

# Dubious Origins: A Conversation with Sanford Biggers

May 4, 2021 by Jan Garden Castro



*Parallaxadaisical*, 2017. Antique quilt, birch plywood, and gold leaf, 29 x 52 x 16 in. Photo: Zachary Balber, Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami, FL

Sanford Biggers's recent directions balance code-switching and syncretism. As he explains, code-switching derives from "the sonic backbone of hip-hop," a "visual journey through collage, patchwork, mashup, chop and screw, and sampling." Three-dimensional, quilt-based forms continue his earlier explorations into the layering and fusion of symbols and patterns, while marble "Chimera" sculptures reconfigure the history of figurative art, extending a dialogue that

began with his “BAM” series of “violently generative” African sculptures re-formed through gunfire. By remixing references and aesthetic values from multiple cultures and time periods, Biggers reconsiders questions of authenticity, art historical authority, and provenance, infusing his hybridized forms—which he calls “objects for a future ethnography”—with overlapping and sometimes diametrically opposed meanings that demand to be grasped simultaneously.

**Jan Garden Castro: “Codeswitch” and “Soft Truths,” your recent exhibitions, celebrate coded messages and diverse cultures. How does the phrase “Soft Truths” apply to the marble figures and quilt-based works included in that show at Marianne Boesky?**

**Sanford Biggers:** In the quilt-based work *Ecclesiastes 1 (KJV)* (2020), the cut-out area represents church archways and tombstones. The black tulle fabric creates shadows in one direction, while the lights create drop shadows in another. These contradictory shadows could never physically happen. In *whence, wince* (2020), the material left hanging becomes almost like flayed skin or decomposing architecture. “Soft Truths” is about disruption and the malleability of our notions of classical sculpture, figuration, architecture, volumes, and voids.



*The Ascendant*, 2020. Pink Portugal marble, 48 x 10.68 x 10.08 in.

**JGC: What went into the marble sculpture *The Ascendant* (2020)? The body stands in a classic contrapposto pose, while the head includes features from African cultures.**

**SB:** The body is after Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave* (1843), itself a copy of Praxiteles's Aphrodite of Knidos, with the head of a Benin Queen Mother, symbolically known as "Mother of Africa." As in the quilts, I'm mixing and matching—in this case, historical ideals of feminine beauty. The pink Portuguese marble is sensuous, with a lush, beautiful color, so it harkens back to classical sculpture. The marble "Chimera" sculptures, although loaded with cross-cultural content, engage with the history of figurative sculpture.

**JGC: Did you begin this direction at the American Academy in Rome (2017–18) or before that?**

**SB:** It started around 2015 when I was doing the "BAM" sculptures and recasting them in bronze. Although that was a "loaded" and charged project, for me, it was about classical figurative sculpture. I had a desire to engage with the foundations of figurative sculpture, going back to works in wood, bronze, and marble and finding new ways to create them—to bring that tradition into a modern vernacular. By the time I got to Rome, being surrounded by marble works, I took that same aesthetic approach and began working with marble.

**JGC: Is *A Love Supreme* (2018) one of those marbles?**

**SB:** Yes, it's a neoclassical trope of a woman with a veil. You see tons of renditions of women with veils; it's a way to explore, once again, the idea of chastity and feminine beauty but also to show the sculptor's skill in depicting various materials. *A Love Supreme* has a West African Dan mask with braided hair. The title, of course, comes from the jazz standard by John Coltrane.



*A Love Supreme* (d), 2018. Honed white marble, 39.5 x 27.25 x 20.25 in.

**JGC: What about *Caniggula* (2020)?**

**SB:** It combines the body of the Farnese Hercules with a mask that fuses Punu and Chokwe Pwo African cultures to complicate things more. Once again, classical African sculpture and classical European sculpture come together in a mashup, referring to the Roman Emperor Caligula. I mentioned the figurative aspect of these pieces; a lot of research has also gone into them. I was looking at the fall of various empires. In Rome, several empires had grown to prominence and fallen into total chaos.

