

Art & Object



Sanford Biggers, *Everyday a Sunset Dies (LKG)*, 2014. © Sanford Biggers. Courtesy the artist and Eric Firestone Gallery

History Remixed: An Interview with Sanford Biggers

Interview with Paul Laster
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A New York-based interdisciplinary artist, Sanford Biggers mines African American history and traditions in a wide variety of ways—ranging from painting on and constructing collages with recycled quilts to making installation art, performance, video, and sculpture. Fresh off his second solo show at New York's esteemed Marianne Boesky Gallery, where he exhibited altered quilts and hybrid sculptures, and in the middle of the run of a monumental survey show of his seminal quilt paintings at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, the artist took a moment to discuss the origin of his ideas and the processes he employs to create his visually enticing and conceptually engaging artworks.

Paul Laster: You once told me that seeing the traveling show of the Gee's Bend quilters motivated you to consider using quilts in your work. Can you share that moment of inspiration and tell us how you started working with textiles?

Sanford Biggers: As a grad student I was admitted into the painting program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), but during my tenure there I did no painting at all. I had lost my interest in painting and strictly did installation art, sound, video, and sculpture. When I saw *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* show at the Whitney Museum in 2002 several things sparked my interest—the aesthetics of the quilts on their own and then their relationship to painting and the Whitney's own history of showing mostly male painters, which made it a deeply political show for me. I started looking more intently at quilts, even though I had grown up with them around me. I had already been inspired by the work that I had seen in the SAIC's fiber department, where I thought some of the most interesting work was being made because it transcended textiles to embrace other genres. And when I read about quilts supposedly being used by the Underground Railroad as signposts, signifiers, and maps, I imagined Harriet Tubman as an astronaut reading the stars, which melded into a sort of Afrofuturist, cosmological, but also very terrestrial type of experience. That became my basis for starting to work with quilts.

PL: What was the process when you first started working with quilts? Did you simply buy a quilt and paint on it or include it in a collage?

SB: The first step was procuring some quilts. I focused on pre-1900 quilts because I wanted the patina. I wanted the visual degradation of the material, but also the psychic, historic, and temporal residue related to quilts of that period. I would sit with them—I still do—for months at a time just to figure out what to do with each one, because you have to respond to them on their own level; you make a relationship with each one. You may not know this, but I first started painting as a graffiti artist, back in LA. My first approach to the quilts was, 'Am I defacing these or embellishing, or am I somewhere in between?' With that in mind, I started applying paint—spray paint, oil stick, paint pens, which was the stuff that I would use to do graffiti. Through the years I've figured out what materials work best, which ones integrate with the fabric better, and how the surface gets affected by the various mix of oil and water-based paints. The *Codeswitch* show is literally the palimpsest of the evolution of the material exploration through the quilts. Often it was additive, with marks, gestures, images, references; then even more material, more textile, mixed textiles; and with the most recent works I pulled back from paint and it's all cloth on cloth or the removal of material—creating voids and spaces, where the rhythms of the patterns are broken.

PL: What's the research you've done into quilts and quilting that you've found most interesting and most related and influential to your practice?

SB: There are the women quilters of the Gee's Bend side of it, which is an important point of departure. There's also a basic re-reading of the history of fabrics and how fabrics were traded along the Great Silk Road and in Constantinople. And there's the early Greco-Roman use of materials, how textiles themselves tell the story of history and commerce and trade and cultural cross-pollination. Plus, I lived in Japan for three years and was super-attracted to kimono patterns. I used materials and kimono pieces when I lived there. I'm always trying to find ways to mix all of those material languages together. I'm still doing research and learning new things. I'm not particularly skilled at sewing. I don't have that kind of mechanical background, so everything is new to me when it comes to working with fabrics, which is why I think I keep exploring and making this type of art.

PL: Where do you find your materials? Where do you source the quilts and fabrics that you use?

SB: There's a myriad of sources. The first batch that I got came after I made three quilts for the Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. I had a studio visit and after the group had left a woman stayed behind and told me that she used to collect and sell quilts. She said that she had hundreds of them that were collecting dust and offered to give me about thirty of them. It turned out that she was a descendent of Andrew Jackson, so she had quilts that went all the way back to his time. She liked the fact that I was messing with American history, which is certainly part of it. Since then, I've developed relationships with various quilt

resellers—eBay is a big friend—and at times I've even found donations on my studio doorstep. People often reach out to me on Facebook seeking to offload old quilts. Developing this strange relationship with quilters and hobbyists—including those that hate what I'm doing because they see it as desecration and younger people that like my work because they feel that I'm pushing the language further—has been one of the most surprising things about working with quilts. There's a whole quilting subculture out there.

