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Detroit Free Press

Sanford Biggers at MOCAD: Meditations on race, identity, art



[Mark Stryker](#), Detroit Free Press Staff Writer 8:37 a.m. EDT September 5, 2016



(Photo: Regina H. Boone, Detroit Free Press)

Sanford Biggers knows how to grab the attention of viewers. He knows how to get them to think, how to get them talking about the power and meaning of art and history. And how to get them discussing issues that they might prefer to avoid — especially race in America.

For "Subjective Cosmology," a solo exhibition opening Friday at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, the 45-year-old American conceptual artist has created a 30-foot long version, his largest to date, of what has become a signature work for him. It's an inflatable vinyl sculpture of Fat Albert, the title character of Bill Cosby's moralistic 1970s Saturday morning television cartoon. Biggers positions him lying face down. An electric air pump causes his body to slowly heave up and down as if breathing.

The artist is riffing on the many recent unarmed black male victims of police violence, and he's also referencing the sexual assault allegations against Cosby and creating a multilayered parable about fallen idols, race in America and the challenges facing

African Americans, particularly young men, in urban areas. Biggers calls the piece "Laocoön," after the Roman sculpture, "Laocoön and His Sons," an iconic image of human suffering.

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"Laocoon" by Sanford Biggers, a piece in vinyl and electric air pump. (Photo: Sanford Biggers)

The Los Angeles-born Biggers, 45, has emerged as an artist of uncommon intellect and creativity, whose interdisciplinary works draw on sculpture, film, drawing, music, performance and more. He's best known for meditations on race, politics, history and identity, but his work is also rich with art historical references, and his best pieces defy reductive analysis. He has exhibited widely in leading American and European museums, and he's also an assistant professor at Columbia University in New York, where he lives.

"Subjective Cosmology," which was curated by MOCAD executive director Elysia Borowy-Reeder, promises an immersive exhibition incorporating not only Biggers' installation pieces but an ambitious three-part video shown on multiple screens with footage shot in Ethiopia and Brazil. The film, "Shuffle, Shake, Shatter," follows an unnamed character across the globe in a search for identity that eventually transcends the physical world. Biggers, who also plays piano, will perform with his band, Moon Medicin, at Friday's opening.

While in Detroit in August to begin installing his exhibition, he spent an hour at MOCAD speaking about his work, creative process, audiences, race, favorite artists and more.



Sanford Biggers, 45, a Los Angeles native and New York based artist speaks with the Detroit Free Press Monday, Aug. 15, 2016 about his upcoming solo exhibition: Subjective Cosmology that is opening Friday, Sept. 9, 2016 at MOCAD (Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit) at 4454 Woodward Ave. Regina H. Boone/Detroit Free Press (Photo: Regina H. Boone, Detroit Free Press)

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QUESTION: You gave a TED talk in which you said, "Two of my favorite materials to work with are history and dialogue." That's an interesting choice of words. Most people would call history a "subject" and dialogue a "process." Yet you called them "materials." Why?

ANSWER: I think of history as a material because history has often been used as a tool or a device, usually by the supposed victors of any political or military exercise. They write history. But there's multiple histories, and there are cultures that didn't even write down their history. So I consider history to be a material, because I can use different aspects of it from different sources, and it changes the context or meaning of the piece.

Historical facts that we have grown to trust get debunked every few years, so it also seems like history is malleable. So I go through my process, and that gets to be re-righting history — r-i-g-h-t-i-n-g.

Part of what I intend to do as an artist is create — and this is where dialogue comes in — opportunities for people to have a dialogue and bring in their own history. That's when the work ends up at a different stage of completion. There's only so much as an artist I can do.

Q: How much room do you want to leave for an audience to come to their own conclusions about the meaning of a piece, and how much do you want to make sure an audience knows what you think it's about?

A: Over the course of my career I've had different positions on that. Presently, I'm very open to other people's interpretations of the work. Even when I've tried to put my opinion in the work, it was still going through everybody else's filter and the experiences that they bring to the work. The interesting thing about that is sometimes the work takes on a new meaning to even me.

Q: Can you give me an example?

A: I did a piece once that basically looks like a ship, but the ship had holes, so it clearly couldn't float. The hull and the outside were covered in hardback books, and I put a bunch of other books inside to fill it up — like bodies. I was referencing in my own head the Middle Passage, a slavery read of it. But when I showed it in a room with international viewers, there was a person from Cuba and he didn't see the boat as slavery at all. He saw it as freedom.

Q: That's 180 degrees from what you intended.

A: True. But at that point I realized that I was actually limiting the read of the work by saying that *this* is what it was about. I'm at a point where I'm more interested in people coming up with their own interpretations. ...

Q: When viewers come to see your show, is there something specific you want them to take away?

A: I often say that my work doesn't necessarily provide answers, but hopefully it provokes interesting and challenging questions. I want viewers to be inspired for sure. I want them to say, "You know, maybe I can look at this situation in a different way. Maybe there's more information that I need before I make an opinion about this conversation about race" — if the work is about race. Or if it's about appropriation or found objects or the materials themselves, then, "Oh, that's an interesting way he's even using materials."

Q: Do you intentionally set out to provoke?

