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What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER and WILL HEINRICH
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*Sanford Biggers's "Selah," from 2017.
Matt Grubb/Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen*

Sanford Biggers

Through Oct. 21. Marianne Boesky, 509 West 24th Street, Manhattan; 212-680-9889, boeskygallery.com.

Quilts, masks and figurative sculptures are central to the art of the African diaspora. Sanford Biggers explores and sometimes even explodes these objects and traditions in "Selah," a juggernaut of an exhibition at Marianne Boesky.

The Hebrew word "selah," which is used in the Bible, has roughly been translated to mean "stop and listen," and Mr. Biggers's paintings, collages, sculptures and videos function as vibrant indicators to halt and take stock of both the present and the past. One way he does this, formally, is in repurposing antique quilts, which were signposts used on the Underground Railroad and have been central more recently in Southern

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African-American collectives like Gee's Bend, whose work, for many, created a link between African textile patterns and modern European abstract painting.

The title piece, "Selah," from 2017, like all the other works, is a large human figure reminiscent of sub-Saharan African statuary though it is sculpted from antique quilts. "Ooo Oui" (2017) and the fantastically kaleidoscopic "Khemetstry" are also made of antique quilt fragments, but these are arranged in sharp abstract geometric patterns. A polished bronze warrior figure with quilts wrapped around its base serves as a kind of shrine in the rear gallery, while the video installation "Infinite Tabernacle" captures a wax African-style figurine being blown apart (more precisely, by bullets).

Watching over the exhibition is "Overstood," a kind of outlier object: a large black cutout made of canvas, sequins and tar that extends high up the gallery wall and depicts Black Panthers at a 1968 protest in San Francisco. While many of the works here speak in the more coded languages of color, patterns and symbols, "Overstood" is a distinct homage to African-American activist history — but also a reminder of this country's continuing struggles with racism and racist brutality.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER