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# Folk Art, Fine Art And Fabric Come Together In Louisville

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Sanford Biggers, American, b. 1970, Quilt 35 (Vex), 2014. Antique quilt fragments, treated acrylic, ... [+] ROBERT MILLMAN

Two women on an epic road trip in the 1950s. A Scottish midwife entering her 80s. One of contemporary art's brightest stars.

Fabric serves as their connective tissue. Louisville brings them together this spring.

## **The Road Trippers**

In 1951, mathematician Ada K. Dietz and textile artist Ruth E. Foster, with their Heinz terrier, "Pickles," bought a trailer, closed their Long Beach, CA Hobby Looms Studio and headed out on a year-plus tour across the United States and Canada promoting their idea for using algebraic expressions to write weaving drafts.

Weaving drafts are directions for how to set up a loom and how to weave a desired pattern. Blueprints, in a sense, for constructing fabric. For anyone unaccustomed to the complexities of the weaving process, these "blueprints" are no less intimidating than those detailing how to build a skyscraper. Warps and wefts and heddles and tie-ups and draw-downs. Weaving, one quickly discovers, represents a language as well as a skill.

Dietz and Foster met in Detroit where Dietz taught math and Foster, a professional weaver, was studying to improve her craft. Foster inspired Dietz to pick up the practice, with Dietz eventually being challenged to write her own drafts as her skill increased.

"She fell back on mathematical equations because that's what she knew," Michelle Amos, Executive Director of the Little Loomhouse in Louisville told



Forbes.com. “She experimented with this until she realized that every time she got an interesting pattern in the weaving.”

Dietz application of Algebra on weaving is the focus of an exhibition at the Lou Tate Gallery at the Little Loomhouse through May 14, “Ada K. Dietz, Algebraic Expressions in Handwoven Textiles: with contemporary interpretation provided by members of the Cross Country Weavers.” More on them soon.



Honeycomb  $(x+y)$ squared, artist unknown, circa 1960s. THE LITTLE LOOMHOUSE

Little Loomhouse founder Lou Tate became aware of Dietz' work through the robust network of handcrafters at the time and invited the mathematician turned weaver to submit her ideas to a traveling exhibition she was curating during the 1940s. The popular reception among weavers to Dietz' unusual approach resulted in Tate inviting Dietz and Foster to visit her in Louisville so she could publish their drafts, launching the road trip.

“I think on an intuitive level (weavers have always used math to compose draft), but Dietz was really the first person to draw it out and completely make that connection and talk about it,” Amos said.

A weaving draft book detailing Dietz' compositions, “Algebraic Expressions in Handwoven Textiles,” was published by the Little Loomhouse in 1949. By the mid-50s, her notions had captured the weaving community's imagination.

“One of the things that it did was it inspired this group—and they're still active today—called the Cross Country Weavers,” Amos explains of the organization celebrating its 65th anniversary this year. “In 1957, they took up the first algebraic challenge of using these algebraic expressions to write weaving drafts to create these patterns. They did that for a couple years and then later started taking up other challenges.”

The CCW, whose membership is limited to 30 of the top weavers across the U.S. and Canada, has collaborated on the current exhibition, creating new interpretations of “Algebraic Expressions” to be shown alongside the Loomhouse's collection of original woven samples and artifacts from the writing and publishing of Dietz' draft book.

As an aside, Little Loomhouse is the birthplace of the “Happy Birthday” song.

## **The Superstar**

Sanford Biggers’ (b. 1970) artwork resides in the permanent collections of America’s most prestigious museums. Today, and 100 years from now, what he’s making will be considered essential to understanding contemporary art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The latest exhibition of his work, “Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch,” concludes its national tour at the Speed Museum in Louisville after debuting at the Bronx Museum in 2021 with a stop in Los Angeles in between.

In linguistics, code-switching (or language alternation) occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages, or language varieties, in the context of a single conversation or situation. In popular culture, it has come to define the verbal and gestural gymnastics undertaken by African Americans as they attempt to safely and successfully navigate white spaces. In the hands of Biggers, code-switching refers to his genius for using a wide variety of materials and methods to produce a singular and cohesive universe of artworks which defy categorization.

