

Interview With Sanford Biggers

By Thomas Butter April 2010

The following conversation occurred shortly before the opening of Moon Medicine, a solo exhibition at the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum featuring new work by Sanford Biggers. The discussion weaved together topics as disparate as Brazilian Capoeira, Lewis Carroll's Cheshire grin, Harriet Tubman's work as an astronaut, the Buddhist "both/and" philosophy and Prince's indescribable funk. These ideas, and the connotations they provoke, will help lay the foundation for Biggers' upcoming "introspective" at the Brooklyn Museum and major installation at MASS MoCA (both slated for late 2011).



Sanford Biggers, Seen, 2009. Video still from Shuffle (The Carnival Within). Courtesy the Artist and Michael Klein Arts.

Tom Butter: So Sanford, how did you learn how to ride a unicycle?

Sanford Biggers: That wasn't me, that was my friend Ricardo. Ricardo is a Brazilian circus performer, stunt man, DJ, father of 4, who lives in Germany. I was at a residency in Stuttgart and I met him randomly on the bus one night. He heard me speaking English to someone and joined in the conversation. After becoming friends, I became fascinated with his story: being a Brazilian ex-pat living in this small German city for 25 years. He told me several stories of the racism he encountered then and how different Germany is now. He has 4 children from 2 different marriages and is an important figure in the surprisingly large Brazilian community of Stuttgart.

TB: He is performer, that's how he makes a living?

SB: He wears many hats. He DJ's, performs as a vocalist, circus performer, stunt man, choreographer and teaches Capoeira and stunts at one of the universities there.

TB: What is Capoeira?

SB: It is a form of Brazilian martial arts/dance. It is done in a circle, along with music played by the berimbau. It is a stringed percussion instrument . . . The Capoeiristas basically battle each other: it looks like they are fighting, but they are actually dancing, or playing as they say. It is quite literally the precursor to break dancing!

TB: You mean actually? That was the influence in NYC?

SB: Part of it.

TB: Wow!

SB: It doesn't get spoken about that often, but the form is there, the mock battle is there, the super-athletic gymnastic moves and the rhythm. Even the floor moves and flips.

TB: I thought it came out of "the dozens", the verbal sparring in Black culture...

SB: Well, that all comes from Africa anyway, and in Brazil, you have some of the most intact African forms. That's what's so fascinating! All of this stuff goes way, way, way back in the African Diaspora. The dozens translates into those dance moves, but it also translates into rap, which is the mock battle, the one-upsmanship and so on...these are traditional forms, with new manifestations, globally.

TB: So what building did you get Ricardo to ride through on his unicycle?

SB: That was the Schloss Solitude, a castle where I was doing a residency around 45 minutes outside of Stuttgart. I had him dressed up and riding the unicycle through the castle grounds, putting make-up on and taking it off. Trying to mask himself in order to matriculate, while consequently having an identity crisis. I don't know if you saw the full video yet...

TB: *I did, at Tyler...*

SB: So the young boy sitting in the train is his son, and he is learning how to put on the mask, and take it off as well...as he becomes a man he continues to put on this mask. All the while a smile, hanging from a tree, is taunting him with its flashing lights.

TB: *It is called "Cheshire" in another piece, right?*

SB: Yes. And just as the Cheshire in Wonderland, it taunts Alice, this insidious grin taunts him and finally breaks him down. But it is also a big blackface grin. It is an amalgam of metaphors...I am heaping them on each other, and seeing what kind of meaning comes out of it.

TB: *I was thinking about your work at Tyler, I saw your show there, (Jack Wolgin International Competition in the Fine Arts) plus the material Michael Klein sent me, and I thought, that's probably him, Sanford Biggers...and I was thinking about the construction of a persona and what that might mean in terms of ethics, morality and action and being in the world. How you are using that idea. It feels like that is part of what you are doing.*

SB: It is a part of it. I don't think anyone has ever asked me about notions of ethics, morality and being before. I'm challenging our dated binary relationship to the supposed Other. Otherness is in the eye of the beholder after all, and in 2010 persona and identity are no longer monolithic and inward gazing. For this reason in my performative and video work, I try not to be the subject. It happens occasionally because I may be the only person available, and I work for cheap (laughs)...but optimally I prefer to use other people. I do not see my performers as "Ricardo" or "Sanford", but instead working as archetypes. In some of my previous work, it was the archetype of the "African-American male"...



