

Forbes

A Face Not Seen Before: Sanford Biggers 'Lady Interbellum' At SCAD Museum Of Art

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Sanford Biggers, 'Lady Interbellum,' (2020). White marble on custom cedar plinth. Detail.

Feathers, fabric, sequins.

Sanford Biggers' materials remind of all that is lost in attempts to digitize art which was meant to be experienced in person.

His 2020 sculpture *Lady Interbellum* serves as a perfect example.

Smooth white marble, sculpted in the round, crouching and positioned to view from all four sides. Its heavy facial features create depth and shadows non-transferable to a screen.

Those facial features are clearly African, transforming *Lady Interbellum* from a beautiful object into a powerful work of art.

White marble statues aren't supposed to have African features. They are supposed to have delicate, angular, Greek and Roman descended features. Diana. Helen of Troy. Thomas Jefferson.

Tall, linear, thin, designed for adoration and veneration.

Not *Lady Interbellum* which can be seen now through August 15 at the SCAD Museum of Art.



Sanford Biggers, 'Lady Interbellum,' (2020). White marble on custom cedar plinth.

While scaled larger than life-sized, she lowers herself to greet visitors at eye level. She is not “on a pedestal.” Her large, thick feet and lower legs indicate a capacity and sturdiness for work, or other burdens. A lack of facial features prevents her from being identified as any singular person to deify.

Biggers’ (b. 1970, Los Angeles) address of classical sculpture and how those archetypes repeated through the centuries have codified beauty in terms of whiteness are unmistakable here.

“What makes this face any less beautiful than Diana or Helen’s,” he seems to be asking onlookers.

“Nothing” is the response.

Lady Interbellum’s face confronts visitors to search their mental encyclopedia of visual imagery for anything like it. Similar examples abound in African masks, Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, Loïs Mailou Jones’ paintings, but in white marble? No.

In classical sculpture? No.

In the medium, scale and fashion befitting a placement in a monument with columns and steeped cultural patrimony? No.

That’s the point.

By upending the facial features visitors are accustomed to seeing looking back at them from marble statues, Biggers puts audiences on the spot to explain why that is. Racism and white supremacy baked into Western Civilization being the answer.

As importantly, Biggers fills the void with an African inspired figure equaling the beauty of any which came before. Not merely cursing the darkness, Biggers provides light.

The sculpture’s title carries especially heavy weight in its present location of Savannah, Georgia, “antebellum” referring to the period before the Civil War.

Savannah, Georgia with its numerous historic squares named after slave owners, including John C. Calhoun (1782-1850), a character so vile, such a staunch defender of slavery and white supremacy in his day, that even his home state of South Carolina removed a statue of him in 2020. Savannah, Georgia with its prominent Civil War memorial jutting skyward in Forsythe Park, steps from the iconic fountain fronting thousands of postcards. Savannah, Georgia, not far from where many sites along the State of Georgia’s official “Antebellum Trail” are found.



Sanford Biggers, ' "Contra/Diction" installation view at Savannah College of Art and Design Museum of SAVANNAH COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

Lady Interbellum appears as part of “Contra/Diction,” a 20-year selected survey of Biggers’ work with him headlining the 12th edition of SCAD deFINEART, the university’s annual program of talks, tours and exhibitions featuring work by contemporary art’s most vital voices each February.

And?, *Ghettobird Tunic* and a giant, shot-up bronze casting of a figure representing Michael Brown, a Black victim of police violence, offer a satisfying look into Biggers’ artistic practice. The dozen or so pieces on view here strike home Biggers’ multidisciplinary approach—feather costumes, marble statues, video.

“I got a lot of pushback and criticism,” Biggers told Forbes.com about his refusal to stick to one medium early in his career. “Mentors and professors—and critics as well—not knowing what my language was or what my aesthetic was, I guess they were expecting to see something that was refined and then done serially, and my creative interests don't necessarily work that way.” Biggers’ background seems to call for experimentation.

Growing up in L.A., he was busted as a teenager for graffiti writing. He responded by taking an oil painting elective in high school. Shortly thereafter, in his advanced placement art class, a teacher asked him why he was always painting Black people? Was he “trying to make a political statement?”

Biggers shared these stories with students during his keynote address of SCAD deFINEART.

He would go on to study abroad in Florence, Italy. He lived three years in Japan. He went to graduate school at the Art Institute of Chicago, received a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. His undergraduate degree comes from Morehouse College in Atlanta. He also briefly managed a Chick-fil-A restaurant in the Atlanta area before quitting the job after being asked to cut his dreadlocks to stay on. He plays keyboards in Moon Medicin, “a multimedia concept band that straddles visual art and music with performances staged against a backdrop of curated sound effects and video.”



Sanford Biggers, 'Contra/Diction' installation view at Savannah College of Art and Design Museum of SAVANNAH COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

“I’ve always considered this a long game approach; over time, you accumulate series of works, but I don’t necessarily work on just one series at a time,” Biggers explained. “Following my natural limits to create in different genres and different ways, in my opinion, in my practice, all of those approaches actually inform each other so it’s me really honing down on the ideas by exploring different means to visualize them.”

While identifying any one of the items on view at SCAD MOA in isolation as “a Sanford Biggers” would prove difficult, seeing them in concert allows clear themes to be identified. Materials. Working in three-dimensions. Scale. Commentary on Black experiences influenced by racism and state sanctioned violence.

What is “a Sanford Biggers?”

Many things, primary among them, unforgettable.