

Interview with Sanford Biggers by Saul Williams, aka Niggy Tardust

SW / SB

SW: First of all can you just explain to me what the term Afronomics is?

SB: Afronomics is the currency of African–Americans’ cultural production. Like economics, there is Afronomics. It describes how we as African-Americans deal with language, slanguage, jazz, poetry, slavery, hip hop, middle passage... those experiences that we have had as a people and how they still come into play in our present day lives. It comes from our lost history and our need to reconstruct parts of it. It is the currency of understanding a vast cultural progression of black people.

SW: In American society.

SB: Not solely, but that is the perspective I am most experienced with that. But, it can’t exist without the larger African Diaspora for that is ultimately the genealogy from where we come.

SW: I find that as an African American often a big deal is made because we are cut off from our history and that we don’t speak the language and the cultures and the traditions. But, then there is the side that I find that the people that have never been cut off from their cultures and language are sometimes almost imprisoned by them, so that there seems that a new element of freedom exists with being African-American because you can pick and choose. We can look at the continent of Africa and feel a connection to that, but you know we have the freedom to look beyond that and make even broader connections. What is the relation that you see between blackness and outer-space?

SB: On a surface level, what comes to mind is P-funk and George Clinton, Earth Wind & Fire, 1970’s Miles Davis, Fela and John Coltrane and all the graphics they would have on their album covers. However, most recently I’ve been reading about what scientist are calling the CMB or, the cosmic microwave background, which is in deep, deep space and consequently deep, deep time and history. This CMB answers the true nature of the universe and it’s based on sound waves. I believe that sound and time are other mediums and languages that Africans and their descendents are particularly fluent in. We are rhythmically inclined and consequently able to do things with sound and time that I think are extremely profound. So you can look at the sonic nature and structure of deep space and how it is paralleled in our visceral attraction to the drum as exemplified in African, Asian, and Latin percussion, dnb (*drum and bass*) and hip-hop.

SW: Exactly

SB: That aspect of our cosmic history is still traceable and a malleable structure for us to manipulate and monopolize, I think.

SW: And there is a great deal of empowerment in that.

SB: Certainly. The problem is that not everyone understands that. Like my friend Joseph Arthur says, "...your history acts as your gravity"

If we didn't have our past struggles and triumphs, we wouldn't be here today. Then we've got the younger generation that is largely disconnected to history because their parents are so young that they themselves may not even know of the history that you and I understand from being born in the 70's. Only after events like hurricane Katrina do they realize that our dysfunctional African American-American history is still right in front of our faces.

SW: Interesting. I think, you know I have a daughter named Saturn and FYI; I named her Saturn partially because it is the only planet in our solar system that can exist outside of our solar system because the center of the planet Saturn is so hot that it could exist as if it had its own sun. So the reason that the planet is so hot is because it is composed from what in quantum physics called chaos matter or dark matter, which within our ozone layer is called melanin. And in looking at some of your work and the methods you are employing, there seems to be allusions to the idea of outer space or worm holes, or what have you, into a localized consciousness. It does seem to do exactly what you are saying, it seems to point to the fact that yes, our history is in front of us. It is there and in many ways riffed on and explored and I guess it challenges us to find new ways of seeing ourselves and analyzing the way we have seen ourselves in the past

I think of the work that you were doing surrounding the black Madonna. And the first question I wanted to ask surrounding that was what role you see art playing in religion.



SB: I think art and religion both have ways of answering the ineffable and unanswerable. Initially, mankind used art and pictures to communicate very basic ideas. With the effectiveness of this approach and the eventuality of more free time, man's desire and ability to communicate more complex and ultimately more abstract ideas grew, and with it even more questions. Religion became a way of answering these questions and harnessing man's ungoverned desires and natural instincts. Art became a way to further illustrate and teach these lessons.

But before that moment, artistic creation, albeit probably in the form of craft, was a functional, and possibly, meditative and communal experience; a way of communing with the spiritual world. In this respect, art was and is in itself a religion.

SW: Yes, do you believe that you specifically have a role as an artist?

SB: There was a time when I believed all artists had a specific role. But I realized this was naïve and overly idealistic. I think I may play several roles as an artist; part historian, part provocateur, part polemicist...

