

***Review:***

***Sanford Biggers' Codeswitch creates new meaning from old quilts***

By [Natalie Weis](#)

Photo: Jon Cherry

April 2, 2022

Where others hold pencil to paper, artist Sanford Biggers holds paint to full-sized quilts.

His new show, “*Codeswitch*,” on view at The Speed Art Museum through June 26th, includes nearly 30 of his quilt-based works along with two video pieces. Biggers received the dilapidated antique quilts as a gift, and decided to give them new life by adding glitter, sequins and tar; drawing on them with acrylic and spray paint; or cutting, re-piecing and manipulating them.

“They’re almost like sketches for all the work I’ve done,” Biggers said.



*Jon Cherry. Artist Sanford Biggers started the quilt project in 2009. He calls his textile work “intimate.”*

Over a career spanning nearly three decades, the artist has worked in painting, sculpture, installation and performance. He also plays keyboard and leads a multimedia concept band called Moon Medicin. The group often performs in masks, in front of wall-sized projections of video imagery Biggers curates.

Days before the exhibition opened, Biggers was at the Speed, guiding the installation of his quilt-based works. He stood in front of a piece called “Blossom Sketch.” It’s a large patchwork quilt made up of rows and rows of small hexagon-shaped scraps of fabric. Painted over it is the outline of a baby grand piano with an array of black and white blossoms flowering from its soundboard. It was inspired by a large-scale multimedia installation he created in 2007 that references both the dark history of lynchings in the U.S. and the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment.



Jon Cherry. Artist Sanford Biggers talks to attendees at the Speed Art Museum Member Preview for his show “Codeswitch,” on March 17, 2022.

“The nature of these quilts and how I work on them is very intimate,” Biggers explained. “These are things that I do often by myself, working late at night in the studio, and it’s a way of getting some ideas out as almost a diary or a codex, and to give you hints and insights into some of my other work.”

When he began the quilt project in 2009, Biggers had been researching the history of the Underground Railroad as part of another installation commissioned by a church in Philadelphia. It had been a stop on the network that helped those escaping slavery in the South. Quilts, Biggers read, often served as signposts along the way, embedding secret codes in their patterns to aid the slaves.





*Sanford Biggers. "Quilt 35 (Vex)." Antique quilt fragments, treated acrylic, and tar on antique quilt.*

Although the story was later disputed, Biggers remained captivated by the idea, and used it to develop some of the quilts. "Quilt 35 (Vex)" is one of them. It's a square quilt with a curving pattern of quarter circles in white, teal, lavender, peach and coral-colored fabric. On top of it, he's painted a tree branch with clusters of small, bright yellow flowers. In the upper left corner,



he's added what looks like a round blossom of long, narrow petals. It's only on closer inspection that we see the petals for what they really are: blueprints for the hulls of slave ships.

"I was really inspired by that narrative of these potentially being signposts on the Underground Railroad," Biggers said. "But it was also about what it meant to come in more than 100 years after the quilts were made and add another layer of code. In the future, people are going to read this and potentially try to decipher the original code, but then they have to try to decipher my code as well. It becomes this cross-generational dialog and a palimpsest of American history."

One quilt in the exhibition holds a bit of Kentucky history as well. Biggers created "Quilt 17 (Sugar, Pork, Bourbon)" after friends invited him to the Kentucky Derby. It was his first visit to Louisville.



Sanford Biggers. "Quilt 17 (Sugar, Pork, Bourbon)" (2013). Antique quilt, assorted textiles, acrylic, spray paint.

"My memories of that weekend were pretty much sugar, pork and bourbon," Biggers recalled. "I was thinking about the dandies, the fashion, the patterns, the clothes, and I threw in what's sort of a break dancing reference." He was referring to the painted silhouettes of footprints that dance their way across the quilt. In the upper right corner, the outline of Gordon the Slave lays on his side, a haunting reminder of part of Kentucky's history of chattel slavery.

“You have to look around a few times before you can locate it, but that came from here,” Biggers said, pointing to the imagery of the enslaved man. “Even the smudges and dust that were left on this fabric somehow came out of the experience of being here. I was already doing some quilt work, but this was, for me, one that put a lot of things into a perspective of how to approach the material.”



*Jon Cherry. Community members mingle at the member preview event for “Codeswitch,” a show by Sanford Biggers.*

The country and culture of Japan have also heavily influenced Biggers’ artistic practice. He lived there for three years in the early 1990s, teaching English and studying Zen Buddhism. When he returned to the U.S., he began recreating Buddhist mandalas with hand-cut linoleum. He took the pieces to breakdance competitions to be used as floors and filmed the dancers from above. That footage became part of his video work “Mandala of the B-Bodhisattva.” In the Speed exhibition, it’s projected onto a raised platform on the floor, creating a playfully disorienting view of the competition.



Elsewhere in the museum, the Speed is presenting *"Pictures from Pieces – Quilts from the Eleanor Bingham Miller Collection."* The 10 American quilts are recent gifts from Louisville native Eleanor Bingham Miller, a co-founder of the Kentucky Quilt Project. The collection on view represents more than a century of American quilt-making – from the 1850s to the 1960s – and a stunning variety of pattern, color and fabrics.



Bill Roughen. "Quilt" (about 1860). 84 3/4 × 105 inches. Cotton, silk, silk velvet. Courtesy The Speed Art Museum, gift of Eleanor Bingham Miller.

“From the second a quilt gets made by someone’s mother or grandmother or aunt, they immediately start to accumulate memories and meanings, and then later recollections and nostalgia,” Scott Erbes, Curator of Decorative Arts and Design, said. “I think that’s what makes them so evocative and in some ways, timeless.”

Biggers made similar observations about the quilts he uses.

“These quilts have had very close interactions with bodies. They are the remnants of the performance of life and inhabitation. They have the veneration that comes from use and age.”

Here at the Speed, quilts are being given new life, whether on display in their original forms or remixed and reimagined into different pieces. And thanks to Biggers, there’s no shortage of codes — from slave ships and lotus blossoms to hip-hop and horseracing — for a new generation to decipher.

“I like for the viewer to work,” he said. “None of this is supposed to be easy. This is all layered stuff.”

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*Support for this story was provided in part by the Great Meadows Foundation.*

*Disclosure: The Speed Art Museum gives financial support to Louisville Public Media, which WFPL News is part of.*