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Sanford Biggers. Photo by Matthew Morrocco.

## **SANFORD BIGGERS: Shapeshifting, codeswitching, and vacillating between medium and meaning.**

By: Katy Donoghue  
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In 2009, for a project with Hidden City Philadelphia, Sanford Biggers started using quilts from the 1800s in his work. He created an installation and interactive project at Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church—a stop on the Underground Railroad—that explored the way quilts were made and used to communicate by African Americans during the antebellum period.

More than a decade later, the New York–based artist continues to return to these historic quilts, adding to them, making his own marks, transforming them into geometric sculptures. That focus of his practice is the subject of “Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch,” currently on view at The Bronx Museum of the Arts in New York through January 24, 2021, and will later travel to the California African American Museum in Los Angeles and the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans. And his familiarity with 1800s artifacts and research on the period even landed him in a new role recently, as an artistic and cultural consultant for the movie *Antebellum* (2020).

In addition to quilts, Biggers is known to engage with objects that are heavily weighted in cultural history, be it African statues in his “BAM” series or referencing Roman sculpture and African masks in marble in his “Chimeras” series (currently on view at Marianne Boesky in New York in “Soft Truths”).

**Whitewall** spoke with the artist about why he sees his work with quilts as collaborative, what it was like to plant Easter eggs in a feature film, and his investigation of shapeshifting.

**WHITEWALL:** What was the starting point for “Codeswitch” at the Bronx Museum? Why the focus on the quilt series?

**SANFORD BIGGERS:** It came about from a studio visit I had with curators Sergio Bessa and Andrea Andersson around maybe five years ago. There was a lot of quilts in my studio at the time, because I was really just sort of getting in stride with them, and they thought it would be a great idea to just showcase that one specific body of work of mine.

I think they wanted to focus on the work themselves, how they lend to a larger area of readymades and found-object works, Underground Railroad narratives, and as objects that vacillate between drawings and paintings and sculptures.

**WW:** You’ve talked about having a realization of quilts, seeing them as paintings, when you saw “The Quilts of Gee’s Bend” at the Whitney in 2002. But you didn’t start working with quilts until you were commissioned for a project with Hidden City Philadelphia. How did that come together?

**SB:** The Gee’s Bend show—the visual freedom of them, the color combinations, the rhythm, seeing them at the Whitney had this conceptual side to it. It really was like positing them against some of these modernist canonical paintings. It almost was a political statement to me, in a way.

In “Hidden Cities,” a group of artists were invited to reimagine historic locations throughout Philadelphia. I visited nine or ten different sites throughout the city. I was particularly interested in the Masonic Temple, but later that day I visited the Mother Bethel Church in central Philly, and there were these stained glass windows, but there was also an exhibition that had some quilts downstairs. I started to make a connection between the colors and patterns and tessellation of the stained glass windows with what was there were on the quilts as well. And then visiting yet another space, I saw another quilt exhibition in Philly talking about the connection to the Underground Railroad. All of those things that sort of combined, and I guess it was a signal that I was supposed to be working with them.

I started to collect some quilts and modify them. At this point, I couldn’t afford many quilts. I borrowed several of them and made various interventions using Velcro, safety pins, or lightly sew them onto the quilts so I can put imagery onto the quilts, but I wasn’t necessarily putting permanent imagery on them because I have to give them back.

I installed them by framing them around the main worship space of the church and right beneath the stained glass windows so as you look up toward the windows you also saw a complete arc of quilts across the space.

**WW:** What is it like to work with these sometimes century-old pieces, and then ultimately being able to buy them and make more permanent marks upon them?

**SB:** That part is a bit of a challenge. I’m used to it now, but I have a great reverence for these works in the first place. Part of the process is spending time with them and figuring out the way to work within the matrix of the existing quilt. I got a little bit more accustomed to working that way, sometimes literally working with the rhythm and the pattern of the quilt, other times working totally against it. It is conceptually thinking a lot about the readymade, the act of taking something that’s already made and having to embellish it or in some people’s minds the defacing it and creating another work. It’s like sampling, taking an older piece of music and modifying it, changing it, altering it, and creating another form of music, of work.

I was always interested in how the quilts themselves have this sort of rhythmic pattern that alludes to perspective sometimes. You can look at the quilt almost like a portal to another dimension. The logical progression of that was starting to build them out into three-dimensional objects. So I started to make wooden armatures underneath them based on different geometric shapes and then covering them with quilts.