Sanford Biggers, Cheshire, 2008. Aluminum, plexiglass, LEDs, timer; 67" x 33" x 10"
Courtesy of the artist, Schloss Solitude, and D'amelio Terras

TB: *hmm...*

SB: ...but now that has expanded to the diasporic individual, one who is more composite than his/her visage may imply. The logical conceptual extension of this is for the performers to represent our syncretic human condition - so that it is not really about Ricardo being a Brazilian in Germany, but that all of us, at some point, are displaced. I don't know how effective it is yet, it's still an experiment, but in "Shuffle" when you see him going through this ritual of putting on and taking off clown make up, it's not just about him but all of us putting on that mask to navigate...

TB: *...to pass...*

SB: ...to pass...exactly. We put on that mask so that our super-ego can go out into the world assimilate and pass. When we get home and take it off, our id comes back out to express itself. This is something we all do to some extent. We've also been socially trained to see things as binary- it is the way the propaganda has conditioned us all...I'm trying to break that down. If we have somehow been able to accept a Black president in the US, we should be ready to evolve beyond the binary.

TB: *When you speak about the human condition I'm thinking about an interview I read of yours- you talk about suffering at least as part of what you are dealing with...*

SB: Uh huh...

TB: *There are different kinds, and different degrees...*

SB: Sure.

TB: *I think it would be hard to quantify it...this amount or that amount. So you want us to make that leap it seems.*

SB: I do. I do. I think there are 2 things happening: on an artistic, formal level, the work is supposed to engage you in such a way that it makes you spend more than the average 3 seconds to look at it. I would like you to start to spend time and look at it, to figure out where you fit in. How do you absorb this imagery through your own personal pathologies and experiences? So that is what I would like to happen on an artistic level. On the larger social level, part of it is challenging certain symbols- like this big smiley face playing both sides of the coin. Being literally this innocuous Cheshire cat from Alice In Wonderland but also this loaded blackface minstrelsy smile. Can you see both, or do they negate each other, you know?

TB: *With the taunting aspect you were talking about before, alongside of this joyful grin?*

SB: Yes! Exactly, exactly. Well you know it all goes back to my interest in Buddhism- seeing these things not as an either/or situation but as a “both/and” situation. It can be both this and that. It doesn’t have to be one or the other. It is not just up to the individual to experience it, but to identify it for themselves whenever they see it...

TB: *To identify it for ourselves at various moments...*



SB: Yes, possibly.

TB: *So you physically cut that grin into a fragment- I was really interested in that- you put it on the floor, near the wall. It didn't seem like it went through the wall- it was distinctly an object. I was curious about that, putting it right next to the wall. I couldn't tell what that was...*

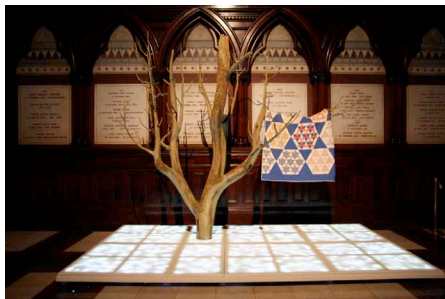
SB: I cut it because the grin always appears and disappears, so it does taunt in that way...to recreate it as half of a grin, and put it upside down on the floor reduces it, but when it lights up, the reflection in the floor completes it again. So it was actually still whole.

