



*Sanford Biggers (second from right) with friends and his sculpture entitled "Mirror", at the 2024 Armory Show, New York, NY*

## ANATOMY LESSONS AT THE ARMORY SHOW

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

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Anatomy lessons are all over The Armory, the annual top art fair in New York. Jeanne Silverthorne's *Banshee*, a self-portrait that received Hyperallergic's honorable mention for recumbent figure and Sanford Biggers' *Mirror*, a mashup of Asian, European, and African forms, both stood out.

Biggers' *Mirror* is one of twelve Platform works selected by Eugenie Tsai, a former curator at The Brooklyn Museum. At over eight feet tall, it is not the Fair's biggest sculpture but is the artist's largest marble sculpture to date and the only large marble work I saw at The Armory. Its genesis is an elaborate process, starting with 3-D scans of forms Biggers chooses: African masks, European busts, and classical figures. Biggers then creates a mashup of gestures and representations of the body that comment on myths, archetypes, and power dynamics. This is part of Biggers' Chimera series, and the title, *Mirror*, is left open to each viewer's interpretation.

Biggers told me, "This came out of a series I made when I was living in Rome among all the ruins and marble. I combined objects I was seeing around, including things being sold on the street. You see combinations of African, Asian, Pre-Columbian, and Greco-Roman." The front of the form is provocative with the bare feet and legs crossed under a filmy see-through dress while in the back view, the figure's legs and derriere are contoured under heavier draped cloth. These effects are difficult to achieve in marble. Both arms are bare, their gestures flirtatious or thoughtful or both. One arm poses pertly on the hip while the other hand bends up toward the mask that hides the face. The mask has mixed African features. The mask's long, pointed chin and almost-closed eyelids may allude to Senufo masks, but that's a guess. Is the aquiline nose Asian? What about the diamond-shaped mouth and other distinctive features? I don't know. That's the artist's point. Sometimes even expert conjectures are off the mark. Behind this mask, we see a head with long hair in an unfamiliar style both gathered up and hanging. A garland of

flowers on a loop of marble 'fabric' contrasts with an actual upholstery fabric draped over the same arm. The fleshy natural color of the marble and a low double pedestal are notable formal qualities.



Sanford Biggers *Mirror*, 2024 Marble 99 7/8 x 29 7/8 x 21 1/4 inches 253.7 x 75.9 x 54 cm, courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery and Sanford Biggers Studio

Oddly, the mashup works. The pedestal is low to the ground yet the form is larger than we are—almost watching over us. This Chimera series questions all origins and the ways that histories have been recorded since ancient times. For example, European histories have often been deemed more important than indigenous histories. The privileged few who traveled far and brought back antiquities usually had some training in the cultures they were studying. Yet even those who spoke ancient languages didn't see the work in the same ways or in the same contexts as the artists who created the work or even their contemporary ancestors. Above all, moving ancient and even contemporary forms away from their places of origin creates new contexts. In past centuries, European historians plundered ancient civilizations to put these items into museums and add their own labels, so there were many opportunities for misrepresentation. Stripped of its original context, any form becomes an archeological artifact rather than art with its own contextual meanings. Whatever the new owner says the work means is not necessarily what it meant to its creators.

*Mirror* may be a cautionary title meaning that we see what we want to see. Its diverse parts remind us to look 360 degrees—in every direction—before we decide what we see. One reason why I decided to write about this work is that, to me, it's a Rorschach test for ALL Armory fair viewers. I visited this sculpture at least six times, and I saw many, many people variously stop, take a selfie, and / or walk on by. I didn't see anyone studying it carefully or pondering what the art and its title mean. By that standard, fairgoers are extremely shallow and superficial.

I heard a few stories about superfans at Jeanne Silverthorne's solo booth, which was part of the Focus solo shows in its own corner of the fair. Silverthorne uses traditional methods of modeling in clay and making a mold; then she casts most of her works in rubber—in a specially-formulated resilient rubber she has invented.

*Banshee*, 2023, is Silverthorne's self-portrait at 73—a prostate figure with untied sneakers, jeans, a t-shirt, and glasses. The mold is lifelike, yet the artist has purposely used separate casts for hands, head, feet, and each body part and then interconnected the parts haphazardly, giving the body a Frankenstein feel. For example, there is a flap where the head and neck connect. This looks more like a stitched-together corpse, an effigy, rather than a living artist. Why did the artist do this to herself? The name *Banshee* signifies a wailing Gaelic figure, so why is she comatose? Read on.

Silverthorne and Biggers were each also featured in live 4 p.m. discussions in the Armory Theater on Saturday and Sunday respectively. This allowed those audiences to hear directly how each artist thinks and works. Silverthorne, for her part, reminded her audience that The Armory Fair started as a fair at The Gramercy Hotel. She spoke about the topsy turvy art world in the 90s and how the vulnerable body and art were impacted by artists of color, AIDS, feminism, LGBTQ awareness, and scientific innovations such as the photo electron microscope, which she used. She talked about hard times, the art market collapse, artist-initiated innovations, being in a male-dominated art culture, and ever-rising rents for studio spaces.

As a result, much like Van Gogh, the studio and her own body became Silverthorne's subjects—literal sites and metaphors for the larger spaces we inhabit. The bare lightbulb is her metaphor for ideas, and broken or used lightbulbs are her version of *Bad Ideas*. Often a bug or spider (in rubber, of course) surveys the all-rubber scene—a rotting wooden studio floor with a dandelion growing through the boards. The artist's rubber crates symbolize deep storage and act as both packing crates and pedestals for her sculpture. She told an over-full house, "From the beginning, there has been a phenomenological conflation of the studio and my body—the guts of the studio are my innards. ...my figure is constructed out of 2 x 4s, ...Rubber remains the constant; it has a fleshy quality that connects it to the body; it's disobedient, it wobbles, flops, and ..has comic subversiveness. And in that comic subversiveness, I hope there are echoes of the joyful anarchy of an earlier art world that some of us were very privileged to experience."



Jeanne Silverthorne, *Bad Ideas*, 2007, platinum silicone rubber, metal, phosphorescent pigment, 20 x 15 x 20 in (50.8 x 38 x 50.8 cm),  
edition of 2

Armory Week is a prime time for international visitors. So their artfully-dressed bodies mingled with bodies of art on display, including many figures, fabrics, and new uses of common materials from yarn to staples and bottle caps. Somehow *Banshee* and *Mirror* are our beaten down yet rising up new, composite selves. We can navigate our bodies into the future only if we can figure out how to see what is around us.