“Codeswitch” represents the first survey of Biggers’ quilt-based works and features more than 30 examples of his unique manipulation on the antique quilts he has collected. To each quilt the artist has used a starting point, he has then variously applied paints, assorted textiles, burnt cork, tar, charcoal and other materials. This process, like linguistic code-switching, recognizes language plurality, as the quilts signal their original creator’s intent as well as

the new layers of meaning given to them through Biggers's artistic intervention.

“Artists who work with quilts and other textile forms—whether in centuries past or in the present moment—are today recognized as critical contributors to American culture,” Speed Museum Curator of Decorative Arts and Design Scott Erbes told Forbes.com. “Witness, for example, exhibitions like ‘The Quilts of Gee’s Bend’ at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, the Whitney, and other prominent institutions (2002-2008) or, just recently, ‘Fabric of a Nation: American Quilt Stories’ at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (2021-2022), not to mention the work of contemporary artists like Sanford Biggers, Dawn Williams Boyd, Bisa Butler, Faith Ringgold and so many others.”

Quilts displayed in museums alongside painting and sculpture has become the rule, not the exception, thanks to these artists. They have also opened the doors of art museums to historic quilters, long ghettoized as “crafters” not rising to the esteem of “fine art” by the institutional establishment.





Sanford Biggers, American, b. 1970, Negerplastik, 2016. Antique quilt, assorted textiles, tar, ... [+] COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Coinciding with Biggers contemporary interpretations of the artform, an exhibition of historic quilts at the Speed, “Pictures from Pieces,” celebrates the recent gift of ten American quilts from Louisville’s Eleanor Bingham Miller. Miller began seriously collecting quilts—particularly those made by Kentucky women—in the 1980s, inspired by her work as one of the co-founders of the Kentucky Quilt Project, a landmark program devoted to documenting Kentucky quilts, their histories, and their makers. The quilts, spanning over a century from the 1850s to the 1960s, are intricate testimonials to their makers’ diverse creative talents.

Miller’s archiving follows in the footsteps of Tate whose collecting of traditional weaving drafts took her into the far reaches of Kentucky, often on horseback. Her first local exhibitions of Kentucky hand weavings were held at the Speed Museum in 1937.

“Artists like Sanford Biggers and others—including artists who specifically produce quilts—are actively responding to and referencing the diverse traditions of historical American quilts and their makers, so the dialogue between past and present is always there, sometimes through explicit visual acknowledgement, sometimes through conceptual acknowledgement, and often with a combination of the two,” Erbes explains.

“Codeswitch” at the Speed Museum can be seen from March 18 through June 26.



# The Midwife



Penny Sisto. BEN NEWKIRK OF UPROAR FILMS FOR THE CARNEGIE CENTER FOR ART & HISTORY

Across the Ohio River from Louisville, The Carnegie Center for Art & History in New Albany, IN presents “[Penny Sisto at 80,](#)” an exhibition of nearly 30 new works by the venerated New Albany fiber artist.

The Scottish-born Sisto has spent the past thirty-three years making expressive quilts, by some estimates about 200 per year, in a wooded cabin bordering the Mount St. Francis Monastery in Floyds Knobs, IN. Recognizable in this most recent series are some of the artist’s favored motifs, from humanoid creatures with antlers, women holding children, Frida Kahlo and various religious icons. The pieces have all been assembled from scraps of fabric and adorned with Sisto’s signature diamond-like sewn details.

Also on display is the artist's first quilt, stitched when she was a child in 1948 with household materials.

By her count, Sisto has helped birth 2,500 babies naturally, from her own daughters' children on a California commune in the 1970's to women in Maasai tribal villages in rural East Africa. Her time in Africa inspired her to combine the quilting, embroidery and appliqué techniques she learned from her grandmother with the beading and collage methods of her African friends, resulting in the distinctive style seen in her work today.