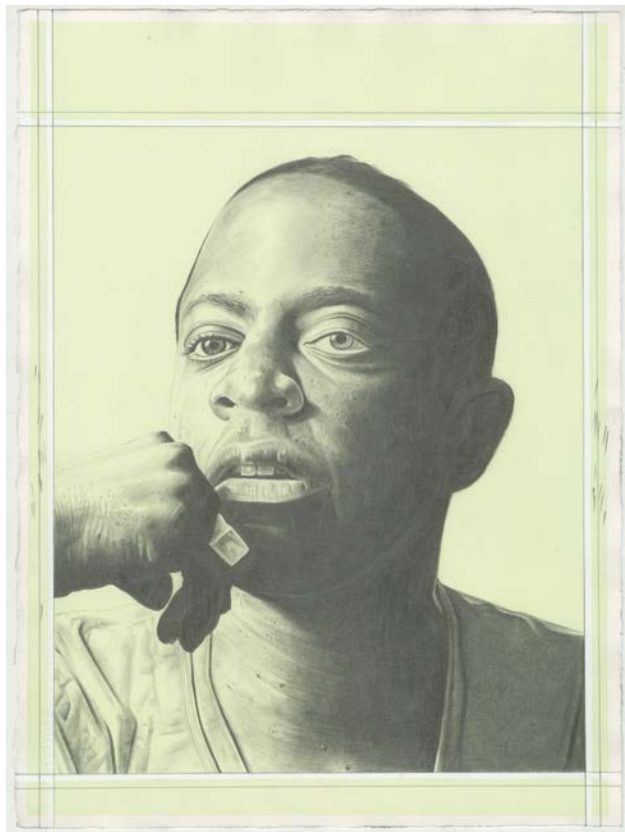


BROOKLYN RAIL



Portrait of Sanford Biggers. Pencil on Paper by Phong H. Bui

Sanford Biggers with Yasi Alipour

By: Yasi Alipour
March 10, 2021

For so long, I waited for the conversation that follows. I started in Columbia University’s MFA Visual Arts program in 2016. It happened to be when Sanford Biggers was beginning to leave his position as an educator. The celebrated artist—and the 2017–18 recipient of the prestigious Rome Prize—was taken by the demands of his ever-expanding practice. I remember sitting in an administrative office in that school, mystified by a small silk screen, *Lotus (125th)* from “The Floating World” (2013). It carried the familiar themes of Biggers’s unique practice: the lotus, abstraction and geometry, history and erasure, the power of materials, the language of quilts, the multitude that is the African American experience. I remember sitting there, as an anxious graduate art student wondering how to deal with and care after my own historical marginality. I found myself under the spell of this work. In this snippet of his work, I encountered what I longed for and what had begun to feel impossible. His work carried deep wisdom without ever negotiating its true urgency. It stared back at the history of oppression and claimed space to echo all that had been silenced. I needed to talk to this artist. Our paths never crossed at Columbia.

We finally met on the occasion of two major exhibitions of his work: *Soft Truths* at Marianne Boesky Gallery which focused on his most recent body of work, and *Codeswitch* at the Bronx Museum which is a survey of more than a decade of his quilts.



Sanford Biggers, *whence/wince*, 2020 Antique quilts, charcoal 149 7/8 x 91 3/8 x 98 in.
Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

Yasi Alipour (Rail): Before turning our attention to your current exhibitions, I want to ask you about what makes your work incredibly significant to me: In your practice, you delve into materials and forms, and through this work, you engage with histories of marginality. It's rare; your work is as "formal" as it is "conceptual"—though both words feel insufficient here. The concerns of the work are always urgent, and yet, they demand serious attention. I keep thinking about the "John Cage meets Sun Ra" concert (1986). That album never fails to amaze me and not just because it's a historic meeting of iconic figures. I'm drawn to the way the improvisation of the two leads them to silence. I know they both cared deeply about silence (and all that was inaudible to the Eurocentric definition of music). But I am also interested in how silence was different for each of them: Cage's commitment to Zen Buddhism and Sun Ra's fascination with Egyptology and Afro-mysticism.

