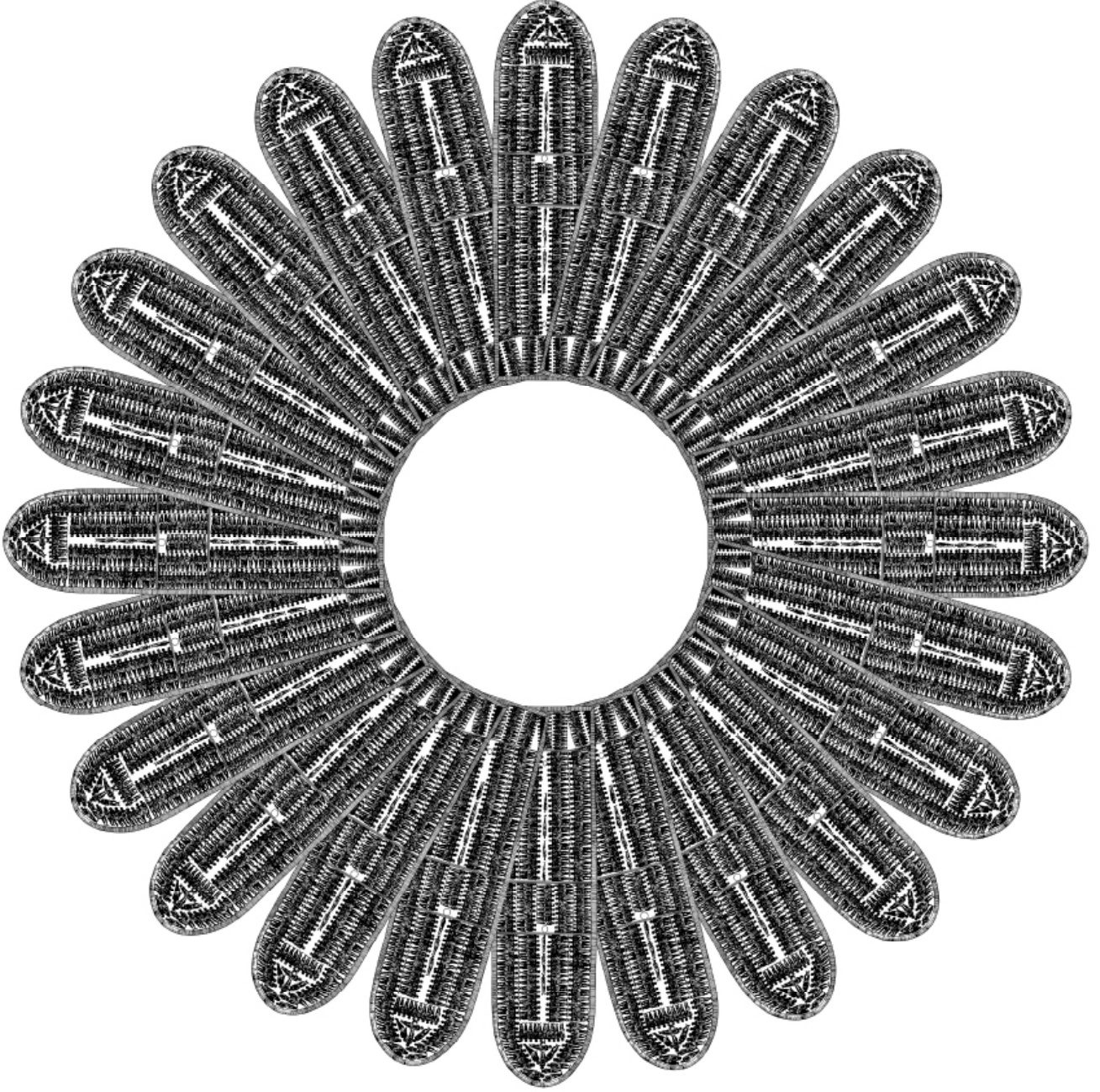


SANFORD BIGGERS
BLOSSOM



BLOSSOM

Thus far, critics and curators have sought ways to approach Sanford Biggers' artistic practice, his interests, and his background through cultural references, themes, and origins. In talking with Biggers about how the African American in pictures functions in this Grand Arts exhibition, we uprooted some of his artistic origins and influences, which may not always be so visible and are in some cases quite surprising.

Biggers grew up in South Central Los Angeles where the first art he was exposed to is now termed Black Romanticism. Particularly the work of Ernie Barnes, Elizabeth Catlett, Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Charles White and Biggers' "cousin," the painter and muralist John Biggers, who inspired Sanford with his exploration of "history through sacred geometry, pattern, ritual." Young Sanford was drawn to the physical and dynamic gesticulation of Ernie Barnes, an ex-footballer and ballet enthusiast, who is best-known for the paintings of "JJ Evans" on Good Times.