Sanford Biggers, Smirk, 2009, Aluminum, plexiglass, LEDs, timer; 30 x 26.5 x 10.5 inches. Courtesy of Artist and Michael Klein Arts, New York, NY

TB: *I go with objects so quickly I didn't see it that way. Interesting...*

SB: Once again- both/and, not either/or...yeah I think in the new work, all these things are coming into play- serious formal decisions, and really conceptual, abstracted social concerns are in there too. It is exciting and it is like a cauldron: I don't know what is going to come out of it each time, but I am putting more and more into it!

TB: *I'm interested in the Harvard piece in the light of that...*



SB: This is Memorial Hall, and the walls are covered with the names of fallen soldiers from the Union in the Civil War who were Harvard graduates. All the writing on the wall are names. This piece, called “Constellation” responds to that in the sense that it has direct reference to stops on the Underground Railroad, and maybe it's a memorial to fallen slaves, too, in their quest for freedom. Being that these names are those of fallen Union soldiers it makes sense to also honor the slaves who were part of the reason for this battle in the first place.

TB: *So how did you do that?*

Sanford Biggers, Constellation 2 (Cambridge), 2009. Mixed media installation: Polyurethane, resin, and steel. 8 x 12 x 12 ft. Courtesy the Artist and Michael Klein Arts, New York, NY. Image courtesy Anita Kan.

SB: The raised platform, a stage if you will, has stars inside it, LED's that look like constellations in the cosmos. A tree grows from that, and hanging on one of the branches is a quilt, and this quilt is also adorned with stars, so both have

references to the cosmos. The Underground Railroad connection for me is the following: I have recently started to think of Harriet Tubman as an astronaut, navigating the stars, trying to develop a trail, a way to escape slavery into freedom. While ruminating on this notion of the stars, I have somehow made an homage to Harriet Tubman. And the performance that took place by the vocalist Imani Uzuri involves her singing text from Rumi, but in the form of Negro spirituals. It goes deep into the church tradition, and the formal arrangement of gospel and the structure of Black choral rendition is another nod to Harriet Tubman and an homage to fallen slaves.

TB: *Rumi is an Iranian poet...*

SB: Yes, Persian.

TB: *But the music is gospel music?*

SB: Yes she arranged some of the text to be sung with the music, but the text is very Buddhist in nature- the text is- “My place is placeless, a trace of the traceless, neither body or soul. I belong to the beloved.” It is very open-ended basically and about the immaterial essence of us all.

TB: *I heard the phrase on the You -Tube video of the performance- “trace and traceless”- it is powerful...and you had an instrument- called a koto, I think?*

SB: Yeah, a koto. It is a Japanese traditional instrument. The performer Sumie Kaneko has been playing koto since she was 5 years old. I lived in Japan for 3 years, and I have always been a big fan of the traditional instruments. She performed a traditional piece, and then she went into an improvised piece with Imani, the singer. They were basically doing a call and response. The way I described that whole scenario to her was that the music she produced was the sound from the cosmic void. And through that sound, the oracle, or Imani the vocalist, was manifested from the sound. Out of nothing, she appears placeless, traceless, and she starts to speak these in repetition, from Rumi, Sun Ra, and some original phrasings that the choir comes in with, and embellishes. These are oracles and angels who are singing to us...like a bodhisattva giving us messages.



Sanford Biggers, Still image from Stranger Fruit, 2009. Sumie Kaneko and Imani Uzuri performing. Courtesy the Artist and Harvard University, Office for the Arts. Image courtesy of Anita Kan.

TB: *The choir is a Harvard group, right?*

SB: The Harvard acappella group - KeyChange.

TB: *How was it to work with the institution on this?*

SB: It was a process- a lot of phone calls, a lot of meetings, a lot of scheduling. But they helped me find the koto player, they helped me get in touch with the acappella group. Those students were great, a joy to work with, they took to Imani’s guidance very well. The director of the group, a young guy named Keith Doelling had no problem falling back and letting Imani direct everyone. So it was really nice, a great exchange, a good experience for them I think.

TB: *How was it received up there?*

SB: People loved it! We probably had a good 70 or 80 people there and people were very responsive, very appreciative. There was a point where everyone started clapping and singing along under Imani’s direction. If you can imagine this Harvard audience singing, clapping, whooping and hollering!