I like thinking about your work in relation. Your work is an extraordinary meeting of meditation and improvisation. There are the obvious facts, that you closely studied meditation in Japan and that you have continuously practiced music and live performance, especially with your conceptual band, Moon Medicin. But it goes deeper. Both elements feel key to all aspects of your practice as a multidisciplinary artist.

Sanford Biggers: Yeah, I see them both, partners, a duet, in some ways, because a part of improvisation has to do with being very mindful, present, and extremely open. And to trust your instinct on when to collaborate with the other. Like with Moon Medicin, it's often a lot of listening before I figure out what I can add, put in, or interject. And sometimes the silence is just as important as the sound, which I think is actually very poignant in that Cage and Sun Ra collaboration. They both really work in tandem. I don't think there is a clear distinction between improvisation and meditation. I think they really feed off of each other.

Rail: Right, there has been a false distinction created between the two, especially if we approach them through the gaze of white America or Western hegemony. In reading through some early writings on your work, I found these ignorant responses basically asking, "how can your work be both Buddhist and political?" The racist problem was twofold: whitewashing Buddhism, meditation, and mindfulness by taking them out of context and exotifying them as Eastern, apolitical, and "passive." And the other was the violent politicization of the Black body through the white gaze. Your work is far beyond these violent divides.

Still, there is so much attention and care you put in the treatment of materials in your work—from painterly and sculptural decisions, to your treatment of music, and even concepts. There's something "meditative" in that sense. As a viewer, it felt like the work demanded that I remain in the "now." And then there are aspects of your work—from *Moon Medicin* to the way you deal with history—that makes me think about the intensity of conversations that happen in real improvisation when suddenly there is urgency in our different understandings of the past and the need to desire a future. Your work seems so deeply in conversation with the long history of Black radical aesthetics, hip-hop, and Afrofuturism.



Sanord Biggers, *Chorus for Paul Mooney*, 2017. Antique quilt, fabric, spray paint, acrylic, fabric treated paint. 75 x 77 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky, New York.

Biggers: I think it's about the blurry lines in between all of those. I like to think that we're somewhere in the midst of a simultaneity. Past, present, and future are not in vacuums. They're all in relation to each other. I think about what you said about the early writings about my work and how they were stuck in a binary—of being Buddhist or hip-hop, or political or passive. And it's problematic because things are not that cut and dry. I did a solo exhibition around 2004–2005, and the title of that show was *both/and not either/or*. I was really addressing all of this stuff very directly in the past, but oddly enough, I don't think people could hear it because they were expecting a specific agenda and projecting their preconceptions onto the work. And I see that in a lot of the early writings as well. Critics that compared me to Kara Walker and David Hammons because that's the tone with which they want to get their information from a Black artist. And I think there's obviously subtlety, nuance, or silence that was overlooked at that time because somehow that was not attributable to the vernacular of an African American artist. I think it was very short-sighted. But finally, the language is starting to catch up. It's interesting you mentioned Afrofuturism, as it has become a buzzword of the moment. But Afrofuturism, as a concept goes back to the early '90s in critical writing with Mark Dery, but as a creative trajectory it goes back decades before that. So, I see Afrofuturism as part of a continuum that goes from John and Alice Coltrane, Sun Ra, Sam Delany, Octavia Butler, P-Funk, and Haile Gerima through *Lovecraft Country* and *Watchmen* with Regina King, and countless visual artists since at least the '50s and '60s. For me, that simultaneity of past, present, and future is always involved in my work. I even consider myself a collaborator with history, making work in the present to be unpacked somewhere in the future. And there's a rarely used phrase, in Japanese *Onko chisin*, which means—similar to the Ghanaian idea of *Sankofa*—learning from the past to inform the present, to then change the future.

Rail: So important. So to begin discussing the current exhibitions, can we talk about the idea of a “power object.” It has remained consistent in the multitude of your practice. In '98, while you were still in undergrad, you got a gig assisting this exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History called *Sacred Art of Haitian Vodou*. Part of your job was to help the visiting priests from Haiti find the needed material to activate the altars in the exhibition. To do so, they would need to meet with the local New York Vodou priests. I am interested in the notion that the activation of the altar requires meetings; relations to be built among these communities. I found it interesting that you then became witness to these dialogues between the two Afro-diasporic communities. The idea of the “power object” and the relations required for “activation” still feels important in the way you deal with material.

