



Sanford Biggers's Afrofuturistic Conundrum

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by Pat Rogers

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The puzzle may be long solved but the quandaries still compel from the large scale installation “The Cartographer’s Conundrum” by Sanford Biggers. The warehouse-size art installation appeared at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA) from Feb to October 2012. The experience of walking among shattered instruments and star-shaped mirrors bathed in colored light still resonates. So does the memory of two lofty rows of pews rising upward in front of a cornucopia of crashed instruments with a piano rising from its center, resembling an alter gone mad.



Partial installation view of “The Cartographer’s Conundrum” by Sanford Biggers installed at Mass MoCA.



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It seemed as if the musical chapel set askew was the centerpiece and destination of the installation. Yet, the walk through the football field-sized room and the small discoveries made along the way are what stayed with me. So did the sensation of being part of a skybourne chapel worshipping silent instruments. After investigating the exhibition further, it made perfect sense: Travels through unfamiliar lands, suspended disbelief, plenty of weirdness and introspection on the personal meanings of it all covers much of Biggers’s points.

“The Cartographer’s Conundrum” combined Afrofuturism with an exploration of identity, the spiritual, technology and a tromp through history. In the main exhibition gallery, visitors walked carefully among installations of mirrors and instrument parts. Neon sheets of Plexiglas and

spotlights altered light and added a colorful glow to the concrete and beamed warehouse. The artworks felt like they were remnants from an unknown culture left askew (or maybe carefully placed) for unknown reasons. Surprises could sometimes be found tucked in small spaces in the orchestrated chaos, adding a surreal touch to the experience.



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All of “The Cartographer’s Conundrum” is steeped in Afrofuturism.

Afrofuturism combines science fiction, cosmology and technology to create a new folklore of the African Diaspora, according to an exhibition release. The African diaspora tells the story of how Africans, removed and scattered from their homelands, retained their traditions and reformed their identities in their new homes. Religion, language and folklore were some of the ways that African culture were carried forward and provided a link to the past.

Afrofuturism was coined in 1995 by cultural critic Mark Dery in his essay “Black to the Future,” according to the museum. Afrofuturism first took hold in the mid-1950s with the musician Sun-Ra, whose music blended science fiction, mysticism, African culture and jazz fusion. It continued with George Clinton’s Parliament and Funkadelic, according to an exhibition release.

Biggers combined Afrofuturism’s musical pipeline with the artwork concerns of the social realism painter and muralist John Biggers (1924-2001). John Biggers, a cousin of Sanford Biggers, was a Texas-based artist, scholar and Afrofuturist, whose art addresses ideas of spirituality and the theatrical.

In his early works, John Biggers portrayed African-American life as a social realist. His art underwent a change after winning a UNESCO fellowship and he became the first African-American artist to travel to Africa, according to exhibition information. Afterwards, his paintings incorporated African themes with imagery of African-American life to create allegories about life, spirituality, hope and survival, according to the museum. John Biggers’s art was also influenced by Afrofuturism and his work incorporated the sacred, fractal geometries and mystical imagery.

Sanford Biggers had always been inspired by his cousin’s work and journey through Africa, according to the museum. In 2008, after awarded a Creative Capital grant, Sanford Biggers traveled through western Africa along the same route that John Biggers followed in the 1950s. The trip was a way to place the cousins side by side. During his sojourn, Sanford Biggers met with colleagues and family members, further connecting the two journeys separated by time.



View from the entrance to “The Cartographer’s Conundrum” by Sanford Biggers at Mass MoCA.

Continuing the connection, “The Cartographer’s Conundrum” aimed to present a “behind the scenes walk-through” of an imaginary workshop as the two artists “...explored the malleability of identity and transcendental ascension through sonic, luminescent and geometric patterns,” states the museum.

The shards of artworks placed on the floor in the Building 5 gallery were curious, puzzling and seemed to be a trail of sorts. Resolution and a broad understanding was not fully realized at the museum. Yet the wondering about it traveled with me and the exhibition continued to reveal itself, even as the artwork remained behind.



Detail from “The Cartographer’s Conundrum” by Sanford Biggers.



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“The Cartographer’s Conundrum” spanned three galleries at Mass MoCA. Installed in an adjacent gallery to the Building 5 gallery was the video “Shake.” The piece is the second part of Sanford Biggers’s Odyssean trilogy about the formation and dissolution of identity. The video depicts Ricardo Camillo, a Brazilian-born and Germany-based choreographer, stuntman, clown and DJ, moving through the favelas and oceans of Brazil before transforming into a silver-skinned figure.



Still from "Shake" by Sanford Biggers.



Still from "Shake" by Sanford Biggers.

In an upstairs gallery, quilts by Sanford Biggers and a reproduction of John Biggers's mural "Quilting Party" were on view. Sanford Biggers drew inspiration for his geometries and patterns, in part, from John Biggers's mural.



"Reproduction of 'The Quilting Party'" by John Biggers, 1980-81.



"Quilt #9 (Star Chamber)" by Sanford Biggers, 2012. Mixed media on repurposed pre-Civil War era quilt. Courtesy the artist and Michael Klein Fine Art.

BASIC FACTS: "The Cartographer's Conundrum," a multidisciplinary installation by Sanford Biggers, was on view at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art from Feb 5 to October 2012. Additional images from the show can be seen at Mass MoCA's [flickr](#) or through Sanford Biggers's website www.sanfordbiggers.com

Mass MoCA is one of the largest centers for contemporary visual art in the United States. It is located in a restored 19th century factory in North Adams, MA. www.massmoca.org.

Sanford Biggers is a native of Los Angeles, CA and currently lives and works in New York City. He is an assistant professor at Columbia University School of the Arts.

Recent exhibitions include the group show "Eight Sculptors" at Paula Cooper Gallery in NYC (Nov 12 to Dec 22, 2012), "Dark Flow Lurking" at David Castillo in Miami, FL (Nov 16 to Dec 31, 2012), and

the solo exhibition “Sweet Funk – An Introspective” at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (Sept 23, 2011 to Jan 8, 2012), among others. Biggers has exhibited extensively. Highlights include Prospect 1 (New Orleans, LA), the Tate Modern (London, England), Performa 07, the Whitney Biennial, the Sculpture Center and others.

Sanford Biggers’s art can be viewed at www.sanfordbiggers.com.

RELATED STORIES: Mass MoCA Blog: “[Getting to know Sanford Biggers.](#)” Published Feb 6, 2012.

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