

SANFORD BIGGERS



CHESHIRE
2008 / OBJECT

WORKS

PASSAGE

2009 | Object

Dimensions variable. Concrete, wave pomade, beeswax, spotlight, house paint



BLOSSOM

2007 | Object

Silk steel, wood, MIDI player piano system, Zoopoxy, 12ft x 18ft x 15ft



WORKS

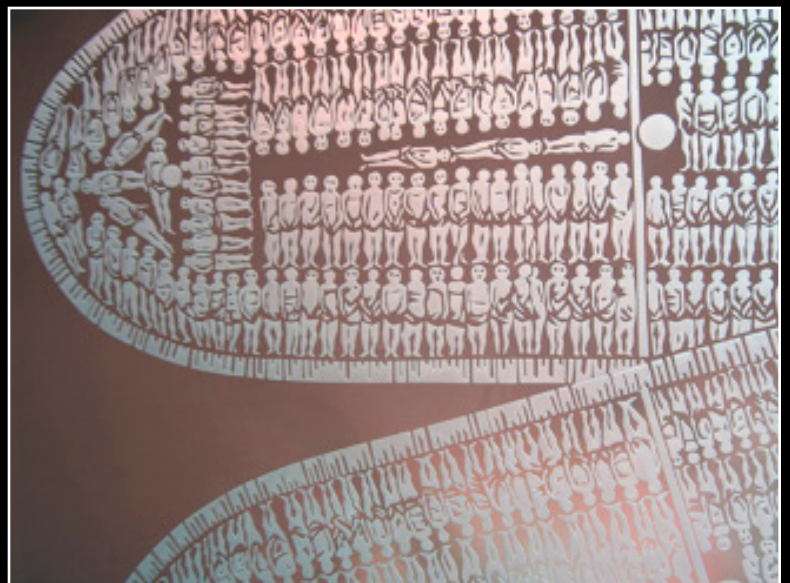


CREATION / DISSIPATION 2002 | PERFORMANCE INSTALLATION

Video still, colored sand, courtesy of the artist, photograph courtesy of Kunstmuseum Luzern.

LOTUS 2007 | Object

Steel, etched glass, colored LED's.
7 ft diameter



WORKS



CHESHIRE

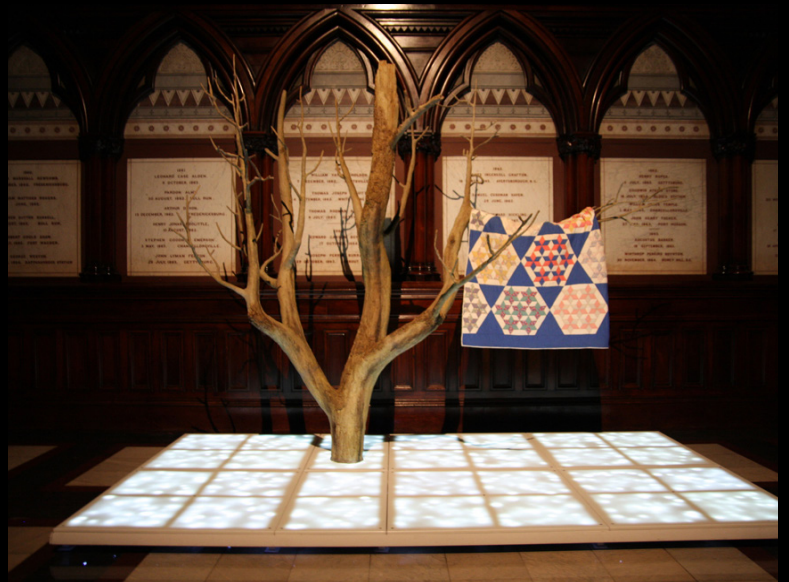
2007 | VIDEO

Dimensions variable, single channel, color, outdoor video projection with sound element

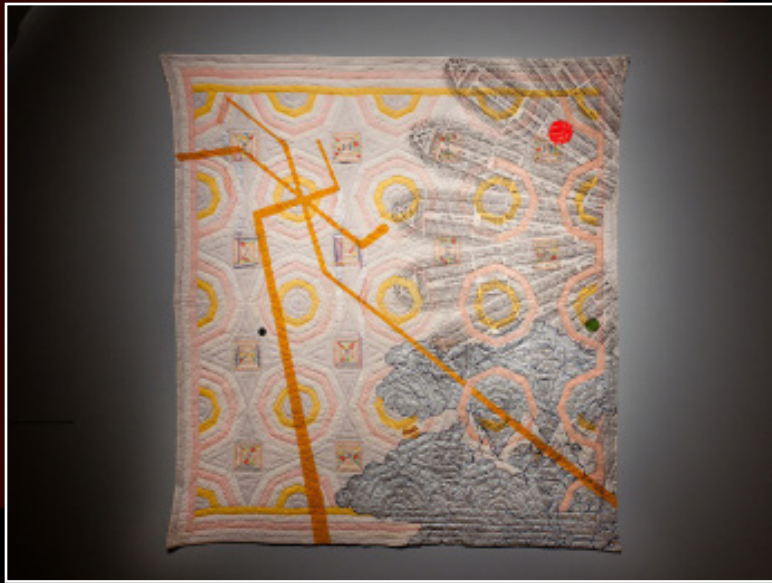
CONSTELLATION

2009 | OBJECT

Mixed Media, Wood, Steel, Quilt, LEDs
8ft x 12ft x 12ft



WORKS



QUILT DRAWINGS

2012 | OBJECT

Quilt, thread

SHUFFLE

2009 | VIDEO

Two channel HD color video installation
with sound component, 4:47 min.



Sanford Biggers

Sanford Biggers is an artist whom is not bound to one specific medium nor subject matter. Biggers began his art career by receiving his Bachelor of Science degree from Morehouse College in Atlanta Georgia. Upon graduation Sanford Biggers went on to receive his Masters of Fine Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago Illinois. Years later he would go back to study at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Sanford's work has been shown all over the United States and he has also seen international recognition. Born in Los Angeles, Biggers later moved to the new center of the art world, New York City to further his art career. While there his art career took off, he began selling and showing works from numeral solo exhibitions. To this day Sanford Biggers is still making work and most recently he has had exhibitions at museums and gallery including the Sculpture Center in New York, NY; Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York, NY; Massachusetts Museum of contemporary Art in North Adams, MA and a showing of his famous exhibition *Codex* at the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, FL.

Biggers merges his diverse backgrounds and ties to ancient Buddhism and the modern black vernacular, in innovative and subtle ways. The spiritual and emotional connectivity of his works shows us how diverse the world is as a whole and also how diverse people can be on an individual basis¹.

A very young Sanford Biggers around the age of 12 first picked up a pair of break dancing shoes, this connection he had with the breakdancing scene would impact him for years to come. Most notably when he began living in Japan in the early 1990s, many of the friends he made while in Japan we're very authentic and really excepted and adopted this "hip-hop scene". So as Biggers showed to Japanese his culture in return his friends exposed and allowed Biggers to experience Buddhism on a truly spiritual and philosophical level. Biggers experiences in Japan merged his old hip-hop culture and ties the African-American community to a new Buddhist ideology². This culminated in Biggers' 2002 performance installation titled, *Creation / Dissipation*. The installation began with five colored circles of sand on the floor, and in each circle laid a dancer. The dancers included three trained modern dancers, and two breakdancers, the fusion of these different types of dance allowed for a truly mesmerizing performance as their bodies moved across the colored sand meshing one with another. Biggers described this peace as a metaphor for the universe and how the different dancers elements conflicted with one another and how with creation comes distraction to both nature and the universe. By the end of the dance all the sand and structure we're completely destroyed.

Biggers also has the ability to dive deep into political issues, the 2009 sculpture titled, *Passage* offers a motivational and inspiring symbol of African-American empowerment. Sitting alone on the floor is a concrete bust of Martin Luther King Jr. and a spotlight that projected the silhouette on the wall behind. However, the truly captivating aspect of this piece is that the silhouette cast is one of President Barack Obama¹. This shadow and silhouette tone, has a similar impact to the works of contemporary artist Kara Walker. *Passage* shows us that yes we do have to look to our past, but to truly move forward we need leaders who have to drive and determination to keep us moving in a positive direction.