Biggers: The “power object” for me is the notion that objects—and even images at this point—can be imbued with a psychic power—whether that be negative, positive, or myriad—that evokes specific charged cultural and social references. The interesting thing about power objects, however, is that they’re not fixed. Symbols, archetypes, imagery that have been around for millennia can be changed by events, usage, and propaganda; the ancient Indian swastika which symbolized prosperity and well-being before being appropriated by the Nazi Party in the 1930s comes to mind. My project is really to conflate what we perceive to be the original function and meaning of historical objects with new significance from/for contemporary culture, world, and society; how do we perceive these things and the disputed notions of the history of those objects? In particular, in *Soft Truths*, you have these marble pieces where I’m combining aspects of Greco-Roman sculptures with African sculptures from various parts of the continent. It’s really a total mashup. We have all heard the stories and are conditioned to believe that monochromatic marbles are the pinnacle of Western aesthetics, ingenuity, and representation. But the reality is, a lot of those monochromatic sculptures were at some point painted and adorned. Our understanding of the “white” sculptures—and the use of that as propaganda for Western Europe and its expansionist project—is false. The same happens when you look at modernism and its inspiration from the images of African objects that were imported to Europe around the turn of the 20th century via books and images. They were denuded to monochromatic brown and black wooden sculptures. But in reality, those objects were also adorned with raffia, beads, colors, and pigments. You have a whitewashed version of history in the classics and a Blackwashed version of history in modernism. The basis of that education and history is a falsehood. You can see how that extrapolates and becomes a metaphor for larger societal conditions. We’re living in a moment of soft truth if there’s truth at all. I want to explore some of those concepts in this show, but doing it not only through art historical reference but also material. But beyond these conceptual aspects I still try to allow for some valence, play, and improvisation so that the end result is less calculated than it is intuitive.

Rail: In some of your earlier work using African sculptures, you often emphasized your interest in the “dubious origins”—versus authenticity. That still feels true here. To refuse the monopoly of the hegemonic museum (and art history) in authenticating. I appreciate how here you stay with the dubious origin of all of them.



Installation view: *Soft Truths*, Marianne Boesky Gallery, NY, 2020.
Courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

Biggers: I think about it like this: the objects themselves, if they still serve a function within a culture or society or family, does that make it less or more “authentic”? And provenance often in the Western usage of it ultimately ends up: who collected that, who ransacked it, who put it in what wing of what museum, and thus it is named the collection of that person and they are the authority. When in fact, something that could have been made three weeks ago may actually hold more magnitude, power, or real connection to the culture it came from than that object from 100 years ago. Who’s to really say? When I say dubious origins, I also say that because the Greco-Roman and neoclassical sculptures that I use are usually knockoffs in the first place. When we go to a museum, like the Louvre or the Met, are we seeing the original piece? We’re usually seeing a copy, and that copy was usually inspired by yet another totally unique sculpture. The pose might have been lifted from one sculpture, and then applied and is then called “Athena.” And then 200 years later, it’s remixed by somebody else and called “Slave Girl.” This happens all the time. You see the same practice in music. That’s why I often liken this to the sampling and chopping and screwing of recorded material. I’m taking full advantage of those dubious origins by concocting and creating these pieces that are in *Soft Truths*. For example, many of the masks that are on the figures in this exhibition are not from one singular group. They’re usually combinations of multiple forms from different cultures. Thus, all are from dubious or unknown origins. And the contrary effect is that I’m actually creating a unique object because there’s no other object that has all of those attributes. For me, these works are objects from a future ethnography. The point being that 100 years from now, when you decipher the elements of one of these pieces, you can’t find one true origin and that complicates the conversation.

Rail: As someone who has spent too much time thinking about the violent history of ethnography and the bitter limits of autoethnography, your idea of future ethnography seems so important to me. In *Soft Truths*, there’s this play that messes with notions of the sanctity of the “Greco-Roman” and the “African” past. You take it further, though. There are also some quilts in *Soft Truths*, which to me implicate Americana in the same way. The Bronx Museum’s exhibition, *Codeswitch*, really engages with that. You commit to a narrative that is as historic as it is mythical: the idea that there were quilts imbued with codes to assist in the Underground Railroad.



