

NEW EDITION

Sanford Biggers: Floating World

By Faye Hirsch

The Floating World (2013)

Meaning is far from stable in the visual universe of Sanford Biggers. While particularly steeped in black cultural memes, from African diaspora to hip-hop and Afro-cyber-futurism, he culls the symbolic language of any and all cultures to create image mashups for his objects, installations and performances. “I use symbols as a medium,” he told one interviewer in 2011. “I look at the flexibility, the plasticity of symbols, politics, religion, form, context.”¹

One could almost, therefore, read the title of Biggers’ lush Neiman Center project as a riff on the nature of his art in general, though of course it refers more specifically to the Japanese prints that have supplied some of its imagery.² (In addition, subtitles hint at content.) Each print resembles a quilt onto which delicate cloud and wave motifs drawn from the vocabulary of *ukiyo-e* have been screenprinted. A variety of Japanese papers are used for the patchwork, though they aggregate into the type of American quilt that Biggers often paints on and incorporates into larger installations. Adhered to a backing sheet of heavier paper, the collage is cut with uneven edges that resemble undulating hems. The papers selected vary from impression to impression; this and the freehand application of spray-paint result in subtle variations within the edition.

The Japanese motifs appear in conjunction with other snippets of Biggers’ iconography (dance-step diagrams and stars, for example) or combine with them to form layered allusions. In



Sanford Biggers, *Lotus* (125th) from *The Floating World* series (2013).

The Floating World: Lotus (125th), petals on a large, centralized, mandala-like flower reproduce a detail from the late 18th-century abolitionist diagram of slaves packed into a ship, the famous “Brookes Print.” (The image was also used by Willie Cole in his monumental 1997 woodcut *Stowage*, in which the shape of the ship doubled as that of an ironing board.)

For Biggers, the complex history of the quilt has made it a potent symbol; many historians believe that the way a quilt was folded and displayed communicated critical information to slaves making their way to freedom, marking areas of danger and safety. Harriet Tub-

man used the stars to navigate the Underground Railroad, so they are also present in the series, though in the form of the classic decoration on a child’s ball. Clouds, too, have often been mar-tialed by Biggers to refer to the skies that guided escaping slaves, and as a sign of hope and transcendence. Here their unmistakable Japonisme lightly inflects the artist’s allusive play, lifting the weight of his message and leavening his globalist thrust. ■

1. “In the Studio: Sanford Biggers with Stephanie Cash,” *Art in America*, March 2011, 96.

2. The Japanese term for these popular wood-block prints, *ukiyo-e*, is usually translated as “pictures from the floating world.”