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A: I set out to engage: I think provoke is a little too strong, because when you start talking about that, I think it can be confused with spectacle or shock, and that's something I'm not particularly interested in. I think there's a lot more depth in what I'm trying to do than just upset people. If I wanted to upset people there are easier and more quicker ways to do it.

Q: What does it mean for you as an artist be making art right now in 2016 in the wake of Black Lives Matter and the shootings of unarmed black men by police?

A: As an artist who has been working with these themes for over two decades now, I think we're at a convergence point where society is starting to mirror some of the things I've already been exploring in my work. Not just me. There are other artists, too. But we're at a convergence point, and who knows, maybe we were part of getting the dialogue to this point.

The thing that is different about where we are right now is that people are listening in a way that people were never able to listen before. That doesn't mean things are resolved. But, speaking as an African-American citizen and not as an artist, a lot of the things African Americans have been saying, pointing this stuff out for 500 years and only now people are really willing to listen because smartphones are capturing it on video.

Q: You are a contemporary artist. You are also an African-American artist, a male artist and an American artist. Maybe this is an unfair question, because I probably wouldn't ask a white artist this, but how do you think about negotiating the spaces between all of those things and your own identity as an artist?

A: I don't. I've never been a fan of labels. I'm an interdisciplinary artist. I'm not a painter, or just a sculptor or just a musician. I've never been a fan of labels, because they are usually used to restrict and limit. I'm a human and an artist. It's something I'd rather not have to navigate, for the same reason you said: If I were a white — a WASP male artist — you would not have to ask that question. But anything other than that, you'd probably have to ask it. ...

Here's something that happened to me. I was in an AP art class in high school in a mixed public high school in Los Angeles, but I was the only African American in the course. There was an assignment to paint portraits of our family and friends. We came back the next week and everyone had their portraits up. There were critiques and everything was going just fine, but the teacher, a white woman, stopped and had to ask a question: Why do you always paint black people?

I thought it was the weirdest question ever, because the assignment was to paint family and friends. That's not to say I don't have friends who weren't black, but I'm painting people who are right outside my house, so by nature they would be black. Why does that make a difference? You told us just to paint family and friends. Why is this work any different? Why does this work need to be seen any other way?

Q: The Detroit Institute of Arts has a suite of galleries devoted to African-American artists, though there are also some works by black artists folded into other galleries. How do you feel about having separate galleries for African-American artists?

A: That's a really complicated question, and I don't know if I can answer that in the time we have. I think it's probably good that they did it now, and hopefully they can drop (it) sometime in the future. It's all late. It's just happening now because there is so much visibility. People are just realizing there's all this stuff, and it's great. It will get to the point where it will be: You know what? We don't need to distinguish. This is great American art. Let it be. The unfortunate thing is that without initiatives like that, there's a lot of work that would not be seen.

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Q: Who are the artists who have been important to you?

A: John Biggers. Charles White. Elizabeth Catlett. Olafur Eliasson. Isamu Noguchi. Martin Puryear. Prince. John Coltrane and Alice Coltrane. Biggers: Being a cousin, he was one of the first artists I literally met and had a conversation with and realized that you could do that. First time I met him I was around 8. White: We had some prints of his at home, so I used to learn how to draw by trying to emulate his prints; the same with Catlett. When I lived in Japan I got really interested in Buddhism and the minimalist aesthetic in sculpture and rock gardens and temples. Noguchi was sort of a synthesis of that as well as modernism. Puryear: His form; his lines are incredible, how they work in space and the craftsmanship. Eliasson: His vision. His trajectory is massive, and the research into materials and experiments he makes. Prince is everything. I got introduced to early Coltrane through my family, I got introduced to more *out* Coltrane in college and after, from "A Love Supreme" on. I was interested in the expansiveness of his music and the approach he was taking to deconstruction and open form. Then Alice and spiritual music. I liked how they were looking at what music could do beyond sonically.



A production still of "Shatter" by Sanford Biggers (Photo: Sanford Biggers)

Q: What was your Opus 1 — the first piece you made where you felt like your creative voice really came into focus?

A: I was in college at Morehouse, I started taking sculpture, and I loved it. The instructor helped me get a job as an apprentice with another sculptor in the city, a professional. who was doing large public commissions. There was a sculpture competition open to grad students and undergrads. They invited everyone to a junkyard and you had two or three hours to pick stuff and then you'd go back to your studio and make something. I made two pieces, and I talked about (them) with my instructor and he said, "Piece A, that's the one. It's great." So we went and installed it, and I had this gnawing in my stomach the whole night because I didn't think it was the right piece

I woke up early the next day, went to the studio, got the one I liked, went to the competition, removed the first piece and put up the one I liked. Now Piece B was on the wall. I ended up taking second place. First place was a grad student, third place was a grad student. I was a sophomore. The piece was a three-dimensional disc out of steel. I polished it to the point where it was almost a mirror-like reflection. Then I hung a rusty chain from it that went down to the ground into a rusty piece of hollow square metal tubing, and out of that came a Confederate flag that was wrapped in this chain with tar and all kinds of stuff. That was 1989. The newspaper

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would not take a picture of it because I had the Confederate flag in it. I stood in front of the piece and said, "If you can't take the picture the way it is, then you can't take any pictures at all." So there's no picture of me in the paper, but there's a mention. That was the moment.