Sanford Biggers, *Orpheus*, 2020. Antique quilt, assorted textiles, wood 82 x 83 1/2 in.
Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

Biggers: The narrative of them supposedly being used on the Underground Railroad was the jumping-off point. And through that thought process, I started to imagine Harriet Tubman as an astronaut, basically navigating the stars to take people to freedom. That's just sort of how my mind works. That's how I initially got into working with quilts and seeing them as a material that had a lot of potential and power. They are fecund with meaning and history, but beyond that, they begin to engage with other formal, gender, labor, usage, representation, and appropriation issues. Just think about quilts being seen as craft and rarely with the vaunted status of high art. When the Whitney had the exhibition *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (2002), it really moved me. In my opinion, they were on par if not superior to several paintings in the collection. And what it meant, having an all-women's art show—disenfranchised women from Alabama. What are the political and the museological ramifications there? All of that was interesting. In the Bronx Museum's *Codeswitch*, I am showing 50-plus works. I'm working out all of these ideas in those pieces. It's a diaristic view of how I've been working through the materials and references. By the time we see the quilts in *Soft Truths*, I'm taking a very different approach. It's less additive, more subtractive. It's really mining information, extracting it as opposed to charging them with it. And that's because I have a trust for those materials. They are operating on a certain plane; I feel like I am a kind of interlocutor with them at this point.

Rail: In *Codeswitch*, I was very aware of the main material being fabric. It felt like each piece could hold, protect, and warm the body. In *Soft Truths*, I kept thinking of the coldness of the dominant material, the marble.



Sanford Biggers, *Lady Interbellum*, 2020. White marble on custom cedar plinth. Marble: 62 1/2 x 45 1/2 x 41 3/4 in, Plinth Stack: 12 1/2 x 51 1/4 x 51 1/2 in, Overall: 75 x 51 1/4 x 51 1/2 in, 190.5. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

Biggers: To decipher most of my work, you've just got to read the titles. [*Laughter*] *Soft Truths* is really a play of opposites. It's the hard and the soft, it's the sort of detached coldness of marble, so to speak, and the warmth and inviting sense of the quilt, it's about volume and about voids. All of that is at play there. And the titles in the show each speak to their own sort of narratives. For example, *Lady Interbellum* (2020). Any music or pop fans out there know about the group Lady Antebellum, which for some reason, after 12 years in a hit career, didn't realize that the word "antebellum" has very negative connotations for many people. So, they changed their name to Lady A. And then they got into a big dispute because there was also already a Black female performer in Las Vegas named Lady A, who had been going by that name for 20 years, and a whole legal suit ensued, and Lady Antebellum said that they were going to let her keep her name and then they reneged on the whole deal at the end of it. The colonizer took the name or may have made her pay to use it.

So, I call this one *Lady Interbellum* also in the sense that, politically, we could be interbellum at the moment as we speak. And the other conceit behind *Soft Truths* and the “Chimera” works featured, is that I did a lot of the thinking for the show while I was at the American Academy in Rome. I went there with the intention of studying the phenomenon of fallen empires; looking at the past to make sense of the present and understand the future. There’s also the double-height quilt called *whence/wince* (2020). Depicted are four of the corner columns of the Parthenon ruins, draped down, flaccid, lying on the floor splayed out of red, white, and blue quilts. It’s very basic, looking at the pillars of democracy and what they stand for—if they stand for anything—at the moment. Other works in the show have mythological, biblical, and cinematic references, but the interplay between the works and titles feels more like a cohesive installation than a group of various objects.

Rail: Since we are discussing the role of language in your work, it feels like a good moment to move towards the Bronx Museum. It’s an important show. In *Codeswitch*, I kept thinking about the hand, not only your gestures but all the traces that could easily belong to those who had worked on these quilts before you. There is a lot in *Codeswitch* that feels beyond language: the hand, hapticity, or even touch. In your engagement with materials and the intensity of the histories they carry, there is something unique in what you achieve; I kept walking around the show, thinking, “you trust the hand.”

