

METROPOLIS

Sanford Biggers Uses Traditional Quilting to Issue a New Message

The artist engages with American lore in the exhibition *Codeswitch* at the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

Lila Allen *October 12, 2020*



Harlem Blue, 2013.

Mythology looms large in the work of Sanford Biggers. Take *Laocoön*, a flaccidly inflated vinyl sculpture the artist installed in David Castillo Gallery in 2015: In name, the piece invokes the Trojan priest whose tale Virgil immortalized in *The Aeneid*. In form, however, *Laocoön* taps into a much more contemporary mythos. The body is Fat Albert's from Bill Cosby's cartoon *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, but the prone posture calls to mind the images of Black bodies brutalized by police. *Laocoön* is all of these at once: a string of connotations that weave a complex portrait of ancient and present imaginaries.

In an exhibition that opened in September at The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Biggers excavates a different American mythology. The show, titled *Codeswitch*, is the first survey of Biggers's quilt-based works, and will display more than 60 of them. This series began more than a decade ago, during a commission for Philadelphia's Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church, once a stop on the Underground Railroad. Quilts, as the story goes, were a way for enslaved people on their path to liberation to share coded knowledge on their journey. Collecting quilts from the 18th and 19th centuries, Biggers began using them as canvases for his own paintings and sculptures, continuing and altering this thread of communication. That historians have disputed the veracity of the quilting legend only makes the artist's investigation more compelling. As Biggers himself has said, "Two of my favorite materials are history and dialogue."