

The Big Idea

Sanford Biggers isn't content to be called a sculptor, video artist, or performance artist, even though these media are central to his work. He's an artist whose interdisciplinary skills allow him to challenge viewers with an unusual practice that resists characterization. He's not only an idea man in the conceptual art tradition, he also makes amazing and mysterious things.

For his exhibition at Grand Arts in Kansas City in 2007, Biggers included three projects, casting three different historical reflections of violence against African-Americans and creating a new take on familiar representations of that violence. First is the simple elegiac form, *Lotus* (2007): a large scale glass disc suspended in space, resembling a ceremonial East Asian gong. Hand etched onto it in the shape of a blossoming lotus flower is a repeating pattern of slaves lined in rows in the hold of a ship; an image appropriated from the famous anti-slavery poster created by the Plymouth Abolitionist Committee in 1789. The ships become petals radiating out from an empty center. This familiar image of the slave ship is linked to another visual vocabulary, Zen Buddhism, through the lotus shape. The semi-transparent mandala invites a transcendent contemplation while imaging an unbroken continuum of slavery with no starting point and no end. Circularity distorts the Western notion of progress, illuminating its fallacies. At the same time, the historical specificity of African trauma punctures the shape's universality. Typical of Biggers' work, everything is happening at once. The viewer looks at this form, looks through it, and while consuming the larger shape, recognizes the detail and the shadows of slavery being cast on every viewer passing by. Although it's all about light, this piece is heavy.

A large, monumental sculptural installation, *Blossom* (2007), is the second part of this suite. An old tree appears to be growing out of the floor of the gallery and into the ceiling, spreading its branches across most of the room's width. A nearly perfect circle of dirt on the floor surrounds the sturdy trunk. And this tree bears strange fruit indeed: a brown baby-grand piano with Queen-Anne style legs is penetrated by the trunk and lifted off of the ground. From the piano one hears the song *Strange Fruit*, popularized by Billie Holliday and adapted from the Abel Meeropol poem that forms an aesthetic lament to lynching in the South. The symbolism is not obscure and the irony is palpable. This beautiful construction, invoking the powerful force of nature as it pierces one of humankind's most lovely inventions, is a visually stunning realization of a history that we hope is passed, but which is vividly remembered with only a few notes of a popular tune. Debates around minimalist sculpture in the tradition of American art history have tended to concern themselves with a notion of theatricality; one argument has been that the art object loses its integrity when it requires a body to move around it to bring it to life. Biggers emphasizes that point here and for the better. The circle of dirt is reminiscent of a minimalist gesture, but everything inside it is high theater. In this play, a tree is not just a tree in some ideal form. The wind blows

and it moves, the seasons change and it grows, a body hangs from it and its branches groan. Nor is an art object something pure: it too has history and consequences.

Artists can hold a mirror to the ugly truth; they can also paint a picture of better possibilities. The latter is what Biggers does with the third piece in this group, *Cheshire* (2007), a video projection against an exterior wall of an old building in Kansas City. In it we see various black men climbing trees. These men are professionals wearing their work clothes: a suit, a dentist's scrubs, athletic shorts. Biggers asked them each to climb a tree in their area. The effort is both comical and hopeful. These men, some of whom look quite out of place, are inverting a history of lynching that is quite difficult to transform. Rather than a site of death, disfigurement and emasculation, the tree becomes a play-place, a way to return to the inventive possibilities of childhood, a natural wonder that is entirely conquerable. While there is still an ambivalent awkwardness to seeing a black professional in a suit out on a limb, Biggers has turned this symbol of subjugation into a site of African-American agency and achievement.

I first encountered Sanford Biggers' work in 2001, through the now legendary *Freestyle* exhibition curated by Thelma Golden at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Initiating her tenure at the museum, the well-known African-American curator announced a new generational perspective that would infuse the old institution with a very contemporary presence. *Freestyle* included a generation of emerging African-American artists with mainstream art educations who were too young to participate in the culture wars of the 1980s, but who still, from their media-saturated and fatigued millennial position, intended to consider the images and realities of race in their work. Many of these artists have, in the years since the show, become important names in contemporary art, including Sanford Biggers. While the discursive achievement of the exhibition was to introduce the convoluted notion of "post-black" to American discussions of race in the 21st century, the real practical effect was the creation of a network of young African-American artists who are still in many cases friends and influential colleagues of one another. Having written a short essay for the *Freestyle* catalogue as one of my earliest high-profile writing gigs, I took a vivid interest in what this scene was all about.

The underlying premise of the show was that the old, bold, didactic representations of racism that a previous generation of black artists had employed to great aesthetic and critical effect – artists like Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, or Glenn Ligon – were being replaced by nuanced and mysterious interpretations of the complexities of identity. This premise overstated the simplicity of the previous generation and the mysteries of the latter, but did make the space for an African-American show that addressed that very concept with a diversity of approaches, from total abstraction to pop celebration. Biggers' piece, a collaboration with the artist Jennifer Zackin, was among the most memorable in the show and would later be one of the standout pieces in the

2002 Whitney Biennial. *A Small World...* (2000), is a single channel video installation running on a six-minute loop. The artists used old family films of their childhoods to draw striking parallels and comparisons to a middle class African-American experience and a middle class Jewish-American experience. In a montage of images, both kids play the piano, pose with family for Christmas or Hanukkah, have birthday parties, play at the beach, and take trips to Disneyland. While the outside world of the late '60s or early '70s was continuously rocked with the problem of race, from within the perspective of these hermetic family experiences, things look very much the same. While the title ironically invokes the Disneyland ride that makes shockingly naive equivalences among the peoples of the world, Biggers and Zackin show that within middle class spaces, it is a small world, after all.

