

# CULTURED MAGAZINE



**Sanford Biggers**, *Harlem Blue*, 2013. Antique quilt, assorted textile, acrylic, spray paint, 88 x 88 in. © Sanford Biggers

## **SANFORD BIGGERS RETURNS TO CALIFORNIA WITH A HOMESPUN MEDIUM**

By: Allison Berg  
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Having created his first quilts in 2009 for a commission in Philadelphia, interdisciplinary artist Sanford Biggers is bringing his first survey of quilt-based works to the California African American Museum (CAAM) this July. The exhibition, “Codeswitch,” which originated at the Bronx Museum, spotlights Biggers’s ability to literally and figuratively stitch together African American history and traditions, Americana, contemporary art and symbolism from urban culture, the body and geometry into a broader, international conversation. Utilizing antique quilts, he applies mark-making, painting, cutting, collaging and sculptural techniques to create new languages and perpetuate ongoing, significant dialogue between generations and the quilts themselves. Biggers met with *Cultured* contributor Allison Berg to discuss the exhibit and how it feels to come full circle at CAAM.

## Allison Berg: Why quilts?

**Sanford Biggers:** There are so many answers. The Gee's Bend show at the Whitney Museum in the early 2000s left a huge impression on me. I thought the works themselves were incredible in the context of modern and contemporary paintings, but there was also this charged aspect with them being from this small group of women in the South, Black women in particular, and now being seen on this platform. There was a political and gender aspect to it. Another aspect of it that I don't speak about so much is that when I was in graduate school and minimalist painting was all anyone was thinking about. Color content was frowned down upon; beauty, sexuality and those things were frowned down upon—of course those things became interesting to me to work with. Quilts are a cornucopia of color content. The challenge is to work within that very loaded content and create a new language. If we think of quilts holding some degree of code, then what does it mean for me, 100 years later, a young man, to add layers of code directly onto that quilt? At a certain point, I came upon the story, or maybe "vernacular tradition," that quilts were used on the Underground Railroad as signposts. When slaves were looking for a safe house and found quilts folded in a certain way or with certain patterns, it gave an indication whether it was safe to stay there or whether it was safe to keep moving, and they would look at these signs to map directions and coordinates.



**Sanford Biggers, *Bonsai*, 2016.** Antique quilt, assorted textiles, spray paint, oil stick, tar, 69 x 93 in.  
© Sanford Biggers and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. Photo by Object Studies.

**AB: How are you adapting or manipulating this kind of visual language like the signposts in the days of the Underground Railroad? Or are signposts more of an inspiration?**

**SB:** I think that contemporary art is often coded. We often hear about people feeling like they have no entry point. There are all these layers of art history, tradition and code that go into a work. To me, it's less about reading it "right" exactly right now in this moment and more about how it might be read decades from now when these quilts act as a cross-generational or transgenerational conversation from the original makers of the quilts, to the original wearers of the fabric in that quilt, to myself doing my interjections on the quilt and then how they are shown moving forward.

**AB: How can a viewer "decode" the narrative of a single quilt work?**

**SB:** One of the reasons I like working in quilts so much is I also practice in doing large installations like marble sculptures and pieces that take a very long time to realize and often require the help of other fabricators. Quilts are something I can do on my own. The way to read the codex of these works is to literally look at as many as you can. The titles start to have interplay with the quilts themselves, the original patterns, song lyrics that reference certain historical narratives. Also, a viewer should look at it against the backdrop of all the other

projects I am doing, which I think also have degrees of found objects, reclaimed narratives, lost histories, untold histories. Conflating them all together creates, maybe, another read on society and culture.

**AB: How do you decide which quilts to work with, what kind of relationships you want to configure and how you will intervene and add layers?**

**SB:** Some quilts speak to me immediately. I will at least know the first couple moves I might make. Then at that point, I start to improvise and see what might work. Other quilts take a much longer time, and that's when I start going through a list of different challenges and tasks to try to find a way in. Sometimes I will look at a pattern and decide whether I want to be harmonious or discordant with that. I think that's why seeing them all assembled is rewarding because you can see the various experiences and challenges at play.



**Sanford Biggers**, *Chorus for Pau Mooney*, 2017. Antique quilt, assorted textiles, acrylic, spray paint, 76 x 76 in.  
© Sanford Biggers and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen.

**AB: When you do see them all together, is it a continuing narrative or just a more expansive context being played forward?**

**SB:** I think it's a continuing narrative. There was a point when I thought I would be finished with quilts a couple years ago, but when I thought about what I wanted to achieve with this next show, I tried something new and it just opened it back up again. The more I work through them, the more I am finding ways of stories regenerating, and you can see the movements within the quilts.

**AB: Where do you research when considering the histories you want to share through your work?**

**SB:** The original research was more just quilts' lore like the Underground Railroad story or through women's quilting groups and competitions, and the textiles themselves. I unfortunately can't read about every textile I come across, but I have started to meet people who really study their histories. A lot of the origins of these fabrics are international so the conversation is larger than just Americana. Sometimes its literature like Octavia Butler or Toni Morrison and how they speak about quilts or going to my aunt's house and her saying, "This quilt has been passed down and I want to give this to you for your new son." Sometimes it can be very heady and academic and sometimes vernacular and casual.

