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The Playful, Political Art of Sanford Biggers

An under-sung artist upends received ideas about race and history.

By Vinson Cunningham

Biggers's art, layered with references to race and history, is sincere and ironic at once. Photograph by Eric Helgas for The New Yorker

Three years ago, on a Saturday in spring, I wandered into a humid gallery just south of Canal Street. On display was a group exhibition called "Black Eye," which included works by an impressive roster of established and emerging artists—Kehinde Wiley, Wangechi Mutu, Steve McQueen, Kerry James Marshall, Deana Lawson, David Hammons, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. The show, curated by Nicola Vassell, felt like a confirmation of my growing, and perhaps belated, realization that work by black artists had come to occupy an elevated position of regard in the art world. A few months before the show, McQueen had won the Academy Award for Best Picture, for "Twelve Years a Slave." A year later, Wiley's first career retrospective, "A New Republic," opened at the Brooklyn Museum to widespread acclaim. In October, 2016, a towering retrospective of Marshall's work, "Mastry," was the first genuine hit at the newly opened Met Breuer. In May of last year, an exhibition of seventeen hauntingly quiet portraits by Yiadom-Boakye, at the New Museum, was a surprise sensation; as with the Marshall show, pictures of the works clogged the Instagram feeds of gallerygoers for weeks.

Biggers is interested in "power objects"—sculptures thought, in some religious cultures, to hold special metaphysical significance.
Photograph by Eric Helgas for The New Yorker

People arrived at "Black Eye" in steady waves, and viewed the art with scholarly quietude. The pieces were uniformly strong, but my favorite, by far, was one of the least assuming: an untitled photograph of modest size, tucked away in a corner, framed in gold. In it, a white woman eyed the camera teasingly, her blond hair drawn up into a high hump that slipped in cascades down her shoulders and back. A red-lipsticked smile cut a spear across her face. With one hand she touched her shoulder; she held the other behind her head. She wore a burgundy T-shirt with "*morehouse*," the name of the all-male historically black college in Atlanta, printed across the front in white block letters. My reaction to the picture—embarrassing for my companion in the hushed space—was a loud, echoing laugh. I stood there looking for a while. The image was very funny, but what, exactly, was the joke?

Two years later, I went to Harlem to talk to Sanford Biggers, the polymathic artist who made the photograph. We met at a bar off Broadway, near the building that houses his spacious basement studio. It was August; outside, people strolled in the early-afternoon sun, carrying bags from Trader Joe's. Biggers, forty-seven, is tall and broad-chested but walks with a graduate student's shamble. He wore a T-shirt and jeans—and black nail polish, left over from his recent wedding. His wife, Arana Hankin, works in real-estate development; they met in 2010, at a public conversation between Biggers and the feminist performance artist Lorraine O'Grady, and began dating a few years later. The polish sparkled when he moved his hands, belying his otherwise understated presentation.

As Biggers sipped a beer, I told him how much I liked that photograph—how, for a while, I had used it as the background image on my laptop, and had tried, almost every day, to invent different scenarios for the woman and her incongruous shirt. Perhaps she appropriated it from a black boyfriend; the pose has a vaguely postcoital quality. Or maybe she ordered it online, to satisfy an itch for some small transgressive thrill: once a month or so, she puts it on and preens in front of her bathroom mirror. When I told Biggers these stories, he chuckled, and then reminded me that the woman might have a perfectly valid genealogical claim to Morehouse, his own alma mater.

"Man, have you seen pictures of those old H.B.C.U. leaders?" he asked. Biggers speaks in an even baritone, with clear, considered diction; his mouth is often set in the kind of slight upturn that seems on the verge of flowering into an open smile. He had a point: John Hope, Morehouse's first black president, could have passed for white without any trouble at all. (He looked a bit like the former Nebraska senator Chuck Hagel—and a bit like the white men who led Morehouse before him.) Only the one-drop rule and a sense of race loyalty kept Hope on the darker side of what his contemporary W. E. B. Du Bois called the Veil. "She could easily be one of their descendants," Biggers said. Then he shrugged, grinning widely, as if to say that the many possible meanings of the photo were precisely the point. Race, already absurd as a concept, has been pulled in too many directions by the forces of attraction and repulsion that exist between blacks and whites. Mixture makes it mean too many things.

Artists usually court controversy when their work is, or seems to be, stridently polemic, or purposely provocative. Think of Chris Ofili's dung-splattered black Virgin Mary, which Rudolph Giuliani, New York's mayor at the time, decried as anti-Catholic—or its older cousin "Piss Christ," by Andres Serrano, a photograph depicting a crucifix submerged in Serrano's tangerine-colored urine. But there is another potential offender: the artist or art work that doesn't seem to care *enough*, that fails to handle certain sensitive issues with sufficient weight. A recent piece by Biggers called "Laocoön" fits this more slippery category.

"Laocoön" is a huge balloon figure of Fat Albert, Bill Cosby's animated schoolyardhero, lying prone, with his eyeballs rolled halfway into his head. Air is gently pumped into the body, making it contract and expand slightly, as if laboring to breathe. The work's name is a reference to the Greek mythic figure who, in the Aeneid, is killed after trying to smash a hole in the Trojan Horse. It also recalls the ancient sculpture of Laocoön and his sons, writhing as they are attacked by serpents, which was excavated in the sixteenth century and which inspired Michelangelo and others to further mine the human figure for its expressive, and tragic, possibilities. Biggers unveiled his sculpture at Miami Beach's Art Basel in December, 2015. Given the timing, it was fair to assume that the piece was in part a reference to the recent deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and other black men killed by police officers—and also, perhaps, a mordant joke about the increasingly intermingled state of entertainment and the news. Then, too, there was the growing awareness of the dozens of sexual assaults allegedly perpetrated by Cosby: an icon was dead, or dying.

"That piece was born out of a lifetime of this dysfunctional relationship between African-Americans and America—not anything that happened within the last four or five years," Biggers told me, declining to identify "Laocoön" as a response to any specific tragedy. His reticence, together with the sheer shock value and the pointed timing of the piece, earned him more consternation than praise. An essay in *ARTnews*, by the writer