SW: As a writer I find that a great deal of my work is extremely personal. I feel that a lot of the poetry that I am writing is really the residue of the work that I am doing, but not

necessarily to become a poem but to become a more harmonious person. So that is sort of the residue of the work that I am doing by myself. What role does the personal play in your artistic work?

SB: I use a much coded language in my work, but at the root, I think all of my pieces are basically autobiographical.

The Black Madonna project, for example, goes from Atlanta, to Warsaw, to questions about faith, origin and Afrocentrism. So do I. The Mandala break-dance floor series refers to my childhood as a dancer and my studies of Buddhism while living in Japan. It's just a way of dealing with things in my life through symbols. I was a figure painter when we were in school, but I got to a point where I just didn't want to represent the figure anymore. I wanted to create more metaphorically and symbolically and explore how symbols operate within the mind and that visceral affinity humans have for symbols. That is comes from an interest in, for lack of a better description, the sacred societal approach of using symbols and coded geometries to speak to the inducted; to other students of Afronomics.



SW: Yes

SB: People do really connect to that in a way that they can not really verbalize.

SW: Some of what you just said is what came to mind when I read the term Afronomics, the ideas of these symbols and what they mean on a personal level. What I do remember at school was, and what I now see represented through some of your artwork, is how you wore your hair.

SB: Uh huh.

SW: So what I see are some of the references as to what you did and what it symbolized for you to cut your locks. My question to you is, what did it symbolize for you to grow them?

SB: It's a journey, man. It's all a journey. The first time I did it would have been probably 1988 and coming out of the west coast, cats were not really wearing locks back then. But at that period, you remember, there was a resurgence of Afrocentric thinking; Public Enemy, Spike Lee, KRS 1 and all of the information that was out there and was so fresh. We were still that generation that could figure out how that related to us very directly. If it had been 10 or 15 years earlier, an Afro would have been an Afro-centric statement, but at that time for me, locks made sense. I was also listening to a lot a Reggae and Ska, and I was just learning about Rastafarianism and the idea of man as a tree and his being branches of wisdom. I was leaving my parents' home and was branching out in my own ways and that was my declaration of expansion. That's how it felt to grow them and then I cut them. And then I grew them again.

SW: The first time you cut them where were you?

SB: I was living in Florence, Italy.

SW: In Italy, Ok.

SB: Then after 5 years of not having locks; I started working some nondescript job, wearing a suit, working 9-5, you know, just making money. That lasted a matter of months before I started to get that itch. I really felt something in me was starting to grow out and rebel against that lifestyle. And that physically manifested in me when my hair started to grow out and I let it lock again

SW: Of course.

SB: I was at a different philosophical point when I locked my hair the second time. I did it for really different reasons. And when I cut it; well, I know you can relate to this, it's sometimes so easy for people to project things on us as performers and creators. So I rebelled. I didn't like feeling like a physical logo for my work. I wanted the work just be read on its own terms.

SW: Deep. Right. I have grown and cut my lock 4 times. And, I remember one time I cut my hair, and though not solely related, there was a review of a poetry book that I had written and in it they referred to me as the Bob Marley of American Poetry. So that my hair was now some how defining my work.

SB: Oh, Yes, Absolutely.

SW: I thought that was absurd. That they would look at a picture of me and use that picture to describe what they had read.

SB: Yeah, well, you start to realize that the media and maybe it's not completely their fault but, they have to feed certain stereotypes. Sometimes writers and critics get lazy and they look for the quick catch phrase. They even look for the visual catch phrase, anything they can throw out there that is a bit sensationalist, or referential to something that everybody knows and feels comfortable with. And that will buy them some credibility from the people who read and are not dissecting that information.

SW: Well as artists who do aim to live creatively and also live off of our art, do you find that there is a need to throw in that sensationalist catch phrase within your own visual work?

SB: Only if I can subvert it. If I can make you get stuck on the catch phrase but then read between the lines and then actually see that I am going beyond the catch phrase then I can use it. Then that's fine for me.

SW: What role does hip-hop play in your definition?