TB: *I read the student review in their local blog, and they were saying they thought they knew what to expect, but ends up saying it was very surprising and that everyone should come see for themselves. Probably a great review! (laughter)*

SB: Yeah! It could also be that they ask you to make so many statements about the work months before the work is done that when the work is finished, it is totally different from the statement! (laughter). It is a creative process.

TB: *The tree is a big deal in your work....*

SB: Yeah, it is. Not on purpose, it just seems to be a recurring element somehow. That started in 1998, when I was at Skowhegan. I did my first tree piece, where I moved a piano into the woods, and for around a month, I would go out every day, totally disrobe, and play this piano in the woods. And everyday it would sound different, because the moisture and the weather would change the dynamics of the piano. Finally at the end, we destroyed the piano in a big bonfire. It was crazy. But I think that started the tree works.

TB: *Is it part of that in the exhibition at Tyler?*

SB: Yes, the video footage inside the tree was from that. That was me, but I never put the camera on my face directly, because I wanted it to be more of an archetype than me as the artist.

TB: *Later on the tree grows through the piano, doesn't it?*

SB: Yep. The tree is lifting the piano off the ground. That came from a drawing in my sketchbook. I drew it years ago, and I was commissioned to do a project at Grand Arts in Kansas City. They kept telling me- "Do something bigger, do something bigger." I was thumbing through my sketchbook and I showed them and they said- "Great! Let's do it!" We set about figuring out how to make that happen...we got the tree uprooting the piano, which is actually a player piano. I programmed it to play my own improvisations on "Strange Fruit". When you walk into the space, not only do you see it but also you hear it. You see the keys moving, and the music takes over the space. That went from Grand Arts, and then was featured at Prospect One, the New Orleans Biennial. It was in the US Mint. That was a fantastic location for it: it was at the top of 2 winding staircases, and the moment you walk into the building you heard the sound of the piece. I think it was probably one of the big hits for that show. From there it went to Portland, and soon it will be in Brooklyn.



Sanford Biggers, Blossom, 2007. Silk steel, wood, MIDI player piano system, Zoopoxy. Approximately 12 x 18 x 15 feet. Courtesy of the artist and Grand Arts, Kansas City. Image courtesy Robert Di Franco.

TB: *Where is that?*

SB: The Brooklyn Museum. Either the end of the year, or the beginning of 2011.

TB: *Oh wow!*

SB: Yeah. They want to call it a retrospective; I would prefer to call it an introspective. (laughter). I don't think artists should have any retrospectives before probably their late '50's or 60's. That is just a personal thing, and I have been making art all my life. When I was growing up with aspirations to be an artist I never thought I would get recognition until my late 30's, 40's 50's. That is just how it used to be. But the world has changed so that, you know, I have students who expect to be stars by 22 or 23...I think there is something to be said for longevity and pacing yourself. To call this a retrospective seems a bit premature. Calling it a survey seems more apropos. Or an "introspective", which so far they like.

TB: *Great!*

SB: Yeah I am looking forward to that. No one, including myself, has seen several of my large installations together in the same place. I think when that happens it is going to connect so many dots...we are talking work done over ten years. I am still dealing with several of the themes I was dealing with over 10 years ago. I'm just finding different ways to present them. I think it will be an extremely cohesive and informative show in terms of contextualizing my work.

TB: *The title for the Harvard piece is Constellation (Stranger Fruit).*

SB: The piece in Philly is called *Bittersweet (The Fruit)*. And in it, the piano is playing a version of *Strange Fruit*. And I did

a video piece called *Cheshire* where there are black men climbing trees...

TB: *They have different professions, and come from different economic classes, right?*

SB: Yes and they all climb various trees. In between each shot of the climbers, there are lyrics from *Strange Fruit* sung, but in a more poetic form: chanted. Definitely not following the structure of the sung version (by Billie Holliday).