PL: What kind of reactions have you gotten from quilters about your altering, painting over, collaging, and cutting up existing quilts?

SB: In the beginning, it felt pretty antagonistic, but lately it's been very embracing. There's a bunch of young quilters out there—punk, queer, tatted women in quilting groups that reach out through social media, where I'm following them and they're following me. They come to my shows and catch my talks. When they tell me their social media handles, I realize who they are. It's been really cool. Quilting is a language. It's a culture that needs to be perpetuated. But I view myself as a late collaborator, because I'm doing some deep modification of the quilts. It's no longer the original thing that you're seeing. Sometimes these things are in total disrepair when I get them, but patchwork is all about using the discarded and recycled.

PL: Does knowing that someone else touched, wore, lived with, and worked with these materials have an impact on you and your work?

SB: Absolutely, I actually rely on that fact. I consider that aspect a material in itself, even though I don't necessarily list it in my materials for the piece, but that aura, which is tangible and palpable, is definitely part of it. It resonates off of the pieces. They're not made in a vacuum, in a plant someplace where they're sterile. They've had hands, they've had bodies, they've got stains—that's a good metaphor for history itself.

PL: What are the parallels that you see between quilting and collage, quilting and painting, that others may or may not consider?

SB: Collage and painting have a certain place in the art-industrial complex, whereas quilting—for the most part—has been ghettoized to vernacular culture or craft. For a long time, it has not even been seen on the same level as collage, even though patchwork is collage and assemblage. And there are several levels of painting composition that can be found in quilts. The hardcore use of pattern can sometimes seem like a different language, but there are moments when the inundation of pattern creates abstraction—and I think those are the sweet spots. I also immediately think of Op Art when I see a really intricate, well-patterned quilt. It's like looking at an anthropomorphic drawing or a work by M.C. Escher, where you see it one way until you change your point of view, and then you see it another way, which makes it hard to see the original way again. That happens to me with patterns. If I change the light, I'll see a perspective that I hadn't seen before, and then I get locked into it. Part of what I'm doing is enhancement. The best metaphor that I can give is a musical one, where someone has a musical composition and the engineers turn up the levels and mix what comes to the fore and what goes to the back, so that the sound effects enhance the composition. I'm trying to enhance the compositions that are already there.

PL: Do you start with an idea in mind, with a sketch, or does the piece grow organically through action and reaction?

SB: For the most part they grow organically. For me—less than imagery that I might be thinking of—I'm thinking of how do I want to challenge myself with this work. How am I going to limit my tools? Is it just going to be a cut, charcoal, spray paint, no paint at all? There was no paint in the quilt pieces at Marianne Boesky Gallery, whereas the works in the Bronx Museum show are all painted. That's one of the things that I was conscious of when planning the Boesky show—a difference in approach.

PL: What is it about patchwork and collage, this transformation of the old to the new, past to the present, that most fascinates you?

SB: It's hip hop. It's sampling. It's cut and paste. It's cultural. It's digital technology. It's like taking an old song and doing something to it to make something new. It's inherent in the quilts but it's also inherent in my marble sculptures, which are assemblages—if you will—or patchworks of different iconographic sculptural pieces.

PL: The title of your Bronx Museum show is *Codeswitch*, which hints at the hidden messages sewn into quilts in the past. Are the messages that you are weaving into your works covert or overt?

SB: They are definitely covert. There are levels and layers to it, even in the title *Codeswitch*. I called my quilts series the *Codex* series. If you were to read my quilts, it becomes the codex for my installations, my sculptures, and my video work. *Codeswitch* is, of course, implying codes in quilts, but it's also implying social code-switching. People have to change or modify behavior and gestures to navigate certain social situations. For a quilt to be exalted to the level of the Whitney Museum means that it has been code switched. It's the same for the Bronx Museum or a Chelsea gallery, as years earlier it might have been at a yard sale or craft show.

PL: When did you start the new body of quilt works—the ones without paint—that you exhibited at Boesky?

SB: At the end of 2019, or maybe as early as 2018. I had been thinking about the removal of material for some time, even while I was still in the additive stage of my process. It came about in Rome, when I was an artist-in-residence for a year at the American Academy after receiving the Rome Prize. There was one piece in Rome, where I made a three-dimensional quilt and then made a two-dimensional quilt piece out of the remnants with voids in it. It came out of thinking of the ruins of Rome and the degradation of material, of how it rips apart. I was thinking about the fall of the empire and deterioration of culture and material. When we get to 2019, I did two pieces—one with two columns that are cut out and draped on the floor and one that has these illusionary shapes that were cut out to create drop shadows. That's when it really started to crystalize, and I wanted to capitalize on it.

