

## Artist Sanford Biggers Explains How Our Misunderstandings of Classical Sculpture Inspired His Rockefeller Center Takeover

The 25-foot-tall bronze is the artist's biggest sculpture to date.

**Sarah Cascone**, May 7, 2021



Sanford Biggers, *Oracle* (2021) at Rockefeller Center. Photo by Daniel Greer, courtesy of Art Production Fund.

Sanford Biggers is taking over New York's Rockefeller Center this spring with a campus-wide art installation headlined by *Oracle*, a monumental bronze sculpture that—standing 25 feet tall and weighing in at over 15,000 pounds—is the Harlem-based artist's largest work to date.

Delayed from a planned September debut, Wednesday's unveiling “was amazing just because of the sheer size and magnitude of the work itself,” Biggers told Artnet News. “To open right now, as the city is starting to open up and the weather is getting nice, and to leave this as a gift in the city I live in is an extreme honor.”

Biggers first started talking with Art Production Fund, which organized the show, about staging a public art project over a decade ago, and the current project has been in the works for about four years. When the APF team suggested Rockefeller Center as a possible site, Biggers was immediately enchanted.

“It was like a lightbulb popped up over my head,” he said. “When Raymond Hood was designing this complex, he was grabbing from stories from antiquity, mythology, art... to wind up with this beautiful Art Deco monument. I wanted to reference various cultures and histories as well.”



Sanford Biggers, *Oracle* (2021) at Rockefeller Center. Photo by Daniel Greer, courtesy of Art Production Fund.

Biggers sees his work as as a companion of sorts to three of Rockefeller Center's most prominent artworks: the Zeus relief sculpture at the entrance of 30 Rock, the gold *Prometheus* sculpture by Paul Manship overlooking the skating rink, and Lee Lawrie's monumental *Atlas* on Fifth Avenue.

"Because of all those mythological references," Biggers said, "having this work here that has a lot of African elements to me is sort of completing the rest of the story."

*Oracle* is the latest in the Biggers's "Chimera" sculpture series, which merges African masks and European figures. The seated body is inspired by the ancient Temple of Zeus, while the head is based on masks and other sculptures from various African cultures, including Luba art and the Maasai religion.



Sanford Biggers, *Just Us* (2021) at Rockefeller Center. Photo by Diane Bondareff/AP Images for Tishman Speyer

On the *Oracle* throne, there is the image of a lotus blossom, a recurring motif in the artist's work where each of the petals is actually the cross-section of a slave ship.

The lotus also appears in photographic works Biggers has throughout the complex, which feature details from works in his "Codex" series, paintings and sculptures made from antique African American quilts featured in his recent exhibition at the Bronx Museum. (The show which will travel this summer to the California African American Museum in Los Angeles.)





A Sanford Biggers vitrine at Rockefeller Center featuring one of his “Chimera” sculptures against a photo background of a still from the video series “Shuffle, Shake, Shatter.” Photo by Daniel Greer, courtesy of Art Production Fund.

“The quilts have a craft background, but so do small African masks and figurative pieces—and when blown up to a monumental scale, it has a different dialogue with the history of public sculpture,” Biggers said.

Biggers has also created work for the Rockefeller Center flagpoles, featuring a wave-like pattern inspired by Japanese kimonos and Buddhist mandalas. The waves, which seem to move as the flags blow in the wind, are meant to represent the slave trade’s Middle Passage and the flowing of water.

Throughout Rockefeller Center, “there are smaller symbols of the triangle trade and the slave trade. You see references to tobacco and cotton and sugar,” Biggers noted.



“I wanted to put a piece here that.. is actually looking past that at the magnificent and powerful influence that African diasporic culture has had on New York City throughout its history.”



Sanford Biggers, *Seigaiha* (2021) at Rockefeller Center. Photo by Daniel Greer, courtesy of Art Production Fund.

Biggers says he felt empowered to remix classical sculpture in part because our contemporary understanding of these forms is already so flawed. The classical European sculptures we know today as sparkling white marbles were once brightly painted, while African masks were originally beaded, pigmented, and adorned.

“So you have a white-washed version of the European objects and a black-washed version of the African objects,” Biggers said. “Editing, cutting and pasting, chopping and screwing has been happening the entire time.”



Sanford Biggers, *Oracle* (2021) at Rockefeller Center. Photo by Daniel Greer, courtesy of Art Production Fund.

In the coming weeks, *Oracle* will also begin to live up to its name with the launch of an interactive component allowing viewers to consult the sculpture about their future after activating a QR code. The sculpture will be voiced by “various celebrities,” according to Biggers, although he declined to name names.

Visitors will be able to ask the oracle anything they want, and if the oracle is “in,” they’ll get a live response from the day’s celebrity.

“They’ll respond as an oracle would,” Biggers said, “in mysterious, poetic vagaries which will hopefully be, if not helpful, at least mystifying.”

*“Sanford Biggers” is on view at Rockefeller Center, Rockefeller Plaza between West 49th and 50th Streets, New York, May 5, 2021–June 29, 2021.*

*“Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch” will be on view at the California African American Museum, in Exposition Park, 600 State Drive, Los Angeles, July 28, 2021–January 23, 2022.*