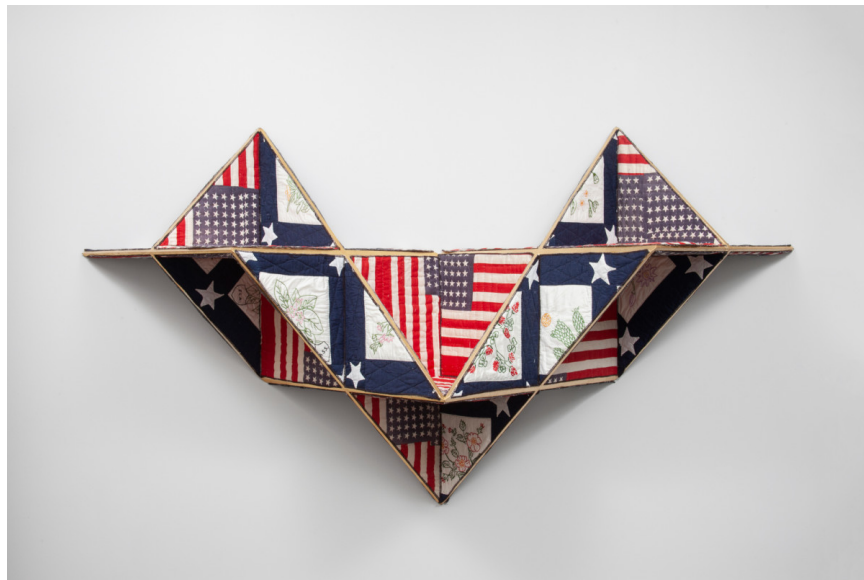
**AB: In addition to literature, are there other cultural references you find yourself returning to repeatedly?**

**SB:** Yes, strangely enough, I think about hip hop a lot. Specifically, sampling and that kind of pastiche aesthetic that we are used to now because it's been around 30 or 40 years. I listen to a lot of Gut Bucket

Blues, Jazz, Hard-bop and early Electronic Jazz. That ties into the quilt for me because it speaks so much to history and improvisation and exploration, risk taking, discourse, harmony, all those elements.

**AB: You grew up in Los Angeles. How does this CAAM show feel like a homecoming?**

**SB:** Well, it's very funny that you ask. I took painting and drawing lessons at CAAM on Saturday mornings when I was a child for probably two or three years. I am very well acquainted with the museum from several iterations over the last 50 years. I even went to summer camp in Exposition Park, that same complex. My cousin John Biggers, the muralist, who passed about 20 years ago, had a solo exhibition there in the eighties. My whole family saw his exhibition. That was one of the first instances of seeing an artist who had reached a certain degree of success. My dad was a doctor, and all his friends were doctors and lawyers, but they were all talking about this guy, John Biggers, like he was the most important guy in the room who had accomplished more than any of them. It was then that I saw being an artist as a real thing, and I saw the gravity of it in that exhibition. It's hard for me to put it into words, and it's hard for me to project how it's going to feel, but being in that space is going to be like a full circle moment.



**Sanford Biggers**, *Reconstruction*, 2019. Antique quilt, birch plywood, gold leaf, 38 x 72 x 19 in.  
© Sanford Biggers and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago. Photography by RCH Photography.

**AB: Considering your parents did both come from very traditional professional backgrounds, how do they perceive this choice to become an artist?**

**SB:** I think my father was a bit of a Renaissance man—if you know science you should know math, if you know math you should know art, and music, poetry and all those lofty, romantic ideas. For him to become a neurosurgeon in the Jim Crow south was far more of a risk than me becoming an artist in the eighties, nineties and 2000s. The thing he and my mom did impress upon me was if I am going to do it, I need to do it with the same tenacity and dedication that anyone would have in any higher education profession. They were very supportive, and we grew up with art around the house—we had works by Ernie Barnes, Samella Lewis and Romare Beardon, prints largely, but visual art was part of my upbringing.

**AB: Were there any specific pieces that you grew up with that really sparked your passion or interest in art?**

**SB:** Yes, there was a reproduction of a John Biggers work called *The Quilting Party*. The title is a total coincidence, just something about the layers in that mural and imagery was always very intriguing to me. I was never thinking about that in terms of quilts at all. I didn't even make that connection to the title until I was about five years into making quilts. There were also a couple sculptural works that I couldn't even name, just stuff that my parents picked up. I recall being terrified of them because they were large and heavy, and kind of

abstract and strange. The physical reaction I had to them is something I try to achieve when I am working in two or three dimensions so that it becomes something you need to grapple with on both a visual and physical level.

**AB:** What do you hope viewers take away from the exhibit?

**SB:** I want them to really look at the materials. Look closely, see the stitching they may have always taken for granted in a quilt; there are moments when I use large swaths of one color, and it becomes monochromatic fields and gets rid of the pattern, but it highlights the actual stitchwork. It ends up looking like drawn lines in the different pitch and texture. I like for viewers to figure out what happened first, and what happened last, both from the original quilt and my interventions on them. Then, in the later works where I think my hand is a little more subtle, figure out what has changed and what has remained the same and then how that is affecting their retina, the optical shifting between the fabric pattern and a few different lines of paint and oil stick and expand it into a three-dimensional piece. I want the viewer to just look and experience with their eyes and, if they are slick, [laughs] with their hands.



**Sanford Biggers**, *Incident Geometry*, 2017. Antique quilt, birch plywood, gold leaf, 48 x 17 x 22 in.  
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