SB: I think hip-hop... hip-hop is like, everything and nothing to me. It is everything because when it first hit, it wasn't about the fad. It wasn't about anything but being really new and fresh and coming from someplace close to US! Now, it often seems impotent.

SW: Yeah it was ours.

SB: You know, I go back and forth because I started getting labeled as a hip-hop artist.

SW: Huh, yeah. I get labeled as a hip-hop poet. When I'm writing prose, you know.

SB: It's a constant conundrum of "is he a black poet or is he a poet, is he a black artist or is he an artist?" Well now it's "is he a hip-hop poet? Or is he a hip-hop artist?" I make lots of work that has nothing to do with hip-hop simply because my mind doesn't always think about hip-hop.

SW: Exactly

SB: But sometimes hip-hop comes through us because, it's like the blood that comes through our veins and it is something we know. Its way beyond the different forms that it has publicly held, it is the impetus behind the work, that voice that was and is hip-hop. Even when you get sick of hearing the same bullshit you hear on the radio, you know that voice is still there behind all the glitz and glamour. Sometimes you can still relate and understand even... Nelly. (chuckles)

SW: Uh huh. Of course.

SB: I'm not a big fan of dude, but at the same time I'm like..." I understand Nelly".

SW: Exactly, exactly. And what is also interesting as young African American artists doing work that sometimes does relate very strongly to hip-hop and also doesn't at time, I find that it's kind of a glaring sensationalist choice for us to do work at sometimes that is NOT overtly hip-hop related. That makes quite a statement.

SB: Yeah. It's more subversive. I think about a lot of the poetry I have heard from you and that is one of the reasons that I like your work so much because, you are one of the most interesting lyricists in music now, hip-hop or otherwise, because, you are so different from everything else. What you do is not about following anything else that is out except your aesthetic. And you have a very sophisticated and nuanced approach to linguistics, social and musical history, and hip-hop. I respect how you synthesize information.

SW: Well I see hip-hop much like the way you describe being African-American so that the history is before it. Hip-hop is essentially a revisionist draft of history and you know part of it is to take something from the past but, to shape it, and stretch it and file it down, to make it fit into your conception of the present and make it work for you now.

SB: And like you said, it is ours all the way through. It's almost like our alphabet. We have every right to use any part of it in any unique way shape or form we choose because it really is ours to deconstruct. It gives us liberty somehow.

SW: And because it does involve sampling and electronics, it also has, if you will, this colonialist feel how we approach the music. It's almost as absurd as going through someone's jazz collection and placing your flag on it and saying, 'this is mine now. I discovered this, I discovered this Dizzy sample and I'm going to speed it up and slow it down and make it unrecognizable and its mine now. I discovered this album, I discovered this thing.' And of course you're not the first to discover it. It was a platinum hit before. But you have claimed it now in the same way that the so called "European pioneers" claimed the so called "new world", even though it wasn't new because there were people there before it. Yeah, it's a way of planting your flag.

SB: I guess it is the idea that once you put your hand or your finger print on it, it's somehow new because it now has you on it. It makes me think about what you said about space because now I am looking at space not only as what we conceptually think of it as, but space as this boundless ineffable place without limits. Now when I think of Ra's **Space is the Place**, the whole flick was super absurd and super low budget but actually really inventive and inspirational and clearly those cats were thinking "there is no limit, we can make a whole full length film on Sun Ra's manifesto, wear crazy costumes, and spread the Afronomical Way. That's our reality and let just do it!"

SW: That is right and there is no limit. And you can go from that to literally Master P's **No Limit**. And there they are exploring, but their frontier is "how much money can we make in a world that is set against us?"

SB: And then the money becomes power and then of course it becomes credibility and thus you become what you were always told that you could never be; a player. A true player in the Game, not just a playa.

SW: And I look at that and it's hard for me to judge it because in my own way I believe that I am doing a similar thing within my artistic field. Like I'm making the point, "You see, you thought I couldn't do that, you thought I couldn't make this statement beyond this idea of what you have of me...but look." Now the last thing I wrote is being compared to Tennyson and this thing that you're doing is now is being compared to Duchamp. Here is a way which we can explore beyond the idea of ourselves that is generally circulated daily. I see that blatantly in your work.

