

ARTFORUM



New York CRITICS' PICKS: Sanford Biggers

By: Wendy Vogel
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Two years after the debut of Sanford Biggers's controversial sculpture *Laocöon*, 2015—an inflatable ten-foot-long rendition of the 1970s cartoon character Fat Albert, laid out like a corpse (a eulogy to African Americans murdered by police and to the “character assassination” of Bill Cosby, according to the artist)—he has retooled his kill-your-idols theme. For “*Selah*,” Biggers moves away from depicting literal scenes of black death toward a more symbolically complicated process where icons of black culture are both cannibalized and consecrated. The exhibition features several sculptures from his series “BAM,” 2015–17. To create these works, the artist dips figurative African sculptures made from wood into wax and then shoots them with a gun before casting them in bronze. In *BAM (Seated Warrior)*, 2017, a prominent chunk is missing from the arm of an elongated soldier whose feet are covered by an antique quilt. The sculpture is shot by an off-screen gun in the slow-motion five-channel video installation *Infinite Tabernacle*, 2017. (Notably, Biggers said that he didn't pull the trigger for the piece.)

Selah, 2017, the exhibition's namesake, scales up a cast of a bullet-riddled African figure with raised arms, suggesting a tragic position of surrender. Like *Laocöon*, this statue, lined with sequined fabric and covered by painted antique quilts, stands ten feet tall. Embellishments to Biggers's flat quilt pieces, which hang on the walls, include sequined cubes, stylized waves, and, in *Khemetstry*, 2017, a geometric armature: a nod, Biggers says, to the study of sacred geometry by his cousin, the late Houston muralist John T. Biggers.

The artist's use of appropriation acknowledges that history is ugly and painfully cyclical. But his formally dazzling sculptures lean on a kind of violence easily consumed by an audience accustomed to disaster porn. "Selah" raises a fundamental question: Can political art be effective without glamorizing brutality?