Biggers: Yes, I trust the hand, but I also trust the material. I consider myself basically a late collaborator with groups of, typically women, quilt-makers who have worked on them over a century ago. A lot of these quilts were on their way to the dustbin. Some I purchased, some were gifted to me, and all of them were basically living in the shadows. Sometimes I sit with them for years at a time before ever making a mark on them. Part of that is to learn and figure out how to navigate each particular quilt. And in that way, there is a lot of trust. I have to sit and consider each of these very intensely before making any marks on them. Sometimes I’m totally guided by the pattern or the color combination of the quilt itself. Sometimes I have to mine and go a little bit deeper and try to drag something out. Sometimes if I squint my eyes, I see the painting already happen. Other times, I have to put it away for months at a time before I come back to it. Some of the more successful ones have taken me years to do because they just kick my ass for three or four years at a time, and then I’d have to return to it. And then some of them, you wake up, and it’s like, “Oh, this has to happen right now.” This work is less heady in some ways than some of my projects. It started from a very heady conceptual place, but eventually, it became a deeply formal, hand and material-based place.



Installation view: *Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch*, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2020. Photo: Argenis Apolinario. Courtesy Bronx Museum of the Arts.

In the main gallery of the Bronx Museum, on the ground, is the video *Mandala of the B-Bodhisattva II* (2000). This is the oldest piece in the show. It is a dance floor that I made out of hand-cutting pieces of rubber tile to create, basically a mandala. And above that mandala, we installed a video camera. I was working with David Ellis (aka Squirm) on this particular one that you see here and it was the official dance floor for the Battle of the Boroughs Breakdance Competition that happened at the Bronx Community College in 2000. And we videotaped the event, and I was later asked to be in a show at the Bronx Museum by Lydia Yee and Franklin Sirmans, called *One Planet Under A Groove* (2001). And that was one of the pieces that was in the show. The 20-foot square dance floor was exhibited as well as a very small monitor that had the video, which showed the dancing. In *Codeswitch*, however, we've projected that video documentation down onto a platform on the ground. Now it looks like the dancefloor mandala itself. But you also see the dancing take place on it. That's in there not only because of the Bronx connection but the patterns that I was exploring in the early mandala works from the late '90s to early aughts really was the gateway to going deeper into pattern. The quilt then became the next vessel of exploring pattern. I see them as totally related.

Rail: Definitely! Also, the geometric forms used in the mandalas and in the quilts, are in both cases dealing with the body in movement—from the dancers to the secret guides for the fugitives. In an old interview, you once mentioned Buddhist monks who knew the mandala so well that they no longer needed to draw them; they would create the mandala by the movement of their body. I imagine a group, a ritual, a dance, a form of knowledge that is beyond writing, or even drawing.

In *Codeswitch*, what stood out to me besides the abstract forms was the tree. My mind went straight to your iconic work *Blossom* (2007)—which returned to view at Brooklyn Museum this summer. I'm thinking about that piece, the tree running through the piano, and your composition of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit." In discussing that work, you used to talk about how the tree is both where Buddha found enlightenment and also points to the brutal history of lynching. The tree persists in your work.

Biggers: All the works in *Codeswitch* really are like sketches of many of my sculptural installations. There are references to pianos, kimonos, trees, and silhouetted figures and forms. This is basically the palimpsest for reading several other works. That's why I call it the "Codex" series. You recanted the story that I was saying about monks often not even drawing or representing a mandala but remembering movements and dancing with the circle. I was really struck by the image. It put in my head this idea of sound pieces with no sound, kinetic pieces with no movement, performative works that don't actually "perform" in the literal sense. But with that being said, I consider these quilts to rest somewhere on that precipice because they are performative objects. Your body relates to them immediately because they are made for your body. But once they're on the wall with that removed, they start speaking a different language: that of drawings, tapestries, and paintings. So, they're vacillating between multiple spaces.

Rail: This also makes me think of your relationship with early hip-hop. A movement born from the breaks of older records stitched together. That seems to be very related to what you were saying: sound pieces with no sound, kinetic pieces with no movement.

