

ARTnews

Sanford Biggers Remixes Centuries of Art History in a Slew of New Solo Shows This Fall

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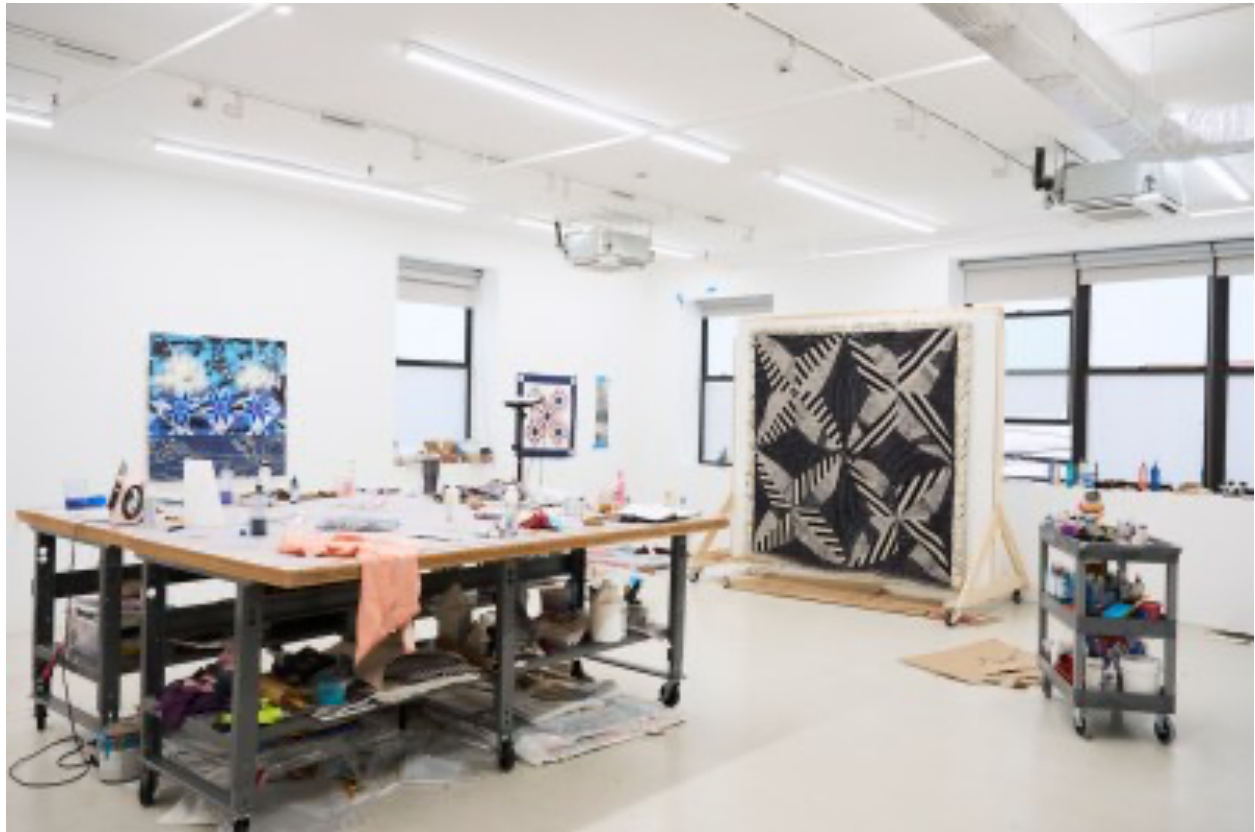
Sanford Biggers in his studio in the Bronx. Christopher Garcia Valle

A bad DJ tears at the original track like carrion, thoughtlessly shredding its structure. It's typically a failure of imagination or a poor understanding of history. A good remix needs a smart listener: to bring art someplace new, you need to learn where it's been.

Though no professional musician, Sanford Biggers has compared himself to a DJ. It took some time to get there: over the past two decades, the 53-year-old Los Angeles native has sidestepped classifications of painter, sculptor, seamster, or collagist. He's not being evasive; just one work can be graphic and sculptural, soft and hard, functional and precious. His best-known pieces begin with an old quilt, mounted on a wall. He teases out its next form, variably laying strips of paint or adding three-dimensional elements, setting scissors to the pattern, extracting and supplementing it with fabric of his own design.

"Most of them are pre-1900, so I imagine this cross-generational conversation," Biggers told *ARTnews*, during a visit to his studio in the Bronx. "And if you think there were codes or messages or some type of communication going on in the original one, what would I be able to add to that conversation? So I make myself think about where I am temporarily in relation to that piece. I don't need to echo what they said."