TB: *But Stranger Fruit, that's a step beyond.*

SB: Yes, a step beyond. Let's face it, we have a koto player, a barren tree, and a tall statuesque black woman with a quilt on, and an acappella choir, all placed in the cosmos. That's a little stranger! (laughs)

TB: *You did some research on the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia. That seems very interesting to me.*

SB: Yes well one of the hallmarks of Philadelphia, one of their claims, is that they were the hub for the gateway to freedom. It was very easy to find many of these locations where the Underground Railroad was. Some have been certified as actual stops, some are just rumored to be. But I think the rumor is as interesting and equally important as the fact. Because when you look at history, that is in fact what is happening, it is conjecture a lot of the time. So that was the first of my constellations. I took a topographical map of all these locations of the Underground Railroad, and then re-presented them as a star map. Those points became the stars in the larger constellation. Extrapolating, if you could take all the Underground Railroad stops on the Eastern Seaboard, you would have a galaxy of constellations.

TB: *And this is how Harriet Tubman comes in as an astronaut.*



Sanford Biggers, Constellation I (Philadelphia), 2009. Printed collectible from installation for Hidden Cities. Courtesy the Artist and Peregrine Arts, Philadelphia, PA. Image courtesy the artist and Jesse Schlabach.

map.

TB: *I see, you could take it with you, it was a handout.*

SB: Yes. When you went to the church there were 2 handouts- there was the map and there was also a little swatch of muslin, and on it was a piece I did called *Lotus*. It is a circular diagram that looks like a lotus blossom, but all the petals are cross-sections of slave ships so you see all the bodies lined up in the slave ship. It is diagrammatic but looks like a big beautiful mandala...

TB: *Buddhist?*

SB: Exactly. The original piece was a 7 ½' glass etching that I did called "Lotus"- it's on my website, a beautiful piece- I reduced the size and made it a print, a handout. So people got a map, and this swatch they could patchwork on whatever they wanted to... t-shirts, bags, pillows, quilts. It was a raw muslin fabric, untreated, sort of off-white, almost beige color, and I

SB: Exactly. And the stars were made as a diagram, a circular grid, concentric circles, maybe some crosshairs, longitude and latitude markings on top of a drawing you can tell is Philadelphia, and you can see these white dots. One of them is basically my north star, and that would be the Mother Bethel Church, which is the longest black owned piece of real estate in the U.S. And that was also ground zero for the project. If you went to the Mother Bethel Church, I had 9 quilts hanging from the rafters. On some of them I drew constellations based on the map, and that would be the place where you would actually go to get the map and locate the other stars.

TB: *Where is the Mother Bethel Church?*

SB: It is located close to downtown Philly, I think the streets are 6th and Lombard.

TB: *The star chart you made, what is the medium on that?*

SB: It was done mostly on a computer, but output as a glossy foldout

printed on it with 4 colors- one was black, one was red, one blue, and one green. It was random which one you might pick up.

TB: *Where's the glass now?*

SB: The glass is in storage, but it will be part of the Brooklyn show.

TB: *Great to be able to get that out again.*

SB: Oh yeah. 7 ½ ' diameter solid glass- it hangs like a pendulum; you can see people through it, walking on the other side while you are looking. Talking about universals, the slave trade was a universal thing, it was part of the global economy. And like it or not, everyone is somehow implicated in it...so as you walk through and see yourself, and see other people through it, it is sort of saying- "We are all a product of this". Even psychically. Not just our country. British, Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch, you know you go on and on and on. Everyone had a hand in this.

TB: *So the Brooklyn Museum Show is a huge thing coming up...very exciting*

SB: Yeah the name for the show is going to be (isn't it Sweet?) "Sweet Funk". (laughter) And it will be...so far we have talked about 10 pieces. There will be video, video documentation of performances, several installations and sculptures, probably some photos and drawings. It will be in the whole rotunda, and the area around it.

TB: *It will be in some of the rooms around the space?*

SB: Yeah...