Biggers admits that he got interested in surrealist painting as a teen: Magritte, Dali and Ernst. Even though neither his art school teachers nor his colleagues considered valid even the context in which such imagery developed, he encourages his own students to get beyond the fine art school denigration of Dali's melting clocks as poster and t-shirt kitsch, instead enjoying the irreverent imagery and enigmatic communication through symbols. It was Biggers' move from two-dimensional painting to sculpture and installation in the 1990's through which he started to refine and communicate his own spatial and conceptual treatment of symbols, their context and cultural baggage as material.



Sanford Biggers, *Cheshire*, 2004-2007. Image still from single channel, color DVD projection. Courtesy the artist.

His three-piece suite created for this show strategically incorporates derogatory symbols from the Black American experience to question not only the historical realities for which they stand, but also how these symbols might function in the future "to get beyond the lazy habit of stereotyping." How Biggers' installations function to become sites of experience must be explained within the context of contemporary art, specifically the historical origins of minimalism.

Cheshire (2007) is a video sequence projected onto an exterior wall of the Gem Theater in downtown Kansas City. Interposed by fades to black, one after another, a different black professional male dressed in his work uniform climbs a tree. A fencer is in his white knickers, a dentist wears his scrubs, a lawyer wears his suit, an artist, an acrobat, a real estate broker ... The point of view and action are each time the same: the man climbs, or tries to climb a tree he has selected close to his home, and if he makes it and gets comfortable,



Sanford Biggers, *Bittersweet the Fruit*, 2002. Dimensions variable. Image still from single channel color DVD with sound, 14:30min. Courtesy the artist.

Biggers' camera zooms in and zooms out. The title *Cheshire* references Lewis Carroll's infamous Alice in Wonderland cat, "who disappears while spewing riddles or koans (Buddhist paradoxical utterances) until only his bodiless grin remains." It illustrates the recurrence of a seemingly mundane act and also shows "black men hanging out in trees, as opposed to being hung from them."

Biggers does not merely re-appropriate a set of symbols: black face, broad smiles, and big lips. This work's narrative sequence of black professionals in diverse regions, from Germany to California, ascending to acquire an aerial view is installed in an exterior, "natural" urban setting rather than the interior "cultured" environment of the gallery. A fundamental condition for the aerial view is a perceptual paradigm shift that liberates man from the yoke of nature – nature, which pulls him down. The aerial view offers up nature as an aesthetic subject to be conceived and contemplated by man. In this and other instances, Biggers' work transforms the exhibition or presentation space as well as the viewer, who becomes part of that re-formed space, too.

How people will watch *Cheshire* remains unclear: Will it be a drive-by? A park and watch? Will they circle the block or convene on the corner? As with Biggers' previous piece, *Bittersweet the Fruit* (2002) the possibility to make the viewer into a performer becomes part of the experiment. His sculpture activates the viewer physically, psychologically, and intellectually. In the video part of *Bittersweet the Fruit* the artist plays the piano nude in the woods. In the corresponding installation, headphones hang noose-like from the branches of a tree. As viewers walk around the tree and put

Sanford Biggers, *Bittersweet the Fruit*, 2002. Dimensions variable. Tree, headphones, glass bottles. Inside tree is a 5.08cm x 3.8cm LCD monitor showing a 14:30 min. single-channel, color DVD with sound.



on the headphones they become suspended in dis-belief, essentially being lynched, "invited into the darkness, albeit symbolically." Biggers' "sculpture in the round" invites viewers to recall horrific histories quite remote from contemporary consciousness, allowing them to transform the experience into new memories for the future.

The very physical way Biggers' work embodies space allows the viewer to move through and maybe even move on (physically and psychologically), and promotes sculpture as a theatrical experience. Though some might mistake this work as a kind of living museum encounter, it also makes sense to consider Biggers' relation to minimalist presentations, specifically, Robert Smithson's Land Art and Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* and *Walks* as works which exemplify art historical precedents.

Biggers' interventionist and interactive sculpture can thus be considered a post-minimalist oeuvre about the theatricality of the body in relation to the exhibition space, an object, or group of objects. In particular, Biggers' floor pieces, mandalas and dance floors, such as *Mandala of the B-Bodhisattva I* (1999) and *Mandala of the B-Bodhisattva II* (2000), recall another historical minimalist, namely, Carl Andre. This comparison seems obvious despite Biggers' heightened content references to the often emptied symbolism of Buddhism and Break dancing.

A tendency to contrive absurd constellations of unlikely pairs herein evidences Biggers' sustained commitment in surrealism: "I was interested in Science Fiction – Dick, Bradbury and Octavia Butler – and the idea of Afrofuturism. I wanted to deal with the African Diaspora and Atlantic slave trade, through the lens of science fiction, looking towards the future – like the Surrealists – as opposed to looking factually at the past."