Biggers: Well, the break is like a meditation in the way the rhythms become repetitive. And that's where you go into that transcendent moment. Musicologists talk about that all the time. I often refer to Harriet Tubman as an astronaut, navigating the stars. Similarly, I consider hip-hop DJs to be time travelers because they literally are splicing, parsing, and reversing time. And through that they're causing the audience and the crowd to go into breakdancing, improvisatory fits.

Rail: That kind of blew my mind. This feels like the perfect moment to discuss Moon Medicin.

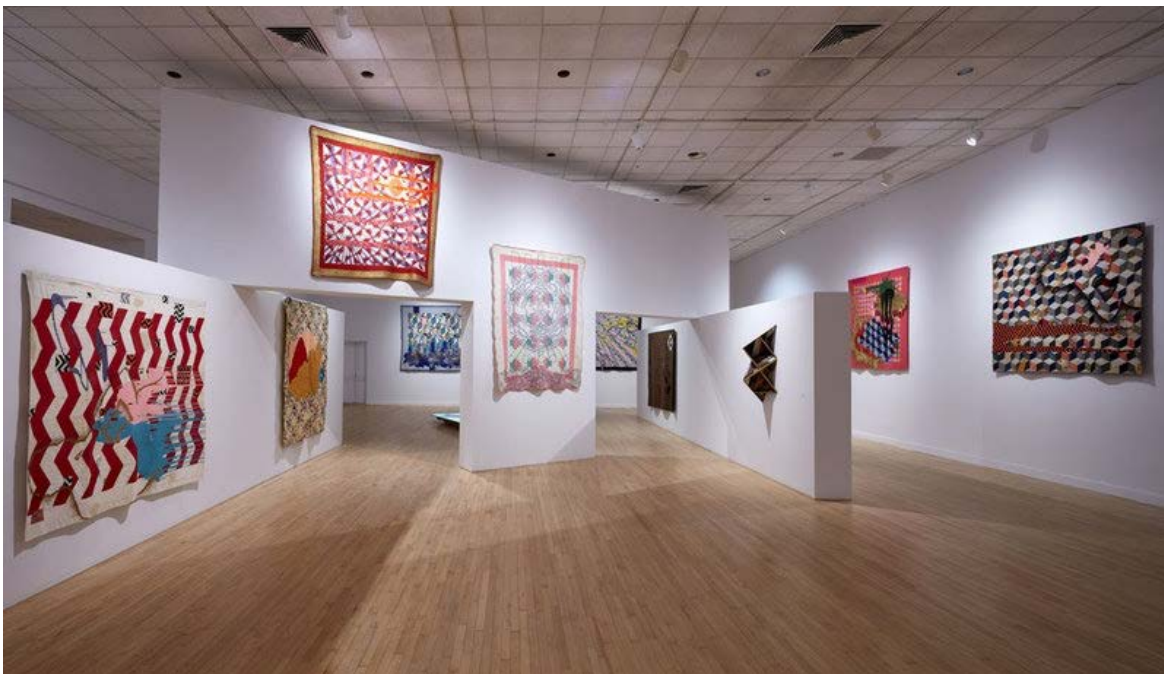
Biggers: The band itself is composed of mainly five people; Mark Hines, Martin Luther, Jahi Sundance, André Cymone (Prince's original bassist on his first few albums), and myself on keyboards. Every performance is a bit of a different playlist. The common attributes per performance is a large video presence and audience participation. And we usually have masks on. And we usually have guests that join us, and they range anywhere from musicians to poets, actors, and comedians, including Rich Medina, Imani Uzuri, Swiss Chris, among others. Meshell Ndegeocello joined us when we were last at the Kennedy Center.

Rail: For me, it felt significant that *Codeswitch* began with the Moon Medicin video, made in collaboration with Terence Nance, the mastermind behind *Random Acts of Flyness* (2018). It showed your back, in the midst of a woods—an image that has persisted since some of your earliest works. But here, the nude Black body is covered by your quilt. The Moon Medicin’s sound piece spilled into the exhibition space. In thinking about Moon Medicin, I keep returning to this incredible interview you did years ago with Terry Adkins in *BOMB Magazine*, who even collaborated in one of your earliest costumed performances. You two just seem to have so much care and respect for each other. There’s a moment when you say:

Ishmael Reed! Saying that all black people, especially black men, are always under the spotlight—whether it is on a stage, in the spotlight of society, a police car spotlight, or an interrogation light. By being entities in this society we are always performing. I’m sure it extends beyond African Americans or black men, but this was the specific quote and, with that in mind, I felt there was no real difference between my doing a performative act in a gallery or a museum and my standing up and speaking my opinion in an all-white academic environment.

