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Sanford Biggers manifests a new destiny with *Ago*

Using quilts and a riot of cultural references, the artist rewrites the history of the Underground Railroad.

By Jeff Huebner
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Ago

Sanford Biggers's window installation *Ago* has a formal decorativeness that belies its provocative intentions. It combines a number of mediums (fabric, spray paint, wood, light boxes) and cultural references (quilt making, graffiti, Japanese woodblock prints, landscape painting) to put a twist on manifest destiny and America's coded—and not-so-coded—racial histories.

The starting point is a reference to a widely distributed 1863 picture of a runaway slave, Gordon, that showed his back heavily scarred by repeated whippings. Taken by the photographer William McPherson and his partner, Mr. Oliver, the image helped expose the horrors of slavery and has been credited with galvanizing the abolitionist movement.

In Biggers's retelling, the outline of Gordon's figure—back turned toward the viewer, face in profile, hand on hip—is spray-painted on one of three quilts; it's also the shape of two wood cutouts that feature

patterned designs. The Gordon figure on one of the quilts seems to be contemplating the nature scenes—a waterfall, waves—painted on the others. Floating clouds (as light boxes) recall *ukiyo-e* prints. The tableau also suggests mid-19th-century Hudson River School paintings in which white men are portrayed surveying idealized American landscapes as they discover and settle the continent.

"It's from that old romantic vision of the west, where blacks and Native Americans are really not part of manifest destiny, not part of the whole grand narrative," Biggers said in an interview at the gallery. "Now [the slave] is in the grand position of surveying the land."

The "repurposing" of the images, he said, was like "rewriting" (or "righting") history.

Biggers, who teaches at Columbia University, grew up in Los Angeles, where he was involved in the hip-hop and graffiti scenes. He taught English in Japan for three years, and earned an MFA from the School of the Art Institute in 1999. His work has been shown in such venues as the 2002 Whitney Biennial, Prospect 1 in New Orleans, and the Tate Modern, as well as in a recent survey at the Brooklyn Museum.

Biggers said he began working with quilts in 2009, drawn to them because of their associations with African-American culture and the Underground Railroad. Some were given to him by descendants of slaves. He's painted, silk-screened, embroidered, or applied charcoal to quilts—"like graffiti on pieces of antiquity," he told me, adding later that his alteration of them represents a "part erasure/part embellishment of the past."

Patterns on quilts hung outside safe houses along Underground Railroad routes have long been thought to have contained coded messages to guide fugitive slaves on their journeys. Yet Biggers acknowledged that this claim hasn't been supported by historical scholarship.

"It's been back and forth for so many years—it gets claimed to be true, then it gets debunked," he said. "The myth is real, so the story is fact, regardless of if it factually happened or not. The persistence of the claim still exists. That is what I'm interested in, because history, at the end of the day, is a compilation of a lot of convenient facts, sometimes fabrications and projections."