**JGC: How do you source the images?**

**SB:** Some African sculptures in the “BAM” works are from my personal collection. I have also formed relationships with collectors of African art, and I’ve done sketches and three-dimensional scans of their objects and been able to make sculptures based on those renderings. The European



aspects are usually from well-known Greco-Roman pieces; sometimes I take pieces because I like a certain gesture. That's another thing: as charged as these works are, I keep going back to the idea of what the figure can do—a certain gesture, a certain body, a facial expression. Based on what I'm trying to achieve in the tone of the final piece, gesture is a big thing. *Caniggula* is ribald, macho—he's got a cocky attitude; whereas *The Ascendant* is subtle and sophisticated.

**JGC: Do you select the marble and do the finishing yourself? And do you design the stacked cedar plinths?**

**SB:** I've been working closely with a quarry in northern Italy. I take periodic trips there, select the marble, staying in-house as many days as I can, and work with the machining part of the process all the way to the hand-finishing. I plan to use my Guggenheim Fellowship to fund extended time there to work on a new body of work. The plinths are on casters. In the Italian stone workshops, they serve as functional work pedestals. They highlight how mundane a material white marble is in many ways.



Installation view of “Soft Truths,” at Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, with (left to right): *Ecclesiastes 1 (KJV)*, 2020, antique quilt, assorted textiles, and wood, 68 x 77 x 3.25 in.; and *Lady Interbellum*, 2020, white marble on custom cedar plinth, 75 x 51.26 x 51.5 in. overall.

**JGC: Moving to “Codeswitch,” the five interconnected works that form *Nyabinghi* (2017) have a Rastafarian title, and the date 1887 appears, which I connected to the date of Marcus Garvey’s birth. How did this work evolve both physically and as a concept?**

**SB:** For much of my youth, I was deep into Rastafarianism and its knowledge and wisdom systems. The Nyabinghi order is the oldest of the Rastafarian subgroups, and it played a specific role in Rastafarian culture; they were sages named after Queen Nyabinghi, who ruled Uganda in

the 19th century. The female form in that work is Queen Nyabinghi. The date was a happy coincidence; it existed on a quilt fragment that I had, and it does coincide with Garvey's birth. That's how a lot of my titles work: I believe in the notion that if I'm patchworking historical and aesthetic references together, at some point, they start to conflate and create their own meaning. So, although it was coincidence, it was meant to happen.

**JGC: *100 Years Too Soon* (2017), another quilt work, employs trompe l'oeil: an ebony sculpture seems to pop out amid a mashup of signs, including tar, Japanese wave patterns, paint, and an African-style pattern. What readings are embedded in this work?**

**SB:** The title quotes James Baldwin, who says, in *The Fire Next Time*, "You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating 100 years of freedom 100 years too soon. We cannot be free until they are free." Basically, he's saying that, in regard to equality, Black folks cannot be free until white folks are freed from the destructive, distorted reality that allows them to engage in social and legislative contradictions to the ideals espoused in the Emancipation Proclamation.



*100 Years Too Soon*, 2017. Antique futon cover, assorted textiles, acrylic, tar, and charcoal, 40 x 38 in.

**JGC: Why is *Mandala of the B-Bodhisattva II* (2000), the hip-hop mandala break-dance floor and video, so important in this exhibition?**

**SB:** That is the foundation, the birthplace, of the exploration in my pattern-based works. My three years in Japan (1992–95) were a serious spiritual awakening—something that spoke directly and profoundly to me. I grew up in Los Angeles going to a Methodist church, so religion and spirituality weren't new for me, but the immersion in a Buddhist culture was a paradigm shift. When I returned to the U.S., I was working with mandala forms partly because of my

interest in Buddhism (I practiced with Buddhist monks when I was living in Japan), but I was also looking at the circle and all that it means—its physical and bodily references in many different cultures. Some monks perform a ritualistic dance in which the circles they create with their bodies end up being a mandala. I grew up break-dancing, which is also a circle-based body gesture. So, that mandala is autobiographical. It's a break-dance floor, as well as a ritual power object. The pattern is part of my original exploration of sacred geometry, which continues the research in the paintings of my cousin John (Thomas) Biggers. I consider P-Funk, Sun Ra, Alice Coltrane, Samuel Delany, and Octavia Butler, like my cousin, to be proto-Afrofuturists, referencing outer space as a way of finding a free and liberated space for Black people. The world we inhabit hasn't been that.

