

HYPERALLERGIC



Sanford Biggers Summons the Power of Deep Music

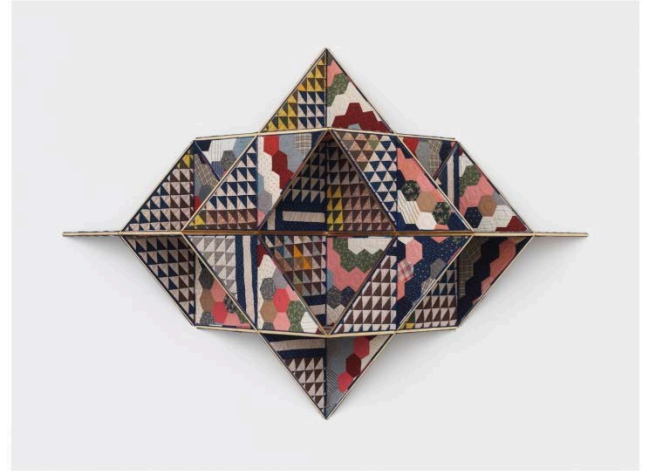
By: Seph Rodney

Sometimes my experience of one piece of art illuminates another. Recently, I visited the 8th Floor Gallery to see Elia Alba's exhibition, *The Supper Club*, which features a panoply of photographic portraits of contemporary artists. Among them is one of Sanford Biggers, titled *The Syncretist (Sanford Biggers)* (2014). As with the other portraits, the title provides insight into the artist's practice. Describing Biggers as a syncretist does shed light on his current exhibition at Marianne Boesky gallery, *Selah*. Syncretism has to do with the conjoining of distinct cultural systems, or the elements thereof. The process is primarily associated with the history of religion, that is, belief systems, and *Selah* recognizes that being black in the United States is a syncretic state of being, that the African and the American have become lodged together in ways that are at times brilliant, grandiose, and also violent and inscrutable.



Men in afros loom over me on the gallery walls, like shadowed projections issuing from the small, seemingly African figures clustered together on the ground several feet in front. I call them "The Men in Afros" in my head, but Biggers titles them *Overstood* (2017). These men (who seem familiar because I've seen their cousins before, at the Harlem Uptown exhibition this past summer) are larger than life, mythic activists, street preachers, or singers — and yes, in my imagination, I think of them tapping into something deeply powerful, ancestral. And I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels this when listening to Sam Cooke sing, or Rakim rhyme.

But Biggers doesn't let the work become hagiography. For the piece *Selah* (2017), he has taken bits of antique quilts — the endowment of hands and ancestral knowledge passed from generation to generation — and added sequins to fold over a figure that is itself in tatters. The figure has two arms raised but only one leg. This representation is a riff. The patterning is profligate, explosive. This is not a story of kings and queens dethroned, or slavery borne and overcome. It's not even a story. It's the middle of a rhyme scheme, where the words bounce and knock off the words that arrived in the previous bar, finding sense as they go. It looks haphazard, but the better word is improvisational — like the Poor Righteous Teachers say in their track "Rock Dis Funky Joint," "Like hip hop, complicated ... according to the moods of my intellect." Thinking of the show in terms of music, I can't help but see the piece *Khemetstry* (2017) (which is a play on Kemetic beliefs) as an exploded speaker, adorned with the patterns of rhyme that it could not fully contain.



The most affecting piece in the show is the video installation *Infinite Tabernacle* (2017), where several figural sculptures, including *BAM (Seated Warrior)* (2017), are shown being shot to pieces (*BAM* is displayed with part of an arm missing). It suggests to me that this amalgamation of cultures and influences, beliefs and narratives, that is American blackness — this funky joint — also comes out of an iconoclastic ethos. As much as we venerate our totems and the pasts they are linked to, sometimes, as Rakim says, we also need to kick a hole in the speaker, pull the plug, and then jet.