I wanted to ask you one other thing because there seems to be a strong Asian influence in your work. In fact, the images that I have seen of you cutting your locks at one point seem to be connected to a ceremony. Was that a specific ceremony or had you made a ceremony of cutting your locks?





SB: It is a little bit of both. I was in Japan planning to cut my hair but not knowing how to do it, ceremonially speaking. You remember Hiromi Hirano of course; well she and I have known each other forever...

SW: She was the one that told me I had to water my Buddha.

SB: Yes (chuckles). Classic! Well when I lived in Japan we spent a lot of time together, and I was shocked when she and her friends began talking about Garveyism. I then learned that her whole crew actually had a traveling reggae sound system that would tour Japan and have sound clashes against the other sound systems. They had a better understanding of Rastafarianism than most people I knew stateside. This was in the early nineties and that sort of syncretism really impacted my understanding of culture and my own work.

So when I was back in Japan and ready to cut my locks 11 years later, she was the only person I could entrust to cut them. We dressed in full kimono (her grandmother was geisha so she had many), and we filmed a hair cutting ceremony in the woods.

While I was editing the piece, another friend told me about a sumo ceremony called a Danpatsu-shiki. When a sumo wrestler retires he sits in the ring in full kimono while past opponents, his agent and trainers all walk by and cut locks of his hair. This coincidental syncretism with my own cutting rite and the fact that in the video, the wind only blows when my head is completely shaved and she is walking away, supported my belief that the Afronomical ways are in full effect!

SW: I find that when I am performing it is a ritual. Do you think of the act of creating in the same way? You spoke of the ritual that you went through while cutting your hair. Do all of your pieces connect to some sort of act of ritual? Do you relate to it in that fashion?

SB: Yes, I definitely do. In my romanticized view of what I am, I come from a long tradition of creators that are motivated from an internal spiritual place. We create from this space and then give that back out to influence and affect other people. Another part of ritual is transcendence and that's probably what I feel the strongest when I am in the creative space. It is only when I am in that moment of creating where I feel selfless and stuck in the mundanity of life.

SW: I see. Now this happened in Japan. You said earlier that the first time you cut your locks you were in Italy. You studied the black Madonna in Poland. What role has traveling played in your expanding identity as an African-American?

SB: We're Afronauts! We are griots looking for the next frontier. That's what this is all about. But, what that means for us is that not only do we need to travel and communicate what we know, but learn what others know as well. You know how it is when you are abroad; you see yourself and your homeland through a much less obstructed lens. As if you are looking in on your own existence and you can know understand and contextualize it in a much clearer and yet abstract way.

SW: Right, in fact I 'm speaking to you from Australia.

SB: Exactly

SW: And have already had the opportunity to perform here for two nights and I'm about to do three more nights here at the opera house. I have been slowly finding ways of interacting with elements of the Aboriginal community. And I am seeing the ways that our work, African-American collective work has already reached here. And once again it has served as a beacon to the disenfranchised people across the world who relate to the idea of the self empowerment of people who have made the process of rediscovery to their past and made their voice public through the arts.

SB: It is interesting when you were talking earlier about performing in the opera house and you mentioned that Paul Robeson had been there before. It punctuates that you and I are not the first to comment or create based on these issues. You don't need to feel the burden of trail blazing and being the sole originator. Although we both have unique and distinctive styles, we are just doing our job. Other people have trail blazed before you, handed you the torch and you just keep it going. Until you hand it to someone else.

Saul Williams is the ground breaking writer and actor in the critically acclaimed film Slam (Sundance's Grand Jury Prize '98; Cannes' Camera D'Or '98). He is also the author of three collections of poetry: ,said the shotgun to the head (2003 MTV Books/Simon and Schuster), She (199 MTV Books/Simon and Schuster), and The Seventh Octave (1997 Moore Black Press). His musical debut Amethyst Rock Star, (2001 American Recordings/Island Def Jam) was produced by the legendary rock/hip-hop producer Rick Rubin and received high praises, including "album of the year" by The Times of London.

His most recent releases include the self entitled album Saul Williams and the upcoming collection of prose, The Dead MC Scrolls

Saul Williams and Sanford Biggers attended Morehouse college together from 1989-1992.