TB: *Is the title partly a reference to Funkadelic, or not?*

SB: (smiles) Yeah loosely...(laughter)...yeah that's included absolutely...(more laughter)...because I started thinking- we have all these terms we use to describe "art" and all these genres- post-modern, post-black, minimal, abstract, blah,blah,blah. I started thinking about music, I was listening to a bootleg of Prince's- he was playing live someplace. He had Maceo, from the JB's, and he was like- "Maceo, they keep asking me what funk is- but if you got to describe it then it ain't funky." So I was like- "Let's go back to basics, you know- "Sweet Funk"! (laughter) You know what it is, I don't have to describe it, you know what it is?

TB: *(laughter) I think I know...*

SB: That works! (laughter)...you know...I think that when all these works are together the funk that holds them together will be a lot more visible. If you see one piece you experience it, you like it, yeah. But when you see them all together there is going to be a whole other element which rises...

TB: *So funk is a binder?*

SB: Funk is a binder. Just like George Clinton (founder of Funkadelic) says- "Funk not only moves it can remove." (laughter)

TB: *I never heard that, that's good.*

SB: He's got sort of a take on it..."uncut funk"...

TB: *Yeah I have heard of that- talking about space ships- everything shifts.*

SB: Yeah It's very much related to that. For me, honestly, that was the creative zeitgeist when I was growing up. Even though I was very young, I had older brothers, siblings, and that's what they were into. I grew up looking at all the album covers. Listening to the music. My brother was a musician, so understanding what was happening musically, seeing its relationship to rock and jazz. You know, funk really was rock and jazz and blues.

TB: *Like Sly Stone. He kind of broke it open...*

SB: Yeah. Well, James would be number 1...

TB: *Right, but that didn't get a whole lot of crossover until later...*

SB: Right. Sly would be first, and even Jimi started getting deep into funk, like when he left the Jimi Hendrix Experience, and went to The Band of Gypsies. All funk, but they didn't have the same crossover...Sly was the cross-over guy.

TB: *I listened to his music a long time after I heard it as a kid, and I couldn't believe how tight that stuff is...*

SB: Yeah it's Mega, when you hear that stuff it's like- "Damn!"

TB: *With the brass too, they got everything...*

SB: Yeah! That's "sweet funk" you know..(laughter)

TB: *We haven't talked about your sound pieces. I understand they are integrated, but some of them stand-alone as well.*

SB: Yeah some of them stand alone. We talked about the tree with the piano playing. The recent video- "Shuffle" shot in Germany has a soundtrack that is a very important, integral part of that piece. I did it with a handheld recorder in Indonesia, going around to small villages and recording traditional Gamelan groups. And I made compositions based on the footage...a soundscape to go with the "Shuffle" video. I have done performances in NY recently in the art context, having me playing piano, and drum programming with various musicians and singers. When I first moved to NYC I was actually a musician performing a lot downtown- for example CBGB Gallery, Spy Bar, all these places performing with a guy named Martin Luther, with Imani who sings in a lot of my pieces, and Saul Williams. All of whom have appeared in my pieces the last few years. Music is very integrated with my visual practice.

TB: *You do all your own mixing...*

SB: Oh yeah, I have a Fender Rhodes in my apartment, I have Midi equipment, I grew up with a piano...so even though piano comes into my work as a sculptural element, that is because a lot of my early years were spent sitting at, and playing, the piano. It is full of personal nostalgia, but the piano seems to be full of nostalgia for everyone. Even as an object, it has a very fetishized presence to it. Sound is super important in my work and the names of several of my pieces reference funk, soul, jazz, hip-hop. I have another circular sculpture (on my website) from years ago, called "Bounce, Rock, Skate, Roll" which is a very popular disco and roller skating song. I have another piece which is a melted radio, which is called- "The Bridge is Over" which references a rap battle between KRS 1 and MC Shan- (Queens vs. the Bronx), constellations and the whole notion of Afro-futurism in my work comes directly from P-Funk, Son Ra, Ornette Coleman, Coltrane, and a whole range of stuff- electric Miles Davis stuff..."On the Corner", "Water Babies", oh yeah...I think those guys looked at funk as a way of describing the ineffable- something that was dank and dark and a bit ornery, but compelling. And since no one else has dubbed my work "funk" I would like to dub it "funk". (laughs). It is a nice word to describe what I am trying to put together.