PL: Did the Bronx Museum survey have an impact on the development of these new pieces?

SB: I feel like the Bronx Museum show represents the first few chapters of the exploration into the quilt material. To have that body of work together and the essays in the catalogue discussing it was a way of saying that this is how the *Codex* series started and this is its conceptual and material evolution, up to a point—and you can actually put a period at the end of that statement. Moving forward, it allows me to take a lot more liberties, both conceptually and materially. I don't feel bound to telling the back story anymore. The narrative's already set-up and there's a tome to encapsulate it. I now feel free to experiment, to push this work in a different direction.

PL: What were you thinking about when composing a quilt-piece like *Orpheus* in the Boesky show?

SB: It was a response to the quilt itself. As I previously mentioned, I spent a lot of time studying kimonos when I lived in Japan. There's a display technique for kimonos, where the arms are spread out. I simulated that technique with the ground quilt being the spread-out arms. The central image—created with overlaid fabrics—was inspired by Japanese woodblock prints and the portrayals of geishas in profile, with their elaborate robes and headdresses. The final result evokes something figurative, but it's purely abstract at the end of the day.

PL: What was the point of departure for *The Charlatan* piece and how did it evolve?

SB: It started with a quilt that came to me in such disrepair that I used parts of it to make other pieces. I had this large flank that was laying around for the longest time and at one point I just put it on the wall in the corner of the studio. Then, one day I realized that the reason that I hadn't done anything to it was that it was speaking to me. I decided to accentuate its form and gesture by adding scraps and pieces from other quilts and transformed it into what it became. Once again, it's not specifically based on any one thing—but, in my mind, it conjured kimonos, coats of many colors, or even Yoruba ceremonial accessories. I chose the title to leave more space for interpretation, rather than pinpointing its meaning.

PL: How are you using the process of blending, which is an inherent process of quilting, in making your recent series of *Chimera* sculptures, that combine African artifacts with iconic figures from European art history and were a central part of your Boesky show?

SB: This started as a dialogue between cultures and with my thoughts about sculpture in general—about how I was taught sculpture and how sculpture has been taught in the academy, with all of the weight and gravity and sacredness that we project onto quote/unquote monochromatic marble sculptures, and what they represent in the Western world. The reality is that lots of these historical sculptures were not monochromatic at all, rather they were painted. They had painted eyes or clothes or adornments that had worn off over time. As monochromatic pieces, however, they began to be used as propaganda for the purity and skill and genius of the Greco-Roman Empire, particularly because of the whiteness of the marble. When you study marble sculptures in Rome, you discover all of the different colors that were used on pieces to represent foreigners and invaders. The reason there are so many white marble statues, ironically enough, is that it was the cheapest material. The colored pieces that represent the foreigners were actually more exotic and expensive to produce, which is why you don't see as many of them. African sculpture—to me—is equally as important—if not more—to look at, but I've never seen these types of pieces in marble. What would happen if I remade these pieces in marble? What would it look like? I've seen it in gold and I've seen it in wood, so what would it be like in marble? That's how it started. I'm blending the European and the African, but even the African is blended in my sculptures, such as combining two different masks superimposed on each other. It's all about cross-pollination.

PL: Do these pieces start as sketches or are they developed digitally?

SB: They start from many different places. I already have a lot of the African elements, so I'm scanning them and working with them physically, as well. I've digitally archived a lot of African objects, many from a collector in Brooklyn who has more than 4,000 pieces. For most of the European pieces, I've made digital replications or gotten scan files directly from museums.

PL: I've always thought of your work as growing out of and visually related to jazz and hip hop, but looking at the Bronx Museum show—and from our discussion today—I'm picking up hints of Afrofuturism. Am I on the right track, and if yes, what's your interpretation of Afrofuturism and how are you conveying it in your work?

SB: To be honest with you, I was consciously dealing with Afrofuturism at the end of the last century when I was making mandalas, one of which I made as a break-dance floor, that's currently part of the Bronx Museum show. To me, Afrofuturism was a hot topic in my mind when I made that piece some twenty years ago. I personally don't use the word anymore because it has become a catchphrase, but it's definitely part of the origin story for a lot of my work. It allows us to project materials into a different future and to have a different understanding of historical objects. Using the mandala as a break-dance floor referenced Carl Andre's floor sculptures and Haitian veves, which are symbols drawn on the ground to create portals or doorways for the deities. And the mandala, of course, is a portal for deities, as well. Afrofuturism has always been in the work, but I wouldn't limit the work to that one aesthetic. The fact that myself and other artist started exploring these ideas way back when, however, is probably why we are even speaking about it today.