I did several mandala dance floors and some sand mandalas on the floor; five or six years later, I started working with antique quilts. For me, that was picking back up on the thread of pattern. The video was shot at Bronx City College, and the dance floor was shown at the Bronx Museum in "One Planet Under a Groove," a 2001–02 show put together by Franklin Sirmans and Lydia Yee. The title, coincidentally, is inspired by a P-Funk song.

**JGC: In contrast to your coded works that hide a web of information in plain sight, your "BAM" series seem to obscure the origins of its bullet-ridden African sculptures.**

**SB:** I'm creating dubious origins. It's a way of acknowledging how problematic ideas of provenance are. You can have an African object of a certain time period, and some Western scholars think they somehow control the provenance of that piece, whereas the people who actually made it, live around it, and are from the same culture are no longer the authorities on the object they have created. This is a big issue in encyclopedic museums; when you go to a place like the Met or the Barnes Collection, you see an object collected by a white guy a hundred or a couple of hundred years ago—the person who collected it becomes the authority. Who gets to decide where this object comes from and what it means? I'm trying to reclaim those pieces and give them a different type of authority.



*BAM (for Michael)*, 2015. High-polish bronze, 19 x 5 x 5 in. Photo: Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami, FL

**JGC: Your “BAM” works are named after victims of police violence. What is your process?**

**SB:** I first cover the objects with wax. I make it impossible to know exactly where an object came from by putting a veil over it. A lot of power objects are covered because they’re too powerful for human eyes. They have to be shielded: partly to protect the object and partly to protect those viewers not considered worthy enough to see it directly. That’s what the layer of wax does. Then I take them to a shooting range. We shoot them with different caliber weapons. I don’t personally pull the trigger, but I help to arrange the shots. Finally, I cast the remnants in bronze. The process is a way to resurrect and memorialize those victims. I assign a name to the figure not based on gender or any other aspect; this becomes a reminder—a memorial.

**JGC: Is the process emotionally difficult?**

**SB:** Making all of these works—the “BAM” works, the quilts, and the “Chimera” series—has been emotionally difficult because part of making the work is taking all of these objects from different places. I have an enormous deference for all of these objects and their makers. That gesture—to take something and to create a new work from it—I know it’s well established in postmodern practice, but the intent behind it, for me, is very important. It’s not just about taking something that’s already made; it’s not just a reference to the readymade. It’s about propagating a story and putting these powerful objects back into a contemporary and trans-generational dialogue. Not only that: it’s for them, ultimately, to be viewed and reconsidered in the future. That’s why I say they’re objects for a future ethnography. When these works are read in the



future, people will need to reconsider their understanding of various countries, the relationship to objects, and ideas of authority and provenance. They're palimpsests and repositories of history and culture.



*Laocoön (Fatal Bert)*, 2016. Vinyl and electric air pump, 240 x 348 x 140 in.

**JGC: You've combined the Japanese Sakura (peace) tree with the lynching tree and merged a diagram of a slave ship with the Buddhist symbol of enlightenment in *Lotus* (2007). Were these early examples of code-switching?**

**SB:** Yes, but code-switching goes back to the autobiography in the work. Even the dance floor code-switches: it's a Buddhist reference, it's a Modernist reference to Carl Andre, it's a conflation of ritual practice and break-dancing; it has a sound element; it's also collaboration, because the dance floor is a static object without dancers. The dancers add their scuff marks; for me, those marks on the floor are the same thing as the thread that goes inside the quilt. These are the remnants and the patina of human contact and communal creation.

**JGC: What does *Laocoön (Fatal Bert)* (2016) have to teach us?**

**SB:** *Laocoön (Fatal Bert)* is lying down as if he's been shot—he's basically paying for the sins of his creator, Bill Cosby. Fat Albert played a certain role, more or less protecting everyone in the neighborhood, like Laocoön was trying to protect the Trojans. In the *Aeneid*, Laocoön was a priest, a messenger, a moralistic figure who was punished by either Athena or Poseidon, depending on the telling—many of these myths also have various and dubious origins. Both Laocoön and Bert paid for the deeds of their creator. The larger message is to be careful about who you put on a pedestal. Read every story not by what you see on the surface but by what lies

underneath. The story of Laocoön is also the story of the Trojan horse. Don't take for granted that what you see is what it really is.

*"Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch" is on view at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles this summer, traveling to the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans later in 2021.*