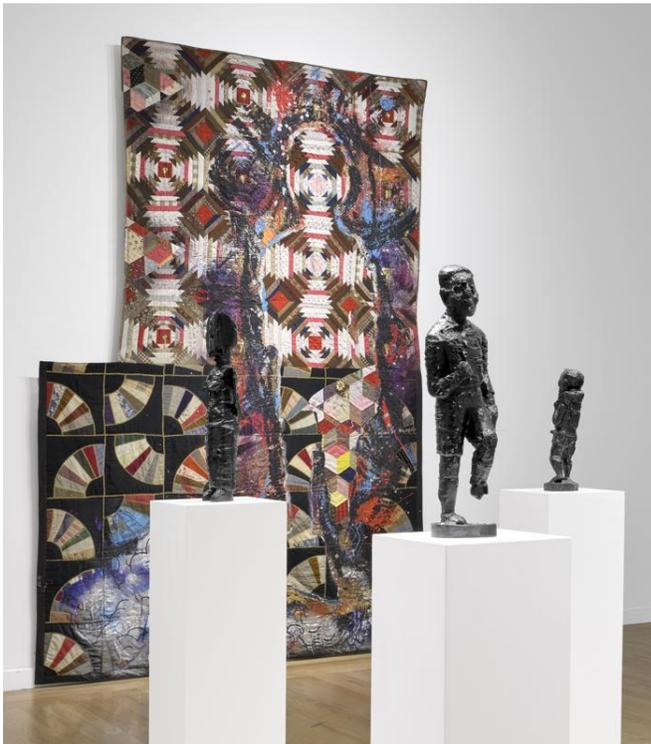


The Boston Globe

Artist Sanford Biggers takes aim at violence against African-Americans

By Murray Whyte, Globe Staff



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Art Review

SANFORD BIGGERS

At Tufts University Art Galleries through Dec. 15. 40 Talbot Ave., Medford. 617-627-3518, artgalleries.tufts.edu

MEDFORD — A dull crack, snap. The body jerks and wheels, tumbling into a grotesque midair pirouette. A limb shatters, fragments exploding like shrapnel

every which way. It happens slowly: You can see every sliver, every element, fleshy or solid, as it tumbles slowly out of sight, quivering from shock. Maybe that's when I realized that I was, too. Witnessing a gunshot wound inflicted at close range, in slow motion, can have that effect. And it should.

I don't want to make too much about how unnervingly visceral Sanford Biggers's show at Tufts University Art Galleries is, because it *is* that, but much more. The array of LCD monitors piled in the corner is a grim, transfixing beacon — African masks and figures, dipped in wax to smooth their skin, pinwheel slowly with every bullet's impact, wood and wax bursting in all directions, in an endless loop. But in art, as in life, it's what happens next that matters just as much.

Biggers took his idols — each representing an African-American shot by police in recent years (which, depressingly, gives the artist no end of material) — to be used as targets at a shooting range, where he recorded their injuries in excruciating slow-motion detail. Then, he cast their broken bodies in bronze, reborn as stoic monuments to their own trauma. He calls the series “BAM,” and they populate the gallery here like a company of the wounded. There's a mask with a jagged hole between the eyes (“BAM (for Jordan),” 2017), a walking figure missing a lower leg (“BAM (for Michael),” 2015), a woman with no arms, her face cleaved right off (“BAM (for Sandra),” 2016).

It's a transformation as profound as it is blunt: The sculptures are, as Biggers put it, “of dubious origin” — African iconography mass-produced for the tourist trade in the aftermath of colonialism's twirl through the cultures it all but obliterated. Trauma was embedded in these figures long before the first shot was fired. In its aftermath, Biggers affords the pieces a kind of immortality, honoring their suffering with the stolid permanence of bronze, a material long reserved for the colonial conquerors whose effigies dot public squares all over the western world.

The artist, who is black, may have taken some vengeful glee in quite literally exploding a commodity culture spawned by a colonial urge to monetize its own brutality. Really, who could blame him?

In a TED talk, Biggers explained that, when it came time to take his idols to the shooting range, he couldn't bring himself to pull the trigger (an assistant did the shooting for him). It's something, when an artist initiates a project too unseemly even for himself — the videos are intensely difficult to watch, swathed in noise-canceling headphones with gunshots and the crack and splinter of the figures' injuries echoing in the center of your skull — but I think that's part of the point.

The idols might on one level represent colonial depravity more broadly, but each was a stand-in for a real person, most of whom hadn't survived. The artist's immediate complaint is the long tale of a generations-old practice of othering, of minimizing, of us and them. It was born in marauding colonial practice, and it's now embedded in everyday life, a rot left to fester and metastasize, infecting every moment of the country's history, including this one.

Some call it systemic racism, and that's a neatly taxonomical way to sum things up. Try that on the family of someone who's lost a father, son, brother, sister, daughter, mother, and it doesn't quite cut it. Those with the luxury of looking away — people who might typically attend an art gallery, say — have it easy. And so Biggers makes you not just look but really focus, headphones and all.

That's why I think his project serves a necessarily dual purpose. African symbolism, in a post-colonial, post-slavery world, is heavily loaded with determined efforts to first erase it, then co-opt it, and finally monetize it. African people, meanwhile, follow the same path backward, from commodity to determined efforts toward erasure — segregation, disenfranchisement, redlining, gerrymandering, on it goes. With the work, Biggers lays plain a society that values some lives more than others.

Maybe he had a symbolic corrective in mind: Bestowing on undervalued lives immortality in cold metal, a convention typically-reserved for so-called greatness. But his monuments don't just eulogize those who were lost. The great, gilded figure you encounter at the gallery's entrance — “BAM (Seated Warrior),” 2017, a slim sentinel more than six feet tall — has unnerving presence; it damns with silent grace. The piece, unlike its cohorts, is a monument not to anyone specific, but to endurance through trauma — endless, deliberate, brutal trauma — and the

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determination to go on. One of its arms is missing a four-inch chunk; one leg has been shot completely off. Still it stands here, unbowed.

This is rough stuff. That might be why the show includes some softer features — an effort, maybe, to counterweigh. Bright quilts drape on the gallery walls, some of them limning the contours of the “BAM” figures in downy fabric. They made me think of the Underground Railroad practice of embedding messages in textiles.

Overwhelmed by the cool brutality of “BAM,” you might be tempted to overlook “Moonrising,” a 2014 video piece Biggers made with Moon Medicin, a cross-disciplinary creative collective of which he is part. It’s Afro-fantastical idyllic nocturne — members of the collective awaken on a forest floor, naked, or dash through the woods bedecked in feathers and masks. An omniscient voice intones the biography of Harriet Tubman, the runaway slave who was among the railroad’s builders. At one point, a low voice sings: “The coded quilt has given word. The train leaves tonight.”

Amid the broken bodies, “Moonrising,” with a hypnotic soundtrack of spare, soulful electronica, is dizzyingly joyful, bursting with the bright energy of what might have been. Set here amid the broken sentinels of what actually is, it’s both that much brighter, and more tragic.