

The Creators Project

Body Paintings and Activist Art In the Arizona Desert

Charlie Schmidlin — May 18 2016

In addition to the diverse musical acts that traveled 70 miles north of Phoenix this weekend to [FORM Arcosanti](#)—the intimate Arizona festival set inside architect [Paolo Soleri's micro city](#), this year curated by [Hundred Waters](#)—several visual artists found their own ways to deliver the theatrics.

Los Angeles-based artist [Alexa Meade](#) swiftly gained notice in 2010 for her unique process of turning 3D subjects into apparent 2D portraits through a detailed body painting technique. Having left a career in politics to pursue painting full-time, she now works out of a Chinatown studio space, selecting her subjects, painting directly onto their skin with non-toxic acrylic paint, and then photographing them against vibrant backgrounds.

At FORM, Meade challenged herself by inviting the unexpected. As festivalgoers looked on in Arcosanti's open-air common area, she painted her female model in a hard-edged, street art style. Once completed, the pair traveled around the micro city to photograph the model in different environments – in front of Arcosanti's unique architecture, partying with Skrillex during his DJ set by the pool, and out along the gorgeous canyons surrounding the festival.

"I'm definitely shaking my process up," she told The Creators Project before the live demonstration, as makeup artist [Josephine Lee](#) provided a base on the model for Meade's work. "I originally thought I'd have a background or some wall that I'd be shooting against, but we thought it'd be so much more true to the experience to have the painting come off the wall and be integrated into the environment around us."

The end result was a stunning, living illustration that tricked the eye: decked out in blue and black stockings, a white and black dress, and a multicolored face, the model drew more than a few double takes from festival attendees as she and Meade sought out the next location.



Coming off of a successful TED Talk and her first dip into collaborations with actress Sheila Vand, Meade also has a number of other artistic projects in play. For the past two years she's slowly turned her LA home into [a funhouse](#) with boyfriend Chris Hughes, an endeavor that she says "will never be done but will always be in progress". Also in the works are a number of toys co-designed with Ron Dubren (co-creator of Tickle Me Elmo), whom she met at a dinner and came out of retirement to work with her. From her work this weekend, it's a relatable thought.

Photo Credit: Ian Clontz

The following day, interdisciplinary artist [Sanford Biggers](#) took the stage at Arcosanti's Apse Stage, where he showcased a slideshow of his work addressing the the traumas of black America. Spanning a wide variety of mediums including music, installation, film, and painting, Biggers discussed the reasons for tackling themes of race and identity in so many formats.

“You can say something in painting that you can't say in sculpture, and something in performance that you can't say in a photograph,” he said. “Then there's the sweet spot of where they all can come together to create an expression. I don't have the golden ratio, though... I'm just throwing it all into the cauldron and seeing what works.”



Sanford Biggers, Laocoon, 2015, vinyl, electric air pump. Credit: Sanford Biggers and David Castillo Gallery.

Among the projects he showed in a slideshow were *Laocoon*, a plastic, inflatable likeness of Fat Albert, shown splayed out and “breathing” face down on the gallery floor; *BAM (For Michael)*, a short video clip on police brutality, where Biggers chipped away at wood and wax African statues by shooting them with bullets; and a music

video from his band Moon Medicine, which mixed a live performance with archival clips of krumping, breakdancing, tribal dance, wrestling, and more.



Sanford Biggers, For Michael, 2015, bronze. Credit: Sanford Biggers and David Castillo Gallery.

Artist and musician Saul Williams, also performing at FORM, soon after came out to interview Biggers (the two went to Morehouse College together). “Your work is fucked up,” he began. “Why thank you,” replied Biggers with a laugh. “What I like about Sanford's work are the juxtapositions,” Williams told the audience. “When we

see the krumping dancers juxtaposed with Nigerian wrestlers, you see the dance rituals and how it's likened to this dance

form that's come out of LA. You look at the ground we tread upon, or breakdance on, every day being brought into art galleries.”

Biggers pointed to a specific project, *Codex*, as an example of mixing technology and historical context, or as he described it, “analog antique into ephemeral web-based art forms.” Inspired by research where he learned quilts doubled as signposts during the Underground Railroad, Biggers sourced pre-1900 quilts from the Eastern seaboard, painted them, and also embedded QR codes within specific quilts.



Sanford Biggers, *Quilt No19 Rockstar*, Repurposed quilt, fabric treated acrylic, spraypaint, and silkscreen. From the author's website.

“I'm interested in the hidden history [of the United States], the history that we're not privy to in schools here,” Biggers said. “As black children we had alternative lessons going on in the home and in the community to supplement the education that wasn't coming from institutions. So that's embedded in my work—some things you may not know about the 1800s, I throw it

back at you through the artwork.”

Williams concluded on a point about the very space we were all sitting, at Arcosanti. “We know a recent historical context about this beautiful land—about Paolo Soleri and what he constructed—but we know that there's a history on this ground that has been built on and seldom learned from,” he said. “The main thing that inspires me in looking at these beautiful pieces is how your creative space is also your learning space. How do we connect that to now?”

Sanford Biggers’ work can be found at sanfordbiggers.com, and on Twitter [@sanfordbiggers](https://twitter.com/sanfordbiggers). You can find Alexa Meade’s work at alexameade.com, and on Twitter [@alexameadeart](https://twitter.com/alexameadeart).