

At VCU, 2 artists interpret story of Harriet Tubman

By Jo Lord
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The work of internationally recognized artist and former Virginia Commonwealth University professor Sanford Biggers is on display in “Codex” at VCU’s Anderson Gallery.

Biggers has explored themes of American history, identity, race and spirituality in his work. He continues to do so in “Codex,” which was inspired by his “Afrofuturist notion” of Harriet Tubman, the abolitionist guided by the stars as she moved American slaves to freedom, as an astronaut.

For “Codex,” Biggers painted on nine historic quilts, a number of which were given to him by the families of past slave owners. A secondary inspiration for Biggers was that quilts were hung as “signposts” to guide slaves escaping along the Underground Railroad. Biggers has infused the quilts with symbolism that includes stars, star maps, dance notations and the Buddhist lotus flower.

Also showing at Anderson is “Jacob Lawrence: The Harriet Tubman Series,” which features paintings that the artist, who died in 2000, created in 1939-40.

“This is an amazing pairing of shows by artists of different times, both using the story of Harriet Tubman as their underpinning,” said gallery coordinator Traci Garland. The difference is that Lawrence’s work presents the story chronologically while Biggers’ “Codex” uses the language of symbols. “It’s interesting and instructive to see two artists inspired by the same idea but with very different creative outputs,” Garland said.