In many ways, Moon Medicin echoes questions that you ask throughout your practice, but somehow it also feels vastly different

Biggers: I think Moon Medicin offers a different voice, and it operates in a slightly different way. Music seems to have an ability to speak to people differently than visual art. On some levels, it doesn’t need as much translation. And it can reach more people because of how its modes of distribution and communal events affect the way we understand and receive that information. Through Moon Medicin, I’m able to very spontaneously tackle a lot of issues that I don’t necessarily address in my visual practice. Some I do, but many I don’t. It’s really influenced by Dada, black humor (in the Surrealist sense), and the Theater of the Absurd. At times, I think my work can have different tonalities, even in my visual practice, but when it comes to the performative realm with Moon Medicin, it can go very dark, very dank, and very dirty. But at the end of the day, it’s also trying to find a sense of liberation from the confines that society and industry project onto artists of color, and liberation through the nonsensical, the nonlinear, and the non-narrative. I think that’s the space that it operates in, and even as a group, it’s got a loose formation. We do collaborations with all kinds of people. It’s an open-source collaboration tool. I think of it as the third pillar of my practice.



Installation view: *Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch*, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2020. Photo: Argenis Apolinario. Courtesy Bronx Museum of the Arts.

Rail: That brings me to the beginning of our conversation. What is meditation if we refuse to whitewash, individuate, and depoliticize it? What is improvisation if, rather than consuming it as entertainment, we instead focus on the deep listening it requires?

Biggers: It's sort of funny. When you get into deep meditation, there are obviously many forms. There's eating meditation; there's walking meditation, sitting meditation. And I think existence as a marginalized person in the US, every day when you're walking under oppression, that's walking oppression, that's eating oppression, sleeping oppression, it's a constant. So maybe there is a correlation.

I'm thinking about that in relation to what we were talking about with Moon Medicin—and even abstraction to a degree—it is really finding ways to express that are not based on the binary or in opposition to something else but expression that is autonomous and of its own. I often go back to Glissant, creolization, and his ideas on opacity.

Rail: That's so interesting. Your work is honestly a rare experience where I feel like I am witnessing something of the essence of Glissant's creolization. How to create space in the language of the oppressor to talk about oppression, to talk beyond it, to talk to each other? I also think about the way your work refuses to conform to mediums, disciplines, or even expectations. It feels like what Glissant emphasized as the marginalized people's right to opacity. You have this quilt in *Codeswitch* that I can't stop thinking about, *Tyranny of Mirrors* (2017). As abstract as it is, it does something rare. It feels like the conversation that happened between John Cage and Sun Ra through improvisation, through silence. I'm also thinking about a room packed with people, listening and dancing in the break.

Biggers: I think that is one of the things that makes it very difficult to document what Moon Medicin does because it's so much about the experience. We usually don't just exist on the stage; we're in the audience, the audience comes up on the stage, there's a porous boundary. I think what is important about mirroring and performance is that I am not so interested in a separation between the performer and the audience; I'm actually more interested in seeing how everyone is projecting onto each other and how everyone is performing—it's a very complicated dance. And I guess that somehow addresses what you're saying with improvisation in my mind. For me, as an improviser, it is focused on the external data coming at you and responding to that, as opposed to in solidarity—creating my own soundscape that's going outwards.

Rail: There's so much trust there and throughout your work, Sanford, in the audience, in the work, even in time. To go back to your conversation with Terry Adkins, I want to ask you about the generational conversation. It's been something that has occupied my mind in thinking about contemporary art that deals with marginalized histories. You have this older work *The Cartographer's Conundrum* (2012), where you made work inspired by, in conversation with, and in response to the practice of your cousin, John Biggers, a scholar, an Afrofuturist, a master painter, and a muralist. Generational conversations are present throughout your work, from the "power objects" to the resampled quilts, to your dialogues with history itself. I feel like I really long for such conversations. But often, these conversations feel to be surrounded, to be interrupted by structures that are violently eager to simplify, erase, and consume.

