

BROOKLYN RAIL CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

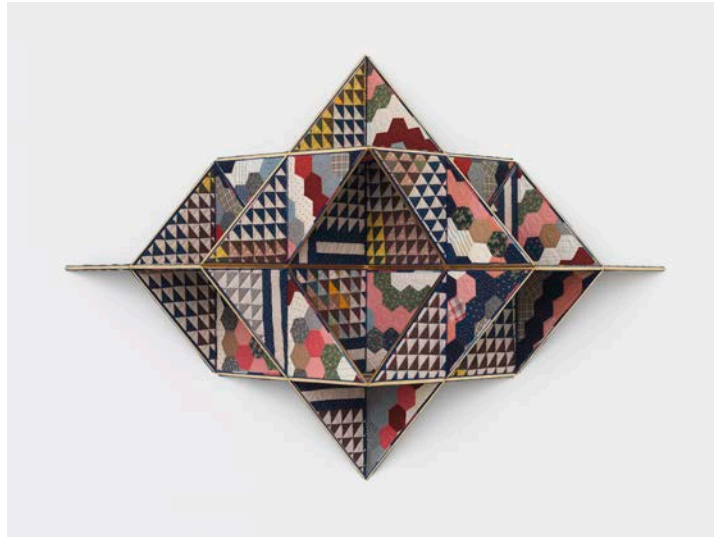


Sanford Biggers: *Selah*

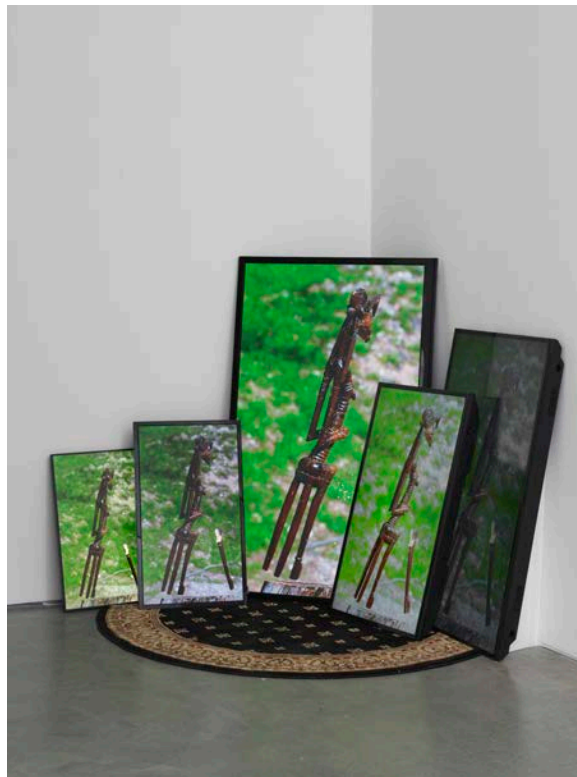
By: Steven Pestana
October 5, 2017

In *Selah*, Sanford Biggers's first solo exhibition at Marianne Boesky Gallery, the African American artist continues his ongoing exploration of African power figures and his carefully formalist work with antique quilts. Shifting from textiles to sculpture to video with efficient mastery, Biggers consistently accounts for the latent and oftentimes tragic symbolic connotations of his materials: jubilant dancing figures become defenseless innocents, patterned surfaces become codes for help, and shadows become defiant rebels.

Overstood (2017) puts Biggers's artful wordplay on display. Highlighting the subtle political orientation of the verb "to understand," one might begin to wonder if the term, as a spatial metaphor, implies (or perhaps even demands) that the comprehension of an idea requires a kind of ideological submission. Attempting to envision these terms as oriented in space conjures images of power balance and its linguistic machinations. The disparity may be best illustrated in *Overstood's* contrast of scales. Here, an apparently diminutive group of power figures casts an enormous shadow of the iconic image of late-60s black power figures: Ben Stewart, head of the Black Students Union at San Francisco State University; George Murray, a university teacher and Black Panther fired for encouraging students to carry firearms; and Bobby Seale, the Chairman of the Black Panther Party (and an unnamed fourth). At twelve feet tall, these shadow figures project a steadfast resolve over the viewer, visually expressing a conquest implied in the title's use of the past-tense. The role of figuration is less pronounced in Biggers's repurposed textiles and quilts. Biggers was first drawn to these because of a fascination with the secret grammars hidden in their patterns, as well as the objects' symbolic connotations.



Folklore suggests that encoded quilts were used to signal the presence of safe houses and other important information to escaped slaves. They also bring to mind notions of warmth and shelter. Dismantling, combining, and reassembling the work of often anonymous seamstresses, Biggers considers the pieces to be a collaborative process as well as a means of revealing secret histories of the black experience in America. The artist is perhaps at his most experimental when drawing parallels between the flat geometric design of quilt appliqués, the 3D folding patterns of origami, and the muralist John Biggers's (Sanford's cousin) interest in sacred geometry, as in the piece *Khemetstry* (2017). The title is a portmanteau of "chemistry" and Khemet, one of the ancient names for Egypt, literally translating to "the black land" and reflecting the pervasive combinatory sensibility that characterizes Biggers's work.



In the five-monitor video piece, *Infinite Tabernacle* (2017), Biggers continues his *BAM* project in which an off-camera shooter blasts away at wooden power figures, which the artist has dipped in wax. The title of the work is ostensibly a modified reference to Psalm 61:4 of the Old Testament, which reads, "I will abide in thy tabernacle forever: I will trust in the covert of thy wings. Selah." Discretely tucked away, perhaps even hidden,

in the corner we are witness to acts of senseless violence against these sacred objects. It is jarring, even unsettling, when the figures are linked to the loss of human life. In previous iterations of this series, Biggers dedicated the video and resulting sculpture—cast in bronze—to the unarmed black victims of police violence (for example, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, and Yvette Smith). In between shots, the footage dwells on fraught, flickering moments of transience. Sometimes the frame rate accelerates; other times it slows to nearly absolute zero, with air borne debris approaching a weightless abstraction. Suddenly, the screen goes dark, at which point, one might pause and silently think: *Selah*.

What, then, is *Selah*? The word can be found as a refrain intermittently throughout The Book of Psalms, an entreaty to meditate on what was just said. Rastafarian culture, one of Biggers's recurring motifs, sometimes uses it as a sort of "Amen," or even as a word for JAH. It has also been interpreted as "forever." The word's malleability is well-suited to Biggers's own mercurial pursuits. Perhaps that's why he also gave the title *Selah* to the centerpiece of the exhibition: a towering figure in an almost ecstatic pose, bedecked in ornate quilts, the form evokes previous *BAM* sculptures on a monumental scale, missing limbs and chunks of its frame. With expressive arms thrown up towards the sky, *Selah* is a heartrending meditation on the terror of innocent black victims of police violence and a history of trauma going back centuries. Yet despite the clear and present sorrow of the work in *Selah*, it collectively offers a kind of consolation through faith, devotion, and mindfulness in the face of desolation.