He continued, "The closest way of looking at it might be sampling, but not sampling where there was a hit song in the '60s, and you just copied it and put some lyrics on it. I'm thinking more like DJ Premier, somebody who really transforms a song."



Sanford Biggers' studio in The Bronx, New York. Christopher Garcia Valle

This fall might prove to be Biggers' biggest yet. He's currently the subject of solo shows at Marianne Boesky in New York and Monique Meloche Gallery in Chicago, and he will also debut two marble sculptures at the Newark Museum of Art in New Jersey on October 20. His studio was bustling with studio assistants on afternoon earlier this month, but he's never alone while at work. A history buff since his time at Morehouse College in Atlanta, his practice draws its spirit—or aura, as he calls it—and substance from his creative forebears, in particular the master quilters of Gee's Bend, Alabama.

"That was always a very contentious point for me in [college workshops] because the artists that I was really into are embraced by the craft community as well as the art community, and they were able to sort of bridge that gap: the tension between craft

and 'high art,' gendered work and soft versus hard, permanent and impermanent," he said.

During our studio visit, Biggers was primarily focused on one in-progress quilt composed of a mostly white monochromatic grid that would head to his show in New York. "When I first got this, it was the first time I had such a limited palette," he said.

Because of these constraints, he thought to approach the work as if by one of the mid-century Minimalist greats. Working from the inside, he puffed out strips, articulating depth. Then, with the tips of his gloved fingers, he dragged craggy lines of tar across its face. "I was thinking about tarring and feathering. I thought about the tar baby. I thought about how mundane, everyday materials that once out of their normal context become somehow profound," he said.

Biggers suggested that the antiques are both more and exactly the sum of their purpose. They are at once examples of a seminal Southern artistic tradition, with a story that spans slavery and the civil rights movement, and also just blankets—something to keep you warm on a cold night.

This is what Biggers is trying to preserve, even as he acknowledges that his finished works are closer to homages than monuments and edge the surreal. Some quilt works reference the (likely apocryphal) act of hiding clues to the location of safe houses along the Underground Rail within the stitching, contextualizing the original within today's ruinous state.

His marble sculptures, like the momentous pair set to sentry the Newark Museum of Art, take a different path to the same point. They draw on *actual* Greco-Roman artistic "traditions": the sinewy, muscular statues and reliefs that were never white, but flamboyantly painted. Biggers paints and gilds them and then glues fabric and masks over their faces.

"I paint on marble to set up that same type of tension whether it's a sort of defacement or addition," he said. "Monochromatic marbles are used to speak about the magnitude and the gravity of European civilizations. That was so purposeful, convenient. Like a form of propaganda."

One of those in-progress marbles was a bust of Apollo, wearing the sort of pan-African masks popularized in European modernism by Picasso. "We know that [African art form] as monochromatic brown and black sculptures, but a lot of those had pigment, too, and beads and raffia. But all these things were too 'complicated' to reproduce. So now you have whitewashed marble and black-washed African objects, all of them erasing culture," Biggers said.

He added, "I'm taking these archetypes and putting them on Apollo, which was probably made by the Greeks, but then copied by the Romans. I'm just in a long line of sculptors taking archetypal material and remixing."



Studio assistants apply gold leaf to an in-progress marble bust by Biggers. Christopher Garcia Valle

The quilts and marbles are set for different shows, which, Biggers said, speak to each other “but in different tones.” The pieces in Chicago are disembodied sculptures, like the mottled marble limbs pulled out of the Mediterranean by archaeologists. There’s power—protection, even—in the mystery of an anonymous leg or arm.

I told Biggers it reminded me of the ongoing restitution debates currently dogging encyclopedic museums around the world, with calls of repatriating objects to Africa, Indigenous peoples, and more. I asked if he saw these works as inherently political: yes and no—sort of, was the answer.

“During the reckoning [following the murder of George Floyd in 2020], every publication was reaching out to me to give my thoughts and commentary. I told them I didn’t have anything to say about it but you’re free to see my last 20 years of work,” he said. “But that ended up being sort of an inflection point; what can be the meta-narrative of work, when the previous meta-narrative is now a common conversation.”

This goes back to the earlier question, he said, about how the quilts and marbles interact: “They’re all patchworks. Patchworks of historical precedents, historical objects, archetypes from various cultures,” he said, gesturing at the unreadable expression of Apollo.

He continued, "I'm just trying to navigate through it, and embracing—at least in terms of objects—how objects can change meaning over time, like monuments. What they meant when they were erected versus what they meant now, what they will one day mean."