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Sanford Biggers' Quilts Carry Secret Messages

Inspired by antique “freedom quilts,” the artist stitches encoded icons into his own textured pieces



Chorus for Paul Mooney, 2017, made of antique quilt, assorted textiles, acrylic and spray paint. Most of the quilts used in Biggers' works were donated or came from thrift stores.

By Amy Crawford
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According to African American oral tradition, people escaping slavery via the underground railroad relied on a code sewn into quilts, which were hung in windows or over clotheslines to mark the route to freedom. The legend remains controversial, but when New York-based artist Sanford Biggers stumbled upon it more than a decade ago, he was intrigued by the possibility that the handmade bedding might have carried hidden messages. Since then, he has transformed dozens of pre-1900 quilts into mixed-media artworks, over 60 of which are slated to be on view starting in September at the Bronx Museum of Art, pending the loosening of COVID-19 restrictions. “I thought it would be interesting to add extra layers of code,” says Biggers, who draws on urban culture, Buddhism and history to construct his own secret iconography. “I’m actually communicating with the original creators of that quilt,” he explains, “so when these are viewed in the future it can be read as a sort of transgenerational conversation.”



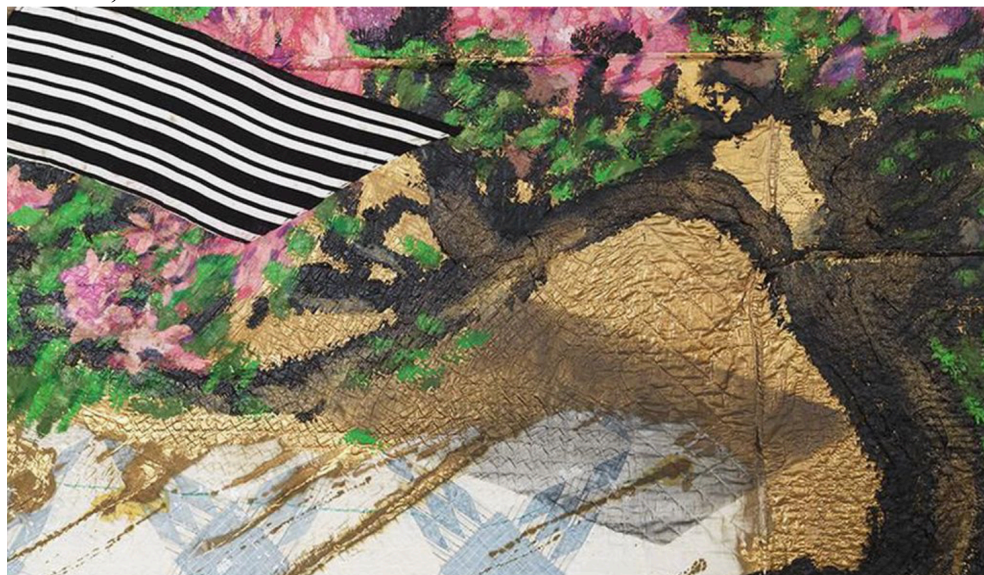
Moon Over Ninevah Bay, 2019.



Harlem Blue, 2013.



Beloved, 2017.



Bonsai, 2016.