Biggers: Well, let's consider one of the templates for writing about artists: finding which great white male artist their work descended from or is akin to. I've always taken issue with that gesture, knowing there have always been so many other fantastic artists from myriad backgrounds to refer to or be influenced by. And to be fair, I'm happy to find inspiration from *all* types of artists but the legacy of art made by women, people of color, and those that did not get their due, even when they were in the same room with the guys we always hear about, is crucial. Before graduate school, I was very fortunate to have artist mentors that took me under their wing and introduced me to other artists, curators, and art professionals. There was a community and network that spanned the country, and we went to each other's shows and supported each other long before the recent attention that non-white male artists are receiving today. We knew we had to do that because we weren't necessarily going to get that attention or even acknowledgment from the more mainstream art-industrial complex. I think my generation really picked up the torch in that respect and we regularly refer to artists ranging from Edmonia Lewis and Elizabeth Catlett to William T. Williams, David Driskell, and Robert Colescott. So, by the time, myself and my peer group started receiving attention, we were able to drop names and bring

up that history. In the MASS MoCA show, there obviously was a bit of that involved. I was also taking some inspiration from my cousin John Biggers's work, but since he was also doing work related to pattern and sacred geometry, I've been continuing a similar line of inquiry across generations.



Sanford Biggers, *Incidental Geometry*, 2017. Antique quilt, birch plywood, gold leaf. 45 1/2 x 37 1/2 x 16 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

Rail: I think about generational conversations as physically running to your elder, yelling, “why is oppression continuing?” but also being held in a “how have we been surviving?” It’s as intimate and vulnerable as it is significant and urgent. I think it’s really special, how in your work, you create these conversations with all their intensity and then bring them to places like MASS MoCA and even *Codeswitch* at the Bronx Museum. I feel like in the current exhibitions, I have witnessed how people were spending time with the work, activating and echoing generational conversations, with all the frustration, with all the contradiction, with all the love and care.

Biggers: I think the intent is very important. I think about this a lot because I do consider myself a conceptual artist. I’m approaching different ideas and projects with different materials all the time. So, what are the things that I can make consistent while I traverse those different materials? One of them is intent. One intent is, shining the light on history and historical figures that probably did not get the type of recognition they deserved at the time they were alive. I am also grappling with material and cultural history. If I’m working on a quilt that was presumably made by a group of women 100 years ago, there’s something to grapple with in that conversation. So, my approach to the quilt is never about washing over this thing and implementing my plan. It’s about observing and listening to what was laid down before. If I chose to cover an entire panel with one color, it may feel like it’s a violent, aggressive type of erasure. But the closer you get to it, the stitching that was actually holding the quilt together is revealed. So, though I’ve gotten rid of part of the pattern, the line drawing, the really intricate work becomes visible. I think that intent is also visibly why people react to them the way they do, because you can’t avoid the hand in any of it.

Rail: You know, the early MASS MoCA piece, *Cartographer’s Conundrum*, made me think of your other works as maps. The quilts may appear as abstraction at first glance, but they unravel, become codes, maps, and carriers of stories, not illustrations, though. It’s more like objects that accompany the oral traditions of storytelling.

Biggers: Yeah, they're part of the griotic tradition. I think of them as syntactical as opposed to just strictly visual. Each one of them has its own narrative. And then collectively, they create a hyper-narrative

Rail: It's interesting, on one level, the quilts are storytellers, carrying histories that cannot be contained in history books. On another, the quilts are maps. That desire to map, to understand land—by journeying through it or by owning it. Then on a third level, the quilts as what warms and protects the body.

Biggers: That's what I'm saying, they're so charged because of their relationships with the body. And the body, of course, is our primary repository of history. So, if you have a quilt that held the body, not only does it have its own history, it has that body's history. All that stuff is resonant in the raw material itself. So, by the time I'm intervening on that, I'm having a very fierce dialogue with a lot of different elements. And, ultimately, there's a faith in the power within that. It's about how much or how little you can do to accentuate what's already there.