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Sanford Biggers on making 'New Work' from two old, 'malleable' materials: history and myth

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A detail from Sanford Biggers' "Neroluce." (Sanford Biggers / Monique Meloche Gallery)

When it comes to the work of Sanford Biggers, not all roads lead to Rome.

For example, there's the single stretch of pavement leading to Gee's Bend, Ala., where generations of isolated black women have passed on an indigenous, geometric quilting tradition that employs whatever's around —

secondhand corduroy, cornmeal sacks and “hand-me-down leisure suits,” as New York Times critic Michael Kimmelman pointed out in his 2002 review of the Whitney’s “The Quilts of Gee’s Bend.”

“Quilts made of worn dungarees sometimes became the only mementos of a dead husband who had nothing else to leave behind,” Kimmelman wrote. “They provided comfort and warmth, piled on top of cornshuck mattresses or layered six or seven deep for the cold nights.

“But they also became declarations of style, flags of independence hung to dry on wire lines for the neighbors or anyone else to see.”

Biggers, then fresh out of grad school, also attended that show.

“My interest in painting had waned a bit because it wasn't able to say the things that I wanted to say at that point. But, this show at the Whitney ended up being one of the best painting shows that I'd seen in years,” he said in a phone interview. “Of course, these were all works by women done on cloth, but I also appreciated that it was 'elevated' by being in the Whitney and no longer just viewed as domestic, ‘women's work.’ These colors, these patterns, the rhythm, the improvisation — everything really seduced me.”

So much, in fact, that quilting became an integral and widely-recognized part of Biggers’ creative output, eventually leading to a 2017 Rome Prize. After spending a year in the ancient city, he is currently exhibiting fruits of this fellowship in “New Work,” his third solo show at Monique Meloche Gallery. A combination of his revered quilt-paintings, reliefs and marble sculpture, Biggers’ fascination with history fills the space from wall to wall. He says his tenure in Italy nourished this curiosity.

“In Rome, for every monument, for every sculpture or building or piece of architecture, there's myriad stories about how it was made, when it was made and who commissioned it,” he said. “In some ways, it clarifies things, and in some ways it opens up more questions. I've always said history is almost a malleable material. Depending on how you use it, who uses it and where it's shown, the read on it can become more complex.”

Within this dexterous treatment of history and memory, Biggers also sees an expanded way of viewing black legacies.

“We talk about the fragmentation of African diasporic history in America, but it's also fragmented across the world,” he said. “So, when you're in Rome, and you realize that there was an African presence in Rome thousands of years before there was an African presence in America, you see the small lens. We're still young compared to a place like Rome.

So, then, you want to ask, ‘What lessons were learned and what lessons were not learned? What did Rome not pick up on, and what were the consequences for all of these other Western cultures that fashioned themselves with Roman ideals? What did they cherry-pick from that history?’”

He also noted how history dubiously selects which materials are valued and which are not.

“Marble is an interesting medium, because marble itself implies this notion of nobility and age and luxury to a degree — but, ironically, marble was used because it was very easy to work with, and abundant.

“The way we perceive marble work and the way art history has even talked about it imagines these alabaster-white, pure objects — but in their natural habitat, they were painted, adorned and colored. Over time, the paint has come off and they've literally become whitewashed, whether intentionally or unintentionally. And I think the same thing has happened historically — all of the color wears off, and we're left with this notion of a pure object.”

Biggers has previously said that his work doesn't respond to a single event in black history but often responds to the ongoing relationship between blackness and the U.S. In this new work, he continues this exploration and takes it global.

“The marbles combine Romanesque figures with pre-Columbian and African figurative renditions from various cultures,” Biggers described. “They're mashed up together. That speaks to me about trade, commerce, colonies, assimilation, appropriation. I think we are in a state of trying to figure these things out. That's why I don't feel the need to be very specific about one event. I'm more interested in the phenomenon, which has been happening for centuries if not millennia.

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“When you talk about the dynamics of brown bodies in the U.S., nothing that we're talking about today is new.”

“*Sanford Biggers: New Work*” runs through Oct. 27 at Monique Meloche Gallery, 451 N. Paulina St.; [**moniquemeloche.com**](http://moniquemeloche.com)