**WW:** Is it difficult to get more quilts?

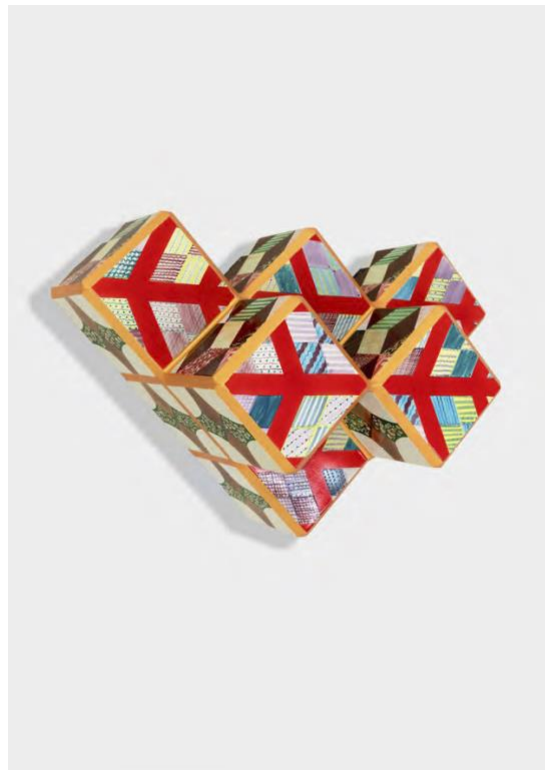
**SB:** It is, but at this point I've been working with them for over 10 years, so oddly enough I get donations frequently. Sometimes I'll do a lecture and out of nowhere this someone might pop up and say, "I have some quilts and I didn't know what to do with them." No one wants to just get rid of them, you know.

**WW:** Right, there's this element where you could feel like you're defacing an artifact, but you're also making them more permanent, in a way, right?

**SB:** That's the whole thing. There is a lot of tension working with these because they are done by individuals or collectives of people many decades, even generations ago. And then here I come in and do an intervention. But at the same time, a lot of these are in disrepair and were going to be thrown out. So, in some way, there is a salvaging aspect to it as well. In the most basic terms, it's a patchwork. And the whole idea is that it's been made and comprised of discarded pieces of fabrics in the first place. So there is a closed loop in working that way.

I find it interesting that the questions of gender come up, the questions of appropriation come up, questions about defacement, craft—all these issues are in there. But at the same time, it's the basic logic of patchwork itself, to constantly be rebirthed in a new form, using the same materials.

It creates this palimpsest of different imagery, symbols, and maybe even messages that can be read and deciphered by future generations.



**Sanford Biggers**, *Gioco Piano*, 2019. Ceramic, grout, plaster on wood, 27 x 37 x 27 inches.  
© Sanford Biggers and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

**WW:** Do you see yourself continuing to work with quilts on an ongoing basis?

**SB:** I thought I would have stopped working with these five or six years ago. But they are still very generative to me, and I think there is a lot more room to explore within them. They surprise me all the time. I find myself making a move or two, and then all of a sudden I'm re-interested in the project all over again. It's been really exploratory and gratifying.

**WW:** Speaking of a move or two away, what was it like to work on the thriller *Antebellum* released this year?

**SB:** It's a social thriller and touches on aspects of antebellum America, but also aspects of contemporary America. They thought that my work, specifically the quilts, made a lot of sense with that kind of backdrop. So I was invited to be the artistic and cultural consultant on the film, where I was able to work with the art department and the costume department; I was in the writer's room at time. Basically, I had a porous relationship with the whole crew because they wanted my input and my eye and consultation on various aspects to get a richer film.

I selected several artworks from friends of mine, placed them strategically throughout the film, really Easter eggs because we wanted to be the type of film that you want to see a few times. We wanted to make it a rewarding experience the more you saw it.

I spent a lot of time in New Orleans working on the film onsite on a literal plantation. And I have never been on a plantation before, and I can tell you that walking on the plantation and seeing all of the different performers in costumes of enslaved people, as well as costumes of Confederate soldiers, was super eerie and strange and surreal. And I got a chance to work with Janelle Monáe, who I've been acquainted with for many years now, friends with many of her cohorts and band. And we've talked about working with each other for literally, like, seven or eight years, and so that was another rewarding aspect of working on it.



**Sanford Biggers**, *Harlem Blue*, 2013. Antique quilt, additional textile, fabric treated acrylic, spraypaint, 88 x 88 inches.  
© Sanford Biggers and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

**WW:** Your show “Soft Truths” opens this October at Marianne Boesky in New York. Can you tell us about the show and about your works in marble as well?

**SB:** I've been working on a series of marble sculptures for the last two years, or maybe three years now. And in this show there will be four or five sculpture works and also four or five quilt works.

When I did the American Academy in Rome, I applied to that program to do a project based on spolia, buildings that are built on the remains of previous buildings, using that as a metaphor for artworks and sculptures that are built on the fall of previous sculptures and objects, and so on. The main focus was the fall of

the empire. I was really keen on that in 2017 to be looking at the political landscape in U.S., seeing it as clearly a paradigmatic shift.

Being in Rome and studying a culture that has had so many different empires come and go, it was worth exploring that artistically, and doing that through marble was the way to do it. There's a certain timestamp and gravity put on that material itself. I'm combining them with African objects as well, and they become this sort of uncanny hybrid. I call the pieces "Chimeras" because they shapeshift and are hybridized forms from various origins and physical and cultural origins.

It's an extension of the idea of patchwork. Putting them in the same room as patchworks may seem like a strange combination, but I think process-wise and conceptually they are working and coming from the same standpoints. Although they are commenting on things that have happened, they're all still predicting the future. It's a very strange thing to watch the world and a context shift around the works themselves, and it makes them strangely more prescient.