TB: *Interesting. What kind of sound are you going to have at the Brooklyn Museum, beside the sound that is already integrated?*

SB: I haven't got there yet, but there is another DJ I work with, this guy named Rich Medina, out of Philly, but he spins in NYC a lot. He did one of the Brooklyn Museum first Friday parties around a year ago, and it was the largest attendance they ever had. It was over 1000 people! They came to see HIM, he just happened to be at the Brooklyn Museum! (laughs). So they had a museum crowd, plus everyone else in NY who always goes to see him. I may have him come in and do another thing. I think he is one of the best DJ's I have ever heard. We are good friends. That might be an aspect. I am planning to do a performance in Santa Barbara for an upcoming solo show which will use another DJ I work with- DJ Jahi Sundance, who comes from an avant-garde jazz family in NY. I'll make a selection of films, and probably do a video montage of the films, project that, and have it soundtracked by him as a DJ, plus a gamelan troupe from Santa Barbara. So they will make the soundtrack live, for the event.

TB: *That will be a one-time performance?*

SB: That will be a one-time performance, if it goes well, maybe I'll do that here in Brooklyn. That's still in the works.

TB: *What about getting into the institutional stuff. At Harvard you did, what about at the Brooklyn Museum?*

SB: I am thinking of this as a very traditional survey of work- I haven't gone there yet. Rather than contextualize it based on the museum, I'd rather the museum just be the context or background for the work. In this case I think that's important. Being that I have never had a gallery solo in NY oddly enough, this will be an opportunity for everyone to get what is really going on, and what has been going on in the work. Most people get bits and pieces, but they can't connect the dots. I want to make connecting those dots the focus of this show.

TB: *I forgot to ask you- is the piece at Harvard permanent?*

SB: No it is temporary. That was a one-time performance there as well. We wanted to do it more than once, but the scheduling was just too difficult. But I would like to do that performance again, and all the performers want to do it again as well, because it worked really well, I mean it was very fluid. The improvisation was great! To find a koto player, or any traditional musician, who is willing to improvise is a feat. But this koto player happens to also be a jazz vocalist, so she gets the idea and is into Western music. She just has a traditional Japanese musical background. She could go there. And Imani is an interpretive singer. She has her own production, which is a rock opera. She can go anywhere from deep Black church stuff to free jazz, to opera. She has got the range and knowledge. I like to work with people who I can trust. Because only those people who are going to be able to interpret my ideas, which are very much not traditional, but like to touch on the traditional.

TB: *Is associative a good word for you, or is there a better word for the way you link things?*

SB: Hmm...syncretic.

TB: *Could you talk about that a little?*

SB: To some level I think the intent and the impetus for certain creative expressions and cultural forms is similar. As an analogy, let's look at religion. You've got tons of religions out there- ultimately what is not important is the name you ascribe to a religion, or its characters, but what is important is the thing that is genetic, or in our DNA that makes us look for religion, or some answer, or create a myth to fulfill that need to explain things. I think music does a certain thing for us and we genetically need that. Visual arts, cultural exchange whether it be friendly or unfriendly there is still a need to figure out the "other"...

TB: *With a little friction?*

SB: Yeah, sure, that's part of the process. So I guess when I say "syncretic" it is about trying to find the similarities in so many disparate elements, or, from the differences, trying to figure out if there is any similarity.

TB: *By juxtaposing and seeing the connections form in front of you.*

SB: Exactly! I think music figured out how to do that millennia ago. You don't really need to interpret music, you just don't have to. It is visceral, and tonal, and whether they are playing in a Western key, or an Eastern key signature, there is just no reason to translate it. You get it. You might not like it. But you don't need an explanation or a translation. Visual art, I mean it's so coded. That is another reason music is so important for me. It seems to be the glue that can put so many things together.

