



## ***New Layers of Meaning: In Conversation with Sanford Biggers***

BY [NATALIE WEIS](#)

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For nearly three decades, Sanford Biggers has been examining the complexities of current social, political and economic conditions — and the historical contexts that created them — through his boundary-blurring sculpture, installation, and performance works. His monumental bronze sculpture, *Oracle*, was on view in New York’s Rockefeller Center from May 5 – June 29, 2021. In 2022, he will resume his work as creative director and keyboardist of his multimedia concept band Moon Medicin. Biggers is the recipient of the 2017 Rome Prize, a 2020 Guggenheim Fellowship and the 2021 Heinz Award, among other honors. He is currently the 2021-2022 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Visiting Professor and Scholar in the MIT Department of Architecture.

I met with Biggers in March 2022 during the installation of [Codeswitch](#), an exhibit of nearly thirty quilt-based works that was first shown at The Bronx Museum of the Arts (September 9, 2020 – April 4, 2021) before traveling to The California African American Museum (July 28, 2021 – January 23, 2022) and The Speed Art Museum (March 18 – June 26, 2022). This interview was conducted at the Speed Art Museum in Louisville and has been edited for clarity and publication.

Natalie Weis: Let’s talk about the title of this show: “codeswitch.” The term can have negative connotations, especially for Black people and other historically marginalized identities.

Sanford Biggers: Code switching, actually, is what the majority of us do. Call it what you want, but it’s just social navigation. It’s a very American notion to think that no one is supposed to ever have to switch. You speak to your grandparents a certain way and your co-workers a certain way, you speak to your lover a different way — that’s human behavior.

But code switching also refers to the idea of new layers and different types of code. If there was code within the initial quilt that was used on the Underground Railroad, and then there's code from me, those are things that have to be deciphered. Then there's the conceptual side—that all history and all contemporary art is embedded with code. Even the places that show art have various codes and ethics.

These quilts are “domestic women's work objects”. But when you put them in a contemporary art museum, they're read right next to the pantheon of Western male painters — code switch right there. They operate as drawings, installations, sculptures, paintings — you can't easily categorize them, so they're code switching in that way as well. In other words, code switching is a way to *not* limit any one particular read of these pieces.

I'm interested in craft and context — the juxtaposition of materials with my conceptual interests.

NW: Tell me what's going on visually with these pieces.

SD: Aesthetically, a lot of these patterns are right on the verge of hardcore trompe l'oeil, multi-point perspective but often don't take it all the way there. They don't have the gradation, shading, and other tropes to make that happen. Part of what I'm doing is using very basic visual tricks to push that sense of dimension and perspective.

I grew up in L.A. doing graffiti, so I'll often use stencils and spray paint. Some pieces have cloud bursts and drop shadows — those are basic graffiti effects that you see on graffiti burners and pieces on the wall. Once again, code switching between high and low, gallery versus street art.

NW: Do you see your work reflecting any kind of geographic vernacular?

SD: I don't think in those terms. My parents are from Houston and Galveston, Texas. I went to college at Morehouse in Atlanta. I spent a significant amount of time in the South, and I was influenced by a lot of things I saw: bottle trees and the quilts, of course. There's a certain visual vernacular that is very different from New York, very different from L.A. Actually, I see this work having more in common with that Southern vernacular and some things in Chicago.



Sanford Biggers, *Transition*, 2018; antique quilt, assorted textiles, acrylic, oil stick, sequins. Image courtesy the artist.

NW: I feel like we're at this moment in contemporary art where we sometimes talk about identity almost to the exclusion of everything else. What are other aspects of your work you'd like people to consider?

SD: That is definitely a conversation that's happening now, but I've been making work for close to three decades, so this work has happened long before identity became a talking point. Once that talking point evolves, it will come back to history, and this work has always been embedded in history. That's another reason why I place this work in an abstract and geometrically aesthetic conversation and not a figurative conversation — there are very few signifiers that would locate this as work being made by a Black artist. I'm interested in craft and context — the juxtaposition of materials with my conceptual interests.

I would hope that when we're at the next phase of the conversation, people take the lessons learned from this part of it, but also realize that Black artists didn't start making work in 2019. [laughs] The interesting thing about vernacular culture, and even signifiers that might seem African American, at the end of the day, those end up being American.



Sanford Biggers, *Ecclesiastes (KJV)*, 2020; antique quilt, assorted textiles, wood. Image courtesy the artist.

NW: Right, exactly. They enter the mainstream.

SD: They've *already* entered. All of the imagery *is* in the mainstream, all of the imagery *has* been American for hundreds of years at this point. So to talk about it now in terms of "Black" is to do the exact thing you *don't* want to do. I don't make work to talk about the Black experience. This is about the American experience. Period.

NW: I understand Terry Adkins was a big influence for you.

SD: Terry is one of those hugely influential artists for me because of the way he traversed through different subject matters, themes, materials, and forms. And people just didn't get it. They wanted works that were very tidy and could fill in a few boxes. Terry's work was far more complicated in some ways, and only now are people really starting to appreciate it. Him being a mentor and a friend and a guide gave me the license to think about things in more complex terms and to make works I didn't fully understand. One of the huge lessons he gave me was saying, "You talk about your work like you really know what's going on, and you need to stop. You need to stop knowing what's going on. Let it not make sense. That's for the future to figure out."

NW: How did your work change after hearing that?

SD: There are moves and instances that happen, on probably every one of these, that make me feel a little uncomfortable. I would do things that I normally would not be able to justify for myself. If I'm asking, What would a Sanford Biggers work look like?, it wouldn't look like that thing I just did. If I am able to get that to happen on any one of these, then I've already made some progress. The whole idea is to never totally be comfortable.

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