Sanford Biggers grew up in South Central Los Angeles, a neighborhood that is more complex and layered socially than the monolithic associations that usually accompany the name. Here he absorbed that lively world's music, dance, fashion and politics. As a witness to the early culture of hip-hop, Biggers took that style and energy with him as he moved through higher education, his study abroad in Florence, his time living in Japan, his BA from Morehouse, his MFA from the Art Institute of Chicago, and other training in Baltimore and Skowhegan, Maine. Biggers is a learned man. He knows about break dancing, Buddhism, art history and a thing or two about the world. In the time I corresponded with him in the writing of this essay, he was doing projects in Germany, Indonesia, and back in Chicago. Biggers splits his time between Harlem where he is based, and Richmond, where he teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University. Biggers is an artists' artist that has also enjoyed commercial success, showing with reputable galleries in New York and Los Angeles, while being revered from the inside by fellow colleagues

Biggers' interdisciplinary approach reflects his physical mobility. Despite a century of avant-garde experimentation in the world of fine art, it still works out best for artists to be something: a painter, a sculptor, a photographer. Otherwise, which department in the museum is supposed to collect your work? Which box will you check on the grant application? And what do you tell that wealthy patron at the cocktail party when you only have a minute to explain yourself? As I pointed out at the outset, Biggers can't quite be categorized in any of these simple ways, which is still a challenge to the deeply entrenched notions of technique and discipline that shape the markets around visual art. But when we call artists like Biggers interdisciplinary, that's really just post-modern language to describe a way of working that's quite common in many places outside of Western modernity. Biggers himself refers to an African artistic tradition as a guiding principle, one that is more fluid than the specializing mandate of European art. In this model, an artist is allowed to work in whatever medium will fulfill her or his ideas. Hip-hop itself is a good example and another guiding principle for Biggers, in its synthesis of music, poetry, and performance, its ability to make new things from old things and vice versa, its political relevance and fantastical power. Biggers uses Buddhist principles in a similar way, appreciating

in the spiritual tradition an ability to absorb a number of ideas simultaneously, a fluidity of practice, and a sense of profundity in mundane acts and objects. And all of this fits well with African diasporic traditions, where location is never quite a place in and of itself, but someplace in relation to other places; where home is provisional, someplace between a lost past and an imagined future. Like in his show at Grand Arts in Kansas City, Biggers is able to actualize this fluidity while still isolating clear and moving ideas around which so many forms and materials circulate. While the specializations of post-Enlightenment European art make great products for contemplation and for sale, I would suggest that practices like Biggers' have a lot more to do with what life is like here and now.

In 2007, Biggers was commissioned by Performa, New York's performance art biennial, to make a piece. The result was *The Somethin' Suite*, a vaudeville variety show shown at The Box that interrogated a history of race on the American stage while employing spoken word and performance art traditions. Performa's director, RoseLee Goldberg is the author of the canonical text *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, in which she traces a notion of performance art to European avant-garde experiments within movements such as futurism, dada and surrealism. As Goldberg points out, performance was always at the forefront of these radical movements, serving as a starting point for rejecting or reversing the expectations of content and form that bourgeois audiences brought to art at the start of the 20th century. As new kinds of performances led the way in each of these movements, Goldberg initiates the idea of an "avant-avant-garde" to describe these challenging acts. Biggers used this opportunity to bring together themes and images he has explored in other works, such as the fabulous feathered jacket *Tunic* (2003) and the video *Cheshire*, as sets, costumes, and conceptual starting points for live performance. Relating to Goldberg's "avant-avant-garde," *The Somethin' Suite* also reacts to the foundations of American popular theater: the minstrel show. Different characters played by a host of singers and poets emerge to sing songs and read poems and react to each other in strange skits that employ and explode the racist stereotypes that have carried themselves through the entire history of American entertainment. Freedom Bradley, a Cab Calloway-esque figure in white tails, leads the number "No Noose is Good Noose." The preacher Martin Luther Bling delivers the stirring message "Still Dreamin'." The "ghetto bird" tunic is worn by a glam figure, Niggy Stardust, while a pair of Southern belles perform a duet in front of a David Hammonds-inspired American flag in the colors of African liberation. For an artist whose representations of African-American experience can often be loosely discursive, these direct references and obvious puns suited the live performance mode, causing the audience to relive a history that sometimes feels impossible to live down. A particularly political statement for the performance art biennial, *The Somethin' Suite* illuminated the black-faced spectacle that still operates in today's arts industries, from popular mass media to the frontline of the cutting-edge.

Biggers' works about race and racism are only a part of his overall oeuvre, though communication across and within cultures is a constant of his work. As such, Biggers has emerged as a prominent voice among artists whose aesthetic instincts are political, and whose political sensibilities affect the forms that artworks take. Biggers has not yet reached his prime, and with each new project, the complexity of the ideas and the ambition of the scope are heightened and elaborated. In her essay for the show *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970*, in which Biggers' feathered tunic was included, curator Valerie Cassel Oliver concludes that "Black Conceptualism has become the act of transferring and manifesting black self-determination in the mainstream art world." While this historical and institutional interpretation is only one of many frames through which to view this work, Oliver's words do ring true. Sanford Biggers is a man with a plan, and he's got the skills to execute it, not only as a black artist, but also on the big stage of world culture.

Malik Gaines -2009