TB: *Someone said all art constantly aspires to the condition of music. (Walter Pater in The Renaissance) . I like that.*

SB: I do too. You have a country musician who can listen to rap, and appreciate rap. You have a rap musician who can appreciate traditional Indian music, and be like "I get it." That's where that syncretism really happens. I would like to do that visually. Or experientially, because my work isn't just happening visually. It has layers, and I try to give a certain amount of import to each of those layers: a non-hierarchical approach to form and content.

TB: *You enact this in your work by putting things all over the place: they are on the floor, on the wall...*

SB: Oh yeah, indoors, outdoors. I respond very well to sites: non- gallery sites like The Memorial Hall at Harvard, the Mint in New Orleans, the Church in Philly, the performance I did here at The Box down on the Bowery, for example...those were all informed by the space involved.



Sanford Biggers, Still image from The Somethin' Suite, 2007. Imani Uzuri singing an acapella version of "Strange Fruit". Image courtesy Barron Claiborne.

TB: *What is The Box?*

SB: It was part of Performa '07- I did an hour long performance with some of the musicians I have mentioned: Saul Williams, Esthero, Martin Luther, Jahi Sundance, Imani, Shae Fiol and I scripted them into what I call a "post-modern minstrel show"- or better yet, a post-minstrel cycle- It is on the website, it is called "The Somethin' Suite". It is really riffing on the idea of the minstrel show and how the minstrel show is still present in contemporary music and pop culture. My work is not simply visual, but is a nexus point for all these other things. I want the viewer to be engaged intellectually, viscerally, sonically, visually, experientially.

TB: *I am going to retract what I said about persona- it doesn't seem like persona is at the center- it seems like you deflect. You want to move it other places, which is different from much Western Art.*

SB: Yeah I deflect. That is why I use the word archetype. The identities of my performers are important to me in the work, but it is a little less important that I use the identity of "Sanford Biggers". I don't mind taking a back seat to some degree, because I am very much in the front seat on another level. That also goes back to my Buddhist mind set: I am a facilitator, and I think that is inextricable from the work itself. So it is not that important to be focused on my persona. Particularly for "minority" artists there is a tendency to be exoticized, and that is something I try to avoid by not being front and center all the time- so people don't immediately say- "That's Sanford Biggers, who looks like this and talks like this..." So I do deflect. That is a conscious decision. I don't want to be pigeon-holed on a few things. I want the work to speak, I don't want to be the one who is always the representative of it.

TB: *When I think of it, the artist I am reminded of is Miles Davis...he would constantly step back and let other artists come forward. He would turn his back to the audience to diminish the thing you were just talking about- where the artist becomes bigger than the work...*

SB: Well Miles is Miles, he will always be the guy, so much so that he doesn't even have to be the guy.

TB: *Yeah...*

SB: And also, musicians of that generation speak of the school of Miles, cause once you went through the school of Miles, you were in!

TB: *But it wasn't a style...*

SB: No, no it was just being there. Miles lets you play with him, so now you can go play with anyone...Herbie Hancock, John Coltrane, Chick Corea, Tony Williams, Shorter, Ron Carter, you can go on and on. They get the stamp, and all of them went on...and did great things. It is amazing. The "School of Miles"! And Miles came from the school of Diz and Bird. That is definitely part of the mythology around the collaborations I do. I like the idea of being associated with people I admire and to be able to look back and say-"yeah, I had the opportunity to work with DJ Rich Medina, or Saul Williams, or Jennifer Zackin, or David Ellis. All the people I've worked with...I also think of the rap remixes- you have a rapper who has a hit song, but on the "B" side he has invited 3 or 4 other rappers who he likes to be on the same track. That's his way of saying-"This is a good one, I want you to get in on it".

TB: *OK, we have covered a lot, I think we are good, thanks Sanford!*

SB: I think we are! Thank you.