

Codes and Clouds

Artist Sanford Biggers deciphers a secret language at Anderson Gallery

By Karen Newton
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Now based in New York, Sanford Biggers, an interdisciplinary artist and teacher at VCU, explores the secret life of quilts in his latest show.

When you think of quilts, you probably think of home arts and crafts. But "Sanford Biggers: Codex," the new show at the Anderson Gallery, offers a fascinating look at quilt as canvas, sculptor as painter and American history through escape art.

In other words, you'll have to leave your notion of what a quilt is at the door.

"Supposedly quilts were used as signposts," Biggers says, referring to the 19th century. "They were hung a certain way or made in a certain pattern to guide escaping slaves. It was a whole system of linguistics. Now they're saying that may be a myth, but that myth is a source of interest to me, whether it's true or not."

Collecting American quilts from the 18th and 19th centuries, some of which were gifts from descendants of slave owners, Biggers was inspired to use them as canvasses. "I got my master's in painting but I've made a career of not painting," he says, laughing. "I was looking for inspiration to get back into that part of my practice."

As a sculptor, he'd always use found objects, seeing them as starting points until he changed them. "With a quilt, sometimes I sit in a room and look at it for four months. Do I want to totally impose my intent on the quilt or do I want work with the pattern and rhythm of it?"

Biggers' attempts to create a visual and artistic language by painting on the quilts is necessarily tempered by what knowledge the viewer brings to the exhibit. Some people will recognize star maps, dance notations and the Buddhist lotus flower, while others may see no further than the grinning mouth of a Cheshire cat, stars or dripped paint.

"All of them are embellished images in an embedded image," Biggers says, walking through the exhibit. "If you're here with someone of an older generation, they could definitely explain some of the imagery to someone younger. That might be my agenda, to start a conversation among viewers."

Working seven days a week, Biggers puts in long hours but can execute the painting of the quilt at a fast pace if he chooses. "I challenge myself with how quickly I can do one and then how intimate I can be with another. Because I take so long to plan, I can focus on the materials and the technique. I'll just get started and I'll be thinking about what else can I do."

At the moment, he sees the quilts as future components of larger murals, making the language even bigger.

Suspended around the gallery with the quilts are clouds made of raw cotton, a staple of slavery. "It's a concise statement, like with the quilts. I'm using the existing, charged nature of the objects to let them speak without imposing too much on them. The clouds work that way too. They're very charged, but almost banal. The history of slavery and quilts leads back to cotton. They're light, airy, ephemeral, which doesn't convey the terror of how it was cultivated."

Also part of the exhibition is his 2004 installation, "Calenda (Big Ass Bang!)." Walking into another gallery, this one darkened, you see footprints painted on the walls and floor and a spinning disco ball, suggesting both dance steps and celestial charts. "Dance was used by slaves to communicate with each other," he says. "Calenda was a specific dance. Harriet Tubman moved slaves at night, so the footprints mirror the routes of escapees and form the stars of the constellation above."

It's a perfect summer show. Expect a visual treat and a thought-provoking experience, which Biggers says was the motivation for the show's name. "I called it codex because if you decipher the language you are freeing yourself, which I think is the key for everybody." S

"Sanford Biggers: Codex" is at the Anderson Gallery through Aug. 4. For information, call 828-1522 or visit arts.vcu.edu/andersongallery. The Anderson also stays open Wednesday evenings from 5-7, from June 5 through July 24.