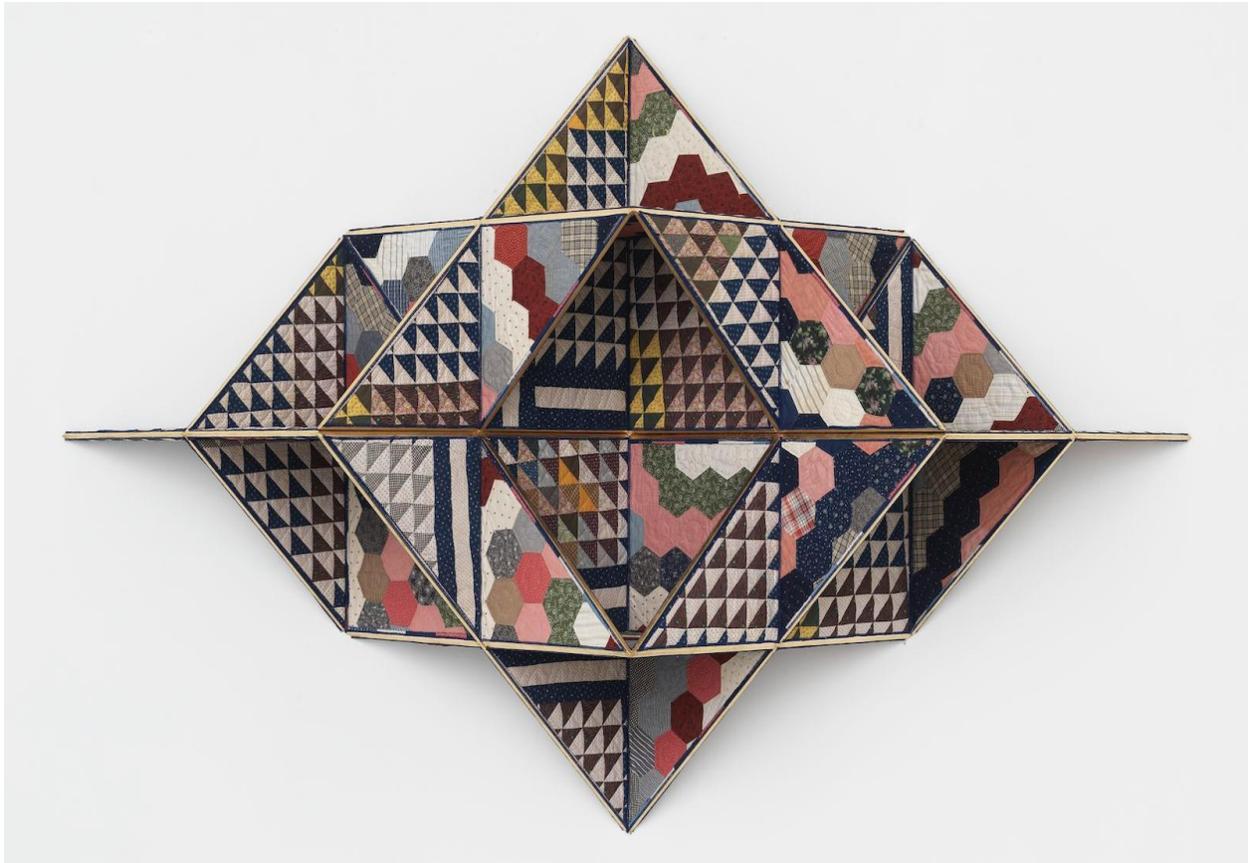


# BRONX MUSEUM

## SANFORD BIGGERS: CODESWITCH

*Artist's first survey of quilt-based works examines American history and the role of quilt-making in the Underground Railroad.*



Sanford Biggers, *Khemetry*, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

(NEW YORK, NY — December 21, 2020) — The **Bronx Museum of the Arts** is pleased to announce ***Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch***, the first survey of quilt-based works by the New York-based interdisciplinary artist. The solo show, which will be on view from **September 9, 2020 – April 5, 2021**, features over 60 quilt-based works by the artist that seamlessly weave American history into a broader context of global traditions and styles.

For over two decades, Biggers has been developing a singular body of work that is deeply informed by African American history and traditions, and sustains a rich dialog with contemporary art on a national and international level, referencing urban culture, the body, sacred geometry, and American symbolism.

The title of the Bronx Museum exhibition, *Codeswitch*, refers to both the artists' quilt series known as the Codex series and to the idea of code-switching itself, or shifting from one linguistic code to another

depending on the social context. The Codex series includes mixed media paintings and sculptures done directly on or made from pre-1900 antique quilts. This process, like linguistic code-switching, recognizes language plurality, as the quilts signal their original creator's intent as well as the new layers of meaning given to them through Biggers's artistic intervention.



