers still identifies with Los Angeles, where he grew up in Baldwin Hills, a son of a neurosurgeon, in a milieu that mingled with and collected Black artists. (His parents moved from Texas so his father could practice medicine; John Biggers, the distinguished Houston-based muralist and teacher, was a relative.)

On his return from Japan, he said, it was elder Los Angeles artists such as Varnette Honeywood and Samella Lewis who took him under their wing and pointed him to art school. He would drive to the desert to visit Noah Purifoy in his found-object sculpture garden. “It felt like going to see the oracle,” he said. “It gave me the inspiration to see that you don’t have to follow the norms.”

Like many with Southern roots, Mr. Biggers had some quilters in the family. His epiphany, however, came with the landmark “Quilts of Gee’s Bend” show at the Whitney Museum in 2002. In the magisterial work of the Alabama quilters, he said, he saw all the possibilities of painting, and more. “There was color, modulation, rhythm, and all these compositional things,” he said. “But seeing them in these beautiful textile works made by a woman’s hands, it was touching on sculpture, touching on the body, touching on politics.”

In the studio, Mr. Biggers showed a few quilt pieces in progress — one, with light purple and green squares, that he was turning into a landscape with boughs and yellow blossoms; another, mostly orange and gray, onto which he added gold strips to complicate the lattice motif. Lurking on one quilt was a QR code; once scanned, it opened an audio track by Moon Medicin.

Mr. Biggers’s quilt work has grown in the same years that the Black Lives Matter movement has intensified, parallel to his own increasingly furious sculptures addressing violence and responding to the cascade of mass-circulated videos of Black deaths. His “BAM” series of gunshot statuettes, which he began in 2015 in a rage,

are dedicated to victims of police killings whom we have come to know by their first names: “BAM (for Sandra), “BAM (for Philando),” and so on. They are not depicted directly, but symbolically, by means of an African figurative sculpture dipped in wax and taken to a shooting range; the damaged but heroic effigy is then recast in bronze.

The artist with an untitled work in progress made from heirloom quilts. Gioncarlo Valentine for The New York Times

When Mr. Biggers showed “BAM (for Michael)” in St. Louis in 2018, he met first with Lesley McSpadden, the mother of Michael Brown, who was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Mo., in 2014, and received her blessing. He likened the works to power figures, like the Congolese nkisi: “The action of shooting them, dipping them in wax, the whole protracted process, is a way of giving them power — charging them,” he said.

Both the method and the naming draw occasional pushback from visitors to his exhibitions, but, he said, “the only way to communicate this type of pain is to do something like this, that will make people get pissed off at you.” When the Legacy Museum at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, in Montgomery, Ala., acquired “BAM (For Michael),” he felt validated.

It’s his own exhaustion that has caused him to pause the “BAM” series, and he is no longer watching the death videos, for now. “I can’t deal with that today. It’s overload,” he said. “There’s a point where there’s no longer any detachment from these things happening.”

The quilts, however, continue. Their softness is their strength. Their transmittal attests to survival; whether they broadcast freedom codes during the Underground Railroad or not, an artist can inscribe them now with salutary information for today.

On the studio floor, Mr. Biggers spread two untouched vintage quilts, both red, white and blue, but in clashing patterns — one a grid of small squares split in triangles, the other building out from the center like a kaleidoscope image. He described a possible tall piece combining the two, with a totemic feel.

Lately, he said, has been working mostly by subtraction, cutting sections from quilts. “To create two things with red, white and blue, and then take something from it, is the gesture,” he said. “Working through the idea of the demise of our democracy.”

The material would guide him from there, he said. Mr. Biggers is just the latest artisan in a continuing historical chain. “It’s not for me to say what they mean now,” he said. “These are objects for a future ethnography.”