



## On the Record With ... Sanford Biggers

*Whether he is combining film and sculpture or drawings and performance, this New York artist is determined to push the boundaries for himself and the next generation.*

By Sanford Biggers, as told to Amy Elisa Keith

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One of the earliest things that served as a catalyst of my love of art was that in my parent's home there were pictures and paintings by prominent, contemporary Black artists of that time. That was Ernie Barnes, Charles White, John Biggers, Elizabeth Catlett and Romare Bearden. Not only in my parent's home but [in] a lot of their friends' homes they have the same imagery.

The second big thing that happened was growing up in Los Angeles, I was exposed new music and new culture very quickly. Rap music was on the rise and I just happened to be that first generation to be of age to go see *Wild Style* and *Krush Groove*. Part of that whole rap culture of course was graffiti. The art spoke to me in a different way.

Later, I attended Morehouse College in Atlanta. As an all-male school, it is a microcosm of an all-Black male society where you have different types of brothers with all different interests. There you have to establish your identity and how it is that you're going to navigate that course of maleness. Luckily, I had the foundation and confidence to flourish, especially because I was not following everybody else's career

path. At that time, I was very much still interested in art. Interestingly enough, they didn't even have an art major at Morehouse. The focus was really on pre-medical students, business, finance, law and the dependable career paths. Therefore, I had to take most of my art courses at Spelman College, which, as a women's college, had other benefits. It raised some suspicion and people would question me. I had no problem providing the answer and at the end it actually opened the dialogue and it gave me larger friendships than I may have had.

Other students would ask me, "Why would [you] become an artist? How will you make a living? Who cares about art? What do aesthetics have to do with anything? You're going to go spend a year in Italy? They're going to lynch you in Italy." They'd ask questions that reflected the pathology and the psychological damage of being an African-American male in America. That person might not really mean "you're going to get lynched in Italy," but the question is really, "How can you leave the safety net and go to this place where there are not many other people like us?" I felt that somebody had to do it. We are ambassadors. I'm willing to go out there and open those doors.

I'm very fortunate to speak to ICON MANN because this is a gateway for a young person to see me and if they find some type of affinity or relationship with me, they get more interested in what I might do as an artist, then that opens their horizons. It's very important, especially as African-American men, to show the diversity of what it is that we all do. In previous years, it was about having these "stable career paths," which we found out are not necessarily the most stable. However, what is more important are the options available to us all to know that we can do anything.

To be an artist, first of all you have to believe in it. You will be met with doubt, frequently. You have to develop a tough skin because if you're not getting doubted, then you're not putting anything challenging out. Get used to that. The other thing is that the sky is the limit. Your limits are only the ones that you put on yourself. We have access to more than we even know and we consider ourselves in America. There are many places in the world that don't have what we have. Do not take that for granted. Use every single thing that is afforded to you, every opportunity that you have creatively, economically, socially, technologically, so on.

My principle aim is to inspire through my work, through my existence, through the way I navigate my path that I influence others to do the same to push further beyond whatever I accomplish but beyond to what they think they might be able to accomplish. It's up to us to determine what our future is, no one else.

*An L.A. native working in NYC, Sanford Biggers creates artworks that integrate film, video, installation, sculpture, drawing, original music and performance. He intentionally complicates issues such as hip hop, Buddhism, politics, identity and art history in order to offer new perspectives and associations for established symbols.*

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