

# ARTFORUM

## Sanford Biggers

BROOKLYN MUSEUM/SCUPTURECENTER  
December 2011



**View of “Sanford Biggers: Cosmic Voodoo Circus,” 2011.** Foreground: *Constellation 6.0*, 2011. Background, from left: *Cheshire (On Tilt)*, 2010–11; *A Jóia Do Orixá (To the Jewel of the Orixá)*, 2011.

Sanford Biggers's art fixates on recurring symbols—trees, carnival, musicians, and a bodiless smile that is part minstrel, part Cheshire cat, and part logo for a conglomerate whose name might be “history.” Two concurrent exhibitions with works spanning 2002 to the present explored these emblems vis-à-vis legacies of violence that constrain the powers and desires of black men. At times, Biggers's ruminations sit uneasily inside a glamorized stagecraft. At best, grim knowledge makes his magic potent.

Biggers framed his Brooklyn Museum show not quite as a retrospective—it is titled “Sweet Funk: An Introspective”—and the survey unfolds like a mind map for a time-traveling shaman-clown. In *Cheshire*, 2007, the era is the present and the protagonists are urban everymen. The video begins with a snatch of “Strange Fruit”—Billie Holiday's signature song, performed by singer Imani Uzuri over a blacked-out screen. Then the scene comes up: a big tree in a park. A casually dressed black man enters the frame, climbs the tree, and sits, quietly regal, looking out. Blackout. Seven times the cycle repeats: Another few bars of song, another tree, and another man climbs above it all, each in his own way as triumphant as Lewis Carroll's cat—except unproblematically embodied. Two more videos, *Bittersweet the Fruit*, 2002, and *Shuffle (The Carnival Within)*, 2009, explore related ideas of freedom as the strange fruit of historical consciousness. In the former, a tiny screen is embedded in a faux tree-branch; headphones dangle from nooses. It's unnerving to put them on. Do so anyway, and you hear rollicking, distorted music. The camera moves through woods to come upon a naked man (Biggers himself) playing an upright piano. The vulnerable bluesman Pan is stalked, surveilled—or does he control the gaze as he does the sound? Similar issues of eerie self-display activate “Shuffle,” which stars Brazilian choreographer Ricardo Castillo. Wearing a red-white-and-blue suit and, intermittently, whiteface makeup, he haunts a Baroque church and a commuter train; like some diasporic djinn, he break-dances, rides a unicycle, finds himself bound to a tree, and then, mysteriously, walks away.

The centerpiece of “Sweet Funk” is not, however, these videos but a life-size sculpture of a baby-grand piano that has been ruined, or transfigured, by a tree growing through its guts. This hybrid, titled *Blossom*, 2007, plays another arrangement (Biggers's own) of “Strange Fruit.” Above the sculpture in the museum's neoclassical rotunda hung the disembodied smile, an aluminum-and-Plexiglas sign with disco-ball and marquee-lightbulb teeth. It too is titled *Cheshire*, 2008.

As a memorial for lynching victims, *Blossom*, with its silk leaves and dustless bark, felt too clean, too pat—especially in comparison to the video *Cheshire*. A similar imbalance held sway in “Cosmic Voodoo Circus,” the SculptureCenter show. Here a gigantic red goddess wearing a raffia skirt faced off against a billboard-size version of the now-familiar smile. Accompanied by shattered star-shaped mirrors and a mechanical trapeze, these works suggested a sinister carnival, but it all seemed a bit simplistic. More compelling was *Shake*, 2011, a video shot in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, wherein Castillo reprises his shamanic role. In the first scene, he walks out of the ocean wearing his red-white-and-blue suit, like a vaudevillian Jesus who has completed the Middle Passage. He makes himself up in silver face-paint and goes coffin shopping; at the end, he prays beside the sea, carrying a mini version of the grinning sign. Alien and trickster, he executes somber tasks, but he's having fun.

Perhaps *Shake*'s lightness despite extremity explains the whiff of Disneyfication in *Blossom*. Certainly something extraordinary levitates *Lotus*, 2007, at the Brooklyn Museum. A huge glass disc suspended in a steel frame, it suggests a gong, though to strike it would be dangerous. The glass is etched with a daisy pattern of long petals. Go close, and each white petal resolves into the infamous 1787 illustration known as “Diagram of a Slave Ship.” I report this reluctantly; it's a spoiler. Better to be shocked by the revelation: Even this image can be made pure, like an aid to meditation—or innocuous, like a corporate logo. It's a disconcerting combination.

—*Frances Richard*