**Left:** Sanford Biggers, *Quilt 14 (Flying Lotus)*, 2012. **Right:** Sanford Biggers, *Chorus for Paul Mooney*, 2017. Images courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

In 2009, Biggers was commissioned by Hidden City Philadelphia, a month-long cultural project, to produce a work for the Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, a stop on the Underground Railroad. As Biggers began to research the history of the Underground Railroad, he was intrigued by the long debated historical narrative that quilts doubled as signposts along escape routes throughout the 19th century. In a later essay about Biggers' work, historian Kellie Jones states: "Some scholars have argued that African Americans in the antebellum period made quilts not simply as bed coverings but as devices to navigate the roads to freedom. Patterns were created, in fabric and stitching, that offered clues to safe places and areas of danger, times and locations as the 'conductor' moved the train north along the Underground Railroad. Quilts hung on fences, washing lines, or even trees displayed these messages that were 'hidden in plain view.'" Inspired by those stories, Biggers created his first quilt-based works for the Philadelphia project, hanging traditional quilts that visually engaged the church's stained glass windows, and also created a "celestial map" handout documenting the city's Underground Railroad sites, with Mother Bethel as the North Star.

Sanford Biggers describes his process, "While working on the project about the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia, the idea struck me that Harriet Tubman was an astronaut, navigating the stars, night skies and her surroundings in the quest for freedom. After reading additional Underground Railroad lore that posited quilts may have been embedded with code and used as maps, I began to search out quilts from the 1800's and add new layers of code through mark-making, painting, cutting, collaging and reconstruction. These quilts are an archive of an ongoing material conversation that acquires new meanings over time and transgenerational palimpsests for a future ethnography. I'm also interested in the tension of working on these objects that hold so much cultural and artistic weight, like embellishing or perhaps defacing history."

The tradition of quilt-making holds a significant place in American culture and has special resonance in African American communities as witnessed in the quilts by the Gee's Bend — a small, insulated African American community in Alabama — that has produced hundreds of quilts from the 19th century to the present. That tradition has been upheld by contemporary artists today, such as Faith Ringgold, Sam Gilliam and Biggers.

*Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch* is a joint collaboration between The Bronx Museum of the Arts and Rivers Institute for Contemporary Art & Thought, New Orleans, overseen by Sergio Bessa (Bronx Museum Curator) and Andrea Andersson, (Founding Director and Chief Curator, Rivers Institute). After closing at The Bronx Museum of the Arts on January 24, 2021, *Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch* will be on view at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles from March 26 to September 12, 2021. It will then travel to the Contemporary Art Center in New Orleans from October 20, 2021 to January 23, 2022.

The catalog, co-published with Yale University Press, features essays by the curators Sergio Bessa and Andrea Andersson along with guest writers, documenting the entire series of quilts produced by the artist. The book includes a forward by Gregory Tate and a 20-page graphic work by John Jennings in collaboration with David Brame and Esperanza Bey.

***Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch*** exhibition and catalog are made possible by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund: Culpeper Arts & Culture Program, Henry Luce Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, Beth Rudin DeWoody, Marianne Boesky Gallery, Massimo De Carlo, David Castillo Gallery, Monique Meloche Gallery, Baldwin Gallery, and Yale University Press.



### About Sanford Biggers

Sanford Biggers' work is an interplay of narrative, perspective and history that speaks to current social, political and economic happenings while also examining the contexts that bore them. His diverse practice positions him as a collaborator with the past through explorations of often overlooked cultural and political narratives from American history. Working with antique quilts that echo rumors of their use as signposts on the Underground Railroad, he engages these legends and contributes to this narrative by drawing and painting directly onto them. In response to ongoing occurrences of police brutality against Black Americans, Biggers' BAM series is composed of bronze sculptures recast from fragments of wooden African statues that have been anonymized through dipping in wax and then ballistically 'resculpted'. Following a residency as a 2017 American Academy Fellow in Rome, the artist recently began working in marble. Drawing on and playing with the tradition of working in this medium, Biggers creates hybridized forms that transpose, combine and juxtapose classical and historical subjects to create alternative meanings and produce what he calls "Chimeras". As creative director and keyboardist, he fronts Moon Medicin, a multimedia concept band that straddles visual art and music with performances staged against

a backdrop of curated sound effects and video. Moon Medicin performed at Open Spaces Kansas City in October 2018 and at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. in April 2019.

Sanford Biggers (b. 1970) was raised in Los Angeles and currently lives and works in New York City. He was awarded the 2017 Rome Prize in Visual Arts. He has had solo exhibitions at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (2018), the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (2016), the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (2012) and the Brooklyn Museum (2011), among others. His work has been shown in several institutional group exhibitions including at the Menil Collection (2008) and the Tate Modern (2007), and also recent exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2017) and the Barnes Foundation (2017). In 2018, Biggers was awarded the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award and in 2019 he was inducted into the New York Foundation for the Arts Hall of Fame. Biggers' work is held in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Walker Center, Minneapolis; the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington D.C.; the Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas; and the Legacy Museum, Montgomery, among others.

### **About the Bronx Museum of the Arts**

The Bronx Museum of the Arts is an internationally recognized cultural destination that presents innovative contemporary art exhibitions and education programs and is committed to promoting cross-cultural dialogues for diverse audiences. Since its founding in 1971, the Museum has played a vital role in the Bronx by helping to make art accessible to the entire community and connecting with local schools, artists, teens, and families through its robust education initiatives. In celebration of its 40th anniversary, the Museum implemented a universal free admission policy, supporting its mission to make arts experiences available to all audiences. The Museum's collection comprises over 1,000 modern and contemporary artworks in all media and highlights works by artists of African, Asian, and Latin American ancestry, as well as artists for whom the Bronx has been critical to their development. Located on the Grand Concourse, the Museum's home is a distinctive contemporary landmark designed by the internationally recognized firm Arquitectonica.

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