

F L A U N T

SANFORD BIGGERS / THE INTERPLAY OF NARRATIVE AND LINGUISTICS IN QUILTING

BY JOSHEN MANTAI SEPTEMBER 9, 2020



New York artist Sanford Biggers is a force to be reckoned with, whose list of achievements transcend belief. His work has been marked by improvisation, placing emphasis on the slow but worthwhile process of creation in order to portray deeper themes referencing American history and to provoke essential political dialogue. Biggers' past work has famously addressed police brutality against Black Americans, speaking to the complicated societal era we are currently immersed in.

This year, Biggers was awarded the prestigious and highly coveted 2020 Guggenheim Fellowship, granted to a modest group of 175 scholars, artists, and writers. He also recently completed 60 quilt-based works that will be a part of the Bronx Museum exhibition Codeswitch, opening today, that reference the interplay of American symbolism with embedded linguistic code inspired by antique quilts used as escape route signage along the Underground Railroad. The show will travel in the future to Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Chicago. FLAUNT had the opportunity to talk to Biggers about the inspiration behind his exhibition, his process of creation, and views on the ongoing intersection of art and politics.

I know creativity has been stifled during the pandemic. What has your headspace been like in quarantine?

It's been pretty difficult to be honest with you. There's quarantine, and all that's happening with social justice and injustice, and the election. It's been a difficult time. In the early part, I relocated to my in-laws and tried to work in a different capacity. It was a good exercise, but it was hard to be creative around all the disruption.

How have the current social circumstances, especially in the BLM protesting, intersected with your art?

It's interesting that there's different moments when culture and society converge, in a very dramatic fashion with the work I've been doing. Now I think it's at a very cathartic point, where it's ongoing, blatant, in your face everyday and it's interesting to look at my work through that lens but it hasn't affected the work I've been doing because it's such an old story in America.

Do you think there's a certain amount of pressure for artists to make a political statement in their art?

For me, I don't feel pressure. I think it'll be interesting to see how work made from this moment will be perceived afterwards because there's moments of inflection where people are responding to current events empathetically, and then there's the backlash to that where people want nothing to do with it. So, it will be interesting to see what lasting effect the art has on society, if any.

What was it like for you breaking into the art scene?

It was a very long process, but I didn't do it the traditional way. I went to graduate school before it became very fashionable to go to graduate school, and I graduated without seeking a gallery. I was more interested in showing in museums, and doing residencies and further expanding on the ideas I started with in graduate school without the pressures of a gallery and the marketplace.

Do you notice a difference between the New York art scene versus Los Angeles?

I think for many years Los Angeles was playing 2nd or 3rd fiddle to New York City. Being from Los Angeles, I knew there was a lot going on there but it was not professionalized or widely known as it is now. I think the development of the art world in Los Angeles in the last 5-10 years has been incredible. When I was teaching at Columbia University, I was often telling my students that there's no default

mechanism to be in New York to start a career, and that Los Angeles is extremely viable as a place to be an artist, and more affordable and hospitable in many ways.

When have you felt the most invincible in your art career?

I think being an artist is a balancing act between invincibility and complete vulnerability. I think when I'm creating I'm the most invincible and at the same time, totally vulnerable. I think one of the superpowers of being an artist is that strength comes from pulling deeply from visceral, vulnerable, open insides to put something out there in the world that can influence people, thought, and culture.

Can you tell me about the inspiration behind the *Codeswitch* exhibition?

Code-switching is something I've tried to encapsulate in my career as an artist, with sculpture, sound, performance, and video. The *Codeswitch* show specifically is a series of artworks I've made with repurposed antique quilts. There's a rumor in history that quilts have codes and secret languages within them, often used by escaping enslaved people along the Underground Railroad. The vernacular history still survives, and that for me was the inspiration for this series of works. The idea is taking these objects that may already have code and layering another code from my own perspective, to be deciphered or read by a viewer now or in the future so it becomes a transgenerational cohort of ideas and American history.



How did you gain access to these heirloom quilts?

A collector came by my studio and she told me she used to collect and sell quilts, but that she had stopped several years prior, so they were just collecting dust in her closet. She asked if I would accept a donation, and she gave me around 25-30 different pieces and it turns out she was an ancestor of Andrew Jackson and she had some quilts that dated back to his time. These were heirloom quilts with significant presidential history and I think she was directly in on the insider concept of these being works directly

made from relics of Americana. After that, I began making connections with quilt retailers and message groups on Facebook and various sources. Sometimes I would come to my studio and there would be a box of discarded materials with no note. It became this interesting communal nexus point, because there was some kind of attachment and nostalgia to these quilts.

Can you talk a little more about the process of making these pieces for the exhibition? How long did it take you to finish the collection?

I've been working on these pieces since 2007. I always had some in my studio I worked on slowly but around 2011 I did three major solo shows back to back with huge installations. I was so overloaded from that process that I wanted to retreat back to my studio to work on something in solitude, so I returned to the quilts, and worked on several at a time. It's been an unconscious daily studio ritual to work on these quilts without really knowing how many I've accumulated at this point.



What kind of message do you hope a viewer or spectator will get out of this exhibition experience?

I hope they get several messages, some formal and artistic ideas like how a reused artwork can be remixed and sampled to become a different body of work. Another is how one can use history as a malleable construct because often we learn history from one vantage point, and we do not get the whole story. History is told by many different people, not just the victor, and I think bringing in these repurposed heirloom pieces for contemporary use is a metaphorical way of showing that. This is work derived by anonymous groups of women, sometimes men, pieces thrown away and forgotten and considered "low-culture" or "domestic" that is inferior to art made by white men. But to see these in a

museum with an intervention done by an African-American male is bringing in voices that have not usually been in those ivory towers, but presenting them in a new light and form of political tension.

Congratulations on receiving the Guggenheim Fellowship. What are your plans for this fellowship?

My plans are to continue and dive deeper into a marble sculpture series that combine aspects of various African cultures with Greco-Roman and Neo-Classical marble sculptures. There is a mash-up patchwork of those time periods, and the aesthetics of those cultures, and I want to make a critique about history and the way we have been taught about African sculpture and European sculpture and the hierarchical interpretations of those genres. So, I plan on going to Northern Italy for several months to work with a group to create new sculptures for that series.

What are your goals for the future of your art?

I plan to keep creating and working, and to focus on the process and let the work determine where it goes.