

HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

Sanford Biggers Cracks the Code of Quilts

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by Natalie Weis
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LOUISVILLE, KY — Billed as a “survey of quilt-based works,” *Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch* at the Speed Art Museum feels less like an overview of one particular section of the multidisciplinary artist’s oeuvre and more like a record of his creative process overall — tactile evidence of the evolution of artistic ideas; fields of interest that have held his fascination; visual motifs that have appeared, in various guises and permutations, throughout his career. The show includes 33 quilt works dating from 2012 to 2020 (the catalogue documents an impressive total of 100 such pieces), along with two video works from 2000 and 2014.

Biggers, who is known for sculpture, video, installation, music, and performance, began the *Codex* series in 2009, after he was gifted about 50 19th-century

American quilts in varying degrees of disrepair. Those familiar with his artistic output will recognize some of his other artworks in their quilted counterparts: “Blossom Study” (2014), a square quilt of small, hexagonal patchwork onto which he has painted the outline of a grand piano bursting with flowers, is a sketch of his 2007 sculptural and sound installation “Blossom,” in which he fused an 18-foot-tall replica of a tree with the belly of a grand piano, its unattended keys playing his recording of “Strange Fruit.”

Similar surrogates are present, such as “Floral Seated Warrior” (2017), a portrait-oriented quilt of chunky gray and beige blocks with a blue, floral-print silhouette of Biggers’s “BAM (Seated Warrior)” sculpture (2017). Representations of “Lotus” (2007) — his flower formed from repetitions of a slave ship diagram — and the broad, iconic red lips of “Cheshire” (2008) appear frequently. “Incognito” (2014), for instance, is a square piece composed of bow-tie sections of two different quilts, a cacophony of pattern and color onto which Biggers has added the smudged outline of a Cheshire grin, its sly smile slightly hidden under improvised dashes of gold, blue, orange, red, and lavender paint. The flourishes are, perhaps, vestiges of the artist’s graffiti days (Biggers grew up in Los Angeles, where he participated in the street art scene). As with all his embellishments, they impart a new and distinct layer of meaning to the antique quilts.

That Biggers is working with quilts is significant, as they are, by definition, layered objects — most often, a piece of batting sandwiched between two pieces of fabric and stitched together. When he first began the *Codex* series, he was intrigued by the contested legend that quilts had been used as coded objects to guide those escaping slavery in the southern United States through the Underground Railroad. In the artist’s hands, the quilts become palimpsests:

historical messages reanimated through the addition of contemporary signifiers, symbols, and codes, such as graffiti.

A codex, the earliest form of the modern book, was also held together by stitching, and enabled a quantum leap forward, knowledge-wise, by allowing random access to reference material, versus the sequential access required by a scroll. In many ways, *Codeswitch* seems to celebrate and revel in knowledge, its references revealing a voracious, eclectic, and often mischievous intellect. Motifs have double meanings (a Cheshire grin recalls both a 19th-century English novel and an American blackface minstrel show; a tree signifies both enlightenment and lynchings); titles contain clever puns (“Big Dada”), witty wordplay (“Kubrick’s Rube”), and other shibboleths of a highly learned and cultured mind (“Quo Vadis”; “Chorus for Paul Mooney”); visual influences include such a motley crew as Hiroshige, Sigmar Polke, and Robert Rauschenberg.

Within a subset of works, Biggers trades his familiar visual lexicon for a more rigorous exploration of abstraction and a deeper engagement with the quilt patterns. In “Tyranny of Mirrors” (2017), he pieces together segments of three different quilts, each featuring a similar hexagonal pattern, with a silver-leaf pattern that seems to recede into space, as if the viewer is looking into a hall of mirrors. The effect, not unlike op-art, is mesmerizing. In “Transition” (2018) and the onomatopoeically named “Ooo Oui” (2017), he incorporates sequins into similar abstract constructions with even more bedazzling results.

In another subseries, Biggers honors the trompe-l’oeil aspirations held by some quilt makers by adhering sections of fabric to geometric shapes made of plywood, which he joins to compose wall-mounted sculptures that resemble large origami

constructions. “Reconstruction” (2019), with its triangular panels of fabric that incorporate the United States flag, calls to mind the rhythmic layering of triangles involved in folding a flag; when viewed from a distance, it also evokes that old Cheshire smile, a visual wink as wry as the double entendre of the piece’s title.

Two video works round out the exhibition: the single-channel “Mandala of the B-Bodhisattva II” (2000) is projected onto a square screen slightly elevated from the floor, replicating the overhead view of a breakdance competition. The dancers are competing on a floor that Biggers designed from cut linoleum segments in a circular pattern, prefiguring his quilting project. In viewing the breakdancers from above, the focus moves from individual tricks to the broader movement across the patterned floor, much like the sewn lines that traverse a quilt’s pieced fabric. Sounds of the cheering crowd mingle with the music, as if to affirm that what is sacred can also be celebratory.

“Moonrising” (2014) is a seven-and-a-half minute video set to music by Biggers’s band, Moon Medicin, and features two Black men in a wooded area. They are variously naked; robed in quilts, hoodies, or mantles of feathers (the artist’s 2006 “Ghettobird Tunic,” perhaps?); or shirtless, wearing jeans, golden masks, and baseball caps as they roam the woods. Sung lyrics allude to the legend of coded quilts leading enslaved people to freedom.

While QR codes on the museum walls provide a glossary of themes, terms, and historical figures to aid the interpretation of the quilted works, no supplemental written material is provided for “Moonrising.” This follows the experience in the United States, where anti-literacy laws prohibited the written transmission of

knowledge among enslaved people, but they could turn to the oral traditions of West African griots to convey information.

In reconnecting quilts with the body and their primal purpose of bestowing warmth and protection, “Moonrising” seems to eschew intellectual knowledge for that which can only be known through experience. As viewers, we may not have all the codes to interpret the multiple conceptual layers of the quilted works, but we can watch men running through the woods, hidden in quilts, before unfurling them in an open field, and come closer to understanding the tremendous fear and danger of escape, as well as its potential for magnificent freedom.



Sanford Biggers, “Incognito” (2014), antique quilt, assorted textiles, acrylic, spray paint, oil stick, glitter, 45 x 45 inches (photo © Sanford Biggers and David Castillo Gallery, courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami)

Sanford Biggers: *Codeswitch continues at the Speed Art Museum (2035 South Third Street, Louisville, Kentucky) through June 26. The exhibition was*

co-organized by the Bronx Museum of the Arts and Rivers Institute for Contemporary Art & Thought, and co-curated by Dr. Andrea Andersson and Antonio Sergio Bessa.