

Sanford Biggers Afrotemple



Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

Afrotemple

Excerpt from a conversation between the artist and the curator,
November 16, 2002

Introduction

Sanford Biggers is not a hip-hop artist, but rather a contemporary artist who utilizes the language of hip-hop to magnify the confluence of world cultures. Through this conceptual body of work, Biggers provides a linkage between traditional African and African-American cultural aesthetics and the sacred ritual practice of Buddhism. He does this using the authentic contemporary American expression of hip-hop, a synthesis of poetry, music, and politics that emerged in the wake of the civil rights of the late 1960s and the urban riotous that followed in the 1970s. Through the language of hip-hop, Biggers shares the similarities, not the differences, of otherwise disparate cultural expressions. To embrace the genius of Biggers' conceptual work, his audiences must open themselves to three facts. First, while hip-hop began as an African-American expression, it is now a pervasive, global language. Second, the concept of spiritualism is present in the secular as well as the sacred. And third, materials have the ability to transcend their specific function, particularly in the face of an overarching aesthetic vision.

In art historical terms, one could closely align Biggers' work with the process-oriented and material-focused work of Ann Hamilton or James Aronson. Biggers' work visually echoes the evolution of spoken-word movement from the 1970s with Afrika Bambaataa, the Last Poets, and Gil Scott Heron to today with KRS One and the Roots. He also extends the primary influence found in the work of artist David Hammons. Given this confluence of influence, Biggers (born in 1945) is extraordinary not only in the maturity of his work, but also in his ability to articulate the very nucleus of our aesthetic expression, that most ancient of societal elements, spirituality.

—Valerie Cassel

The Essential Thoughts of a B-Boy Buddhist!

The conceptual connection between Buddhist sacred rituals and hip-hop (for me) began while I was living in Japan in the early 1990s. Well, actually the journey began much earlier. While I was growing up in South-Central Los Angeles, I was aware of a confluence of Asian and African-American cultures. On the Compton strip, there was and still exists a small Japanese neighborhood. And when I first began break dancing around the age of seven or thirteen, the first pair of shoes that I wore was slip-on karate shoes. I thought them because they were cheap and because they were really good for pop locking and moonwalking.

Then, seven years later, there I was in Japan. Many of the Japanese

that I had befriended—people my age—had adopted hip-hop, but not its monody. They were really hip-hoppers, b-boys and b-girls. Many American hip-hop artists were performing in Japan, because in the United States there was a fear of violence associated with concerts and subsequently fewer bookings. Because the Japanese got hip-hop directly from the underground source, there was a visceral connection, an awareness of the emotion in the form.

During this time, I developed an interest in mandala. I was drawing mandalas almost unconsciously, and when I returned to the United States, I began looking for a way of evoking the same feeling of ancient artifice with contemporary materials that speak to contemporary subject matter. This is when I began recognizing the linkage between the urban expression of hip-hop and Buddhism.

As a religion and philosophy Buddhism is very inclusive and very malleable. It was the presence of the Buddhist way of thinking that allowed the Japanese to so readily absorb another cultural expression such as hip-hop. As I continued to explore this linkage, I began adding more ideas, tapping inward to concrete circles toward the most essential element, or nucleus, of African-American expression—from African-American spiritualism to African Diaspora cultures, to African traditions. Especially, there was a political agent to all of this: to make people conscious of our global connectedness or the most essential link.

I use the mandala in the same manner as the Tibetan Buddhist monks, who have used the ritual as a spiritualized form of an awareness of their plight (Tibet's occupation and religious oppression by China). My dialogue, however, deals more with making sacred what is desecrated. "Show away culture" is making the connection between the mandala and b-boy practices like the four-based circular ritual of break-dancers, or between the symmetrical of the sand-painted mandala and that of graffiti. I found myself making a political statement regarding the need to embrace this urban cultural tradition as sacred and ritualized, rather than chaotic and insignificant.

There are strong linkages between Buddhism and African or African-American traditions. Most notable is the idea of flow—an embracing of the unknown and the ephemeral. In African-American cultures, there is fluidity as well as spontaneity in forms of dancing. You get that same sense when you watch Bruce Lee in *Way of the Dragon*. He is musical in the manner of jazz improvisation; when you know the structure and you are a master of the technique, then you can throw them both away.

The concept of *wabi-sabi* in Buddhism, the idea of profundity in the mundane, is also a vital aesthetic expression in African-American vernacular tradition and in the African Diaspora.¹ For instance, look at the urban art in

At a particular altar, there may be a Barbie doll, next to a pack of cigarettes, next to a bottle of rum, next to a cross. These things multiply in their visual power so that they just end up one another. This also happens on a philosophical or conceptual level with the syncretism of African religion with that of Catholicism.

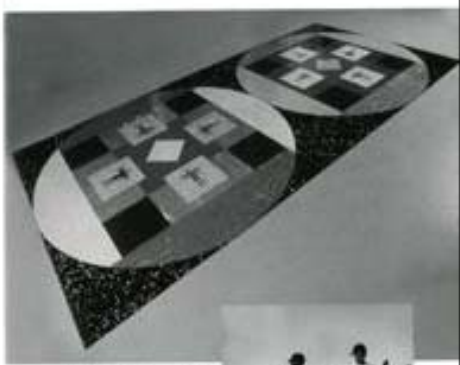
In regard to hip-hop, there is a commonalities based upon class and experience that transcends the reality of race and ethnicity. It is an inclusive way of being in the world. It is the people who have been disenfranchised stepping up and saying, "I am going to claim this disenfranchisement and you that to take me where I want to go. I don't need to go to the academy. I can set my own attitude that I've learned from the music to give myself and there with confidence." I find it fascinating that hip-hop is still a place of critical dialogue. The music is not an artifact but an evolving art form.

The Work

My work is very process-oriented. There is a performance aspect in the creation and the viewing of the work. I am always considering how the audience will observe or interact with the work, and then importantly, how to capture the residue of that interaction. The cumulative audience interaction with the work is an essential extension of its being. This relates back to the Buddhist concept of connectivity and universality. Many people have suffered the work, and with each new touch, a person is connected to others in a real, but subtle way.

Mandala of the B-Buddhistas!

This is one of the first in a series of floor pieces that I began in 1998. In this work, I am consciously making the link between hip-hop and Buddhist sacred practices. The piece was specifically designed to have break-dancers perform upon it. In break-dancing, a circular movement with the body echoes the circularity of the mandala. The dancers' work upon the piece gives it an energy in activation. When I created this work, I actually conceived this activation as a ritualized performance. The viewers become full-body spectators, but also performers themselves, and they are encouraged to interact with the piece—to stand and dance on the work, or even sit on it. All that is required is that they rub legs. After each performance or ritual, the southwesterly of the dancers and audience participants remain, completing the work with a fresh or patina. It is the same idea of a patina of use in traditional African artifacts. The work is made of the most beautiful



Mandala of the B-Buddhistas! 1998
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
and Venice

Light by George Campese (artist)
Installation at Museum of Contemporary Art,
Chicago, November 27, 2002

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