Biggers' commitment to an unprecedented alchemical approach is evidenced by the second work at Grand Arts titled *Lotus* (2007), a seven-foot diameter glass disc that from afar looks like an ornate blossoming flower. Etched into each of

the petals is a cross section illustration of bodies lined up in the cargo hold of an 18th Century slave ship. Light projects this haunting image onto the gallery walls and onto visitors, who pass through and thus get visually integrated into the scene as both a projection surface and part of the slave ship.

Biggers' third piece at Grand Arts, titled, *Blossom* (2007), consists of a tree growing vertically through the floor lifting a baby grand player piano off its normal axis. The piano plays a rendition of *Strange Fruit*, written in the 1930s by a Jewish schoolteacher and union activist from the Bronx and made famous by Billie Holiday. It's a beautiful but dark song. Each of these symbols: black men in trees, a slave ship, mandalas and the anthemic *Strange Fruit* represent major points in the Black American experience or so-called "dream": "However, in this case I believe nightmare is more apropos."

Clearly, Biggers' interventions are not just about breaking the rules of what could happen in a gallery space, but rather breaking the rules in a serious and reflective manner to change the space one occupies. While the piano acts as a stand-in for the accepted track of ascension through entertainment offered to Black Americans, it also makes reference to performative situations in the history of contemporary art. For example, since Janis Kounellis' tethered 12 live horses in the gallery, it now makes sense to bring horses (as well any live or dead matter) into an exhibition.

This example may seem to lack the meaningful historical content so prevalent in Biggers' work, but the emergence of performance art cannot be segregated from the evolution of theatricality as a condition for sculptural form. Most importantly, one cannot help noting the simultaneous emergence and importance in the 1960s and 70s of the performative art object for white Conceptual sculptors and the performative objectives of Black Romantic painters. A critical reconsideration of the object was circulated just as the physicality of Black Romantic bodies in murals blanketed public exteriors and paintings adorning private interiors. Both contemporaneous movements opened a space for Biggers to imagine artistic and personal movement.

Sanford Biggers, *Prayer Rug*, 2006. 20 x 40 ft. Colored sand poured loosely on floor. Photo credit: Tom Powell. Image courtesy Triple Candie, New York.



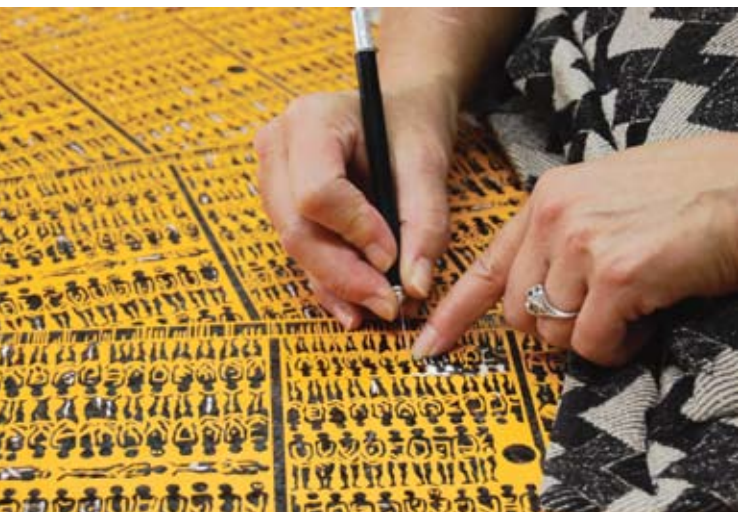


Sanford Biggers, *Blossom* in progress, 2007. Dimensions Variable. Player piano, steel. Photo Credit: E.G. Schempf.

Ernie Barnes moonlighted on network television while Bruce Nauman and even Adrian Piper found themselves in a studio without any media to work with except a recording device.

Even if most visitors, even artists, may not move around Biggers' *Blossom* and think of Nauman walking and stomping in his work space, this reenactment of white folks surrounding a tree singing: "Black bodies swinging in the Southern Breeze" creates memory theatrically. This encounter involves both Michael Fried's required "presentness and instantaneousness" as well as Rosalind Krauss' depiction of works which "put pressure on the viewer's notion of himself as axiomatically coordinated – as stable and unchanging in and for himself."

Sanford Biggers, *Lotus*, work in progress detail, 2007. Process diagram, tape mask and 7-foot diameter glass disk. Image courtesy the artist.



Notes

All quoted passages in the text not cited attribute to Sanford Biggers in conversation with the author.

Here Biggers uses "dream" in reference to the Surrealists. He writes, "These symbols [...] all represent major plot points in the Black American experience or "dream" as the Surrealists might muse, however in this case I believe nightmare is more apropos."

Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977, P. 240.

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front cover image:

Sanford Biggers, *Lotus*, 2007. Process diagram for 7-foot diameter glass etching. Image courtesy the artist.