Biggers solo exhibition of 2007 at the Grand Arts in Kansas City Missouri titled, *Blossom* showcased many of his now famous sculptures. The three main pieces to come out of *Blossom* included, *Lotus*, *Cheshire*, and of course *Blossom*. *Lotus* is a marvel in technical and metaphorical

1. "In the Studio Sanford biggers with Stephanie Cash." *Art In America* 99, no. 3 (March 2011):90-98. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed May 2, 2015).

2. Biggers, Sanford. "Meditations of a B-Boy Buddhist." *International Review Of African American Art* 21, no. 3 (June 2006): 51-54. Academic Search, EBSCOhost (accessed May 2 2015).

precision, this piece is just about 4.5 feet and hangs suspended in the air. Walking to the gallery you will be able to see the light shine through the etched glass and create strong silhouettes on the walls around it. The glass is cut into the shape of a gigantic lotus flower blossoming out of itself, and on the flower Biggers repeatedly carved images of slaves lined up and on board slave ships. This piece demonstrates the emotional power and connection Biggers has with the modern display of African American history. The transparency of the piece allows all of its viewers to be truly connected with the work, for that the silhouette of the slaves aboard the ship's are cast on those experiencing the exhibition. Sanford Biggers chose the symbol of the lotus as it is one of the main symbols in Zen Buddhism, and to demonstrate the the growth that we as a society need to see. *Lotus* wants to shine a light through the horrors that some may have forgotten pertaining to and the evolution of slavery. After the Grand Arts show in Kansas City, *Lotus* went into storage and years later it would be revived as a main component of his Brooklyn Museum show¹.

Cheshire is a video piece that Biggers projected outside of the museum on the wall of a neighboring building in Kansas City Missouri. On the most basic level appears to be just different black man climbing up different trees. However, you can see that These men are portrayed to be "professionals", one wearing athletic clothing, another in a suit and one wearing medical scrubs. Watching these men attempt to climb the tree gives the emotional feeling that no matter what walk of life you come from, this seemingly simple task of climbing a tree can prove difficult. The symbol of the tree is a reoccurring theme that Biggers uses in many of his works. The idea of the tree symbolizes a lot for Biggers, first off, the tree in African-American history particularly in the southern states of the union portrayed a very negative symbol for lynching. On the other side of the coin, Biggers' roots to Buddhism allow the tree to symbolize the ideology of found enlightenment. In *Cheshire* you can also hear portions of the poem, *Strange Fruit*, another reoccurring component in Biggers work. The Cheshire smile is in the US the pop icon from the film *Alice in Wonderland*, but to others in the world like in Germany this script simply represents there depiction of the smiley face. This notion was displaying in the sculptural component of *Cheshire*, Biggers created a 5 foot long glowing *Cheshire* cat grin and hung the piece outside in a tree³. The lights on *Cheshire* would flicker giving this ominous feeling of death.

The third and title piece of the exhibition *Blossom* is still to this day Biggers' most well-known work. The scale of *Blossom* is unbelievable. Towering over 18 feet, *Blossom* combines steel, wood, clay, paint and of course a fully functional self playing grand piano. Once again the concepts behind the tree are in full force with this piece, with this piece the Jena six incident in Louisiana helped to shape the sculpture. Back in 1998 Biggers moved his piano into the woods and on a daily basis would go out into those woods strip down naked and play, this process allowed him for freedom and connection with his environment. It was these experiences that gave him the vision for *Blossom*, the infusion of the elements of the tree and the piano create this, as he quoted "afro-futurist" motif⁴. One of the more powerful components of this piece is once again Biggers incorporation of the idea of poem and in this case song, "*Strange Fruit*". The piano was programed to play the song on loop, amplified by the speakers at the gallery the song could be heard throughout the exhibition space. *Blossom* has now been shown a plethora of times all over The United States and has traveled the world, this famous sculpture even had a long run sitting at the top of the winding staircase at the US mint.

1. "In the Studio Sanford biggers with Stephanie Cash." *Art In America* 99, no. 3 (March 2011):90-98. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed May 2, 2015).

3. "Sanford Biggers: BUSY!" *International Review Of African American Art* 23, no. 4 (October 2011):5-6. Academic Search, EBSCOhost (accessed May 5, 2015).

4. Richard, Frances. "Sanford Biggers." *Artforum International* 50, no. 4 (December 2011): 259-260. Academic Search, EBSCOhost (accessed May 2, 2015).

Keeping with Sanford Biggers Metaphorical meanings placed on the tree comes the 2009 High Definition color video installation of *Shuffle*. *Shuffle* also known as *Shuffle (The Carnival Within)* is a four minute short film and is the first film of Biggers series *The Odyssean Trilogy*. The film features the famous German performer, Ricardo Camillo. Biggers once again uses the notion of the tree, in this instance the actor is tied to the tree using rope in the same position of a famous image of a burning slave. The film starts out with the actor applying clown makeup to his face, then removing it and reapplying once more later in the piece. *Shuffle* like many of Biggers' work deals with the concept of identity, he uses this concept to Showcase cultural synchronization between political and religious substances². The film gives a basic description of the metaphor that shows how everyone on occasion has to wear mask, and how every person has these multiple personalities.

In 2009 Biggers was commissioned by the Office for the Arts at Harvard University to create a piece for their Memorial Hall. The installation was called *Constellation (Stranger Fruit)*, and is a dedication to all those who died fighting in the Civil War and caught during their attempts to reach freedom on the Underground Railroad. More specifically, the piece delves into Harriet Tubman's connection with the Underground Railroad. *Constellation (Stranger Fruit)* combines many different metaphorical elements including, the tree, the quilt, and the stars¹. The tree has the same metaphorical meaning as it has in previous works, the quilt on the other hand is a new concept that Biggers has adopted and will play with in future exhibitions. During the time of the Underground Railroad quilts were used as a marker to convey messages pertaining to different stops along the way, different colors and patterns denoted whether a location was safe or if it was under watch. The use of the stars this piece symbolize how slaves would be able to tell which way to head to reach their freedom. *Constellation* uses a raised platform with a glass floor with LEDs in the shapes of constellations being shined upwards, on this platform a tree emerged and hanging from this 12 foot high tree was a lone quilt. Biggers it perfectly clear this piece was want to be touched walked upon and truly experienced. At the exhibition opening sitting under the tree was a Japanese Koto player who was playing a spiritual melody, beside her stood what he called the 'Oracle', this was a woman who is singing to the tunes played by the Koto player and doing a verbal preach⁵. Echoing the Oracle was an a cappella group the three elements combined with perfectly with *Constellation* and left its viewers speechless.

Sanford Biggers latest works are inspired by the positivity and overwhelming support he received from *Constellation (Stranger Fruit)*, in the 2012 series he is calling *Quilt Drawings*. These pieces are using the initial metaphor from the Underground Railroad but merging it with different themes from his past. He is using these ideas as away to "draw" on the quilts as a canvas, Biggers incorporates ideas of the *Lotus*, *Cheshire*, *Codex*, *Constellation*, and many more.

In addition to Sanford Biggers long list of solo and group exhibitions, he was offered an adjunct teaching position for Department of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University after his work with *Constellation (Stranger Fruit)*, Biggers also taught at Columbia University. Sanford Biggers would come and create an exhibition that would help to promote the ideas of diversity and inclusion in a unique and multicultural way that would benefit our community as a whole.

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2. Biggers, Sanford. "Meditations of a B-Boy Buddhist." *International Review Of African American Art* 21, no. 3 (June 2006): 51-54. Academic Search, EBSCOhost (accessed May 2 2015).

5. Bowles, John. "Sanford Biggers at the Contemporary Arts Center." *Art In America* 93, no. 1 (January 2005): 132-133. Academic Search, EBSCOhost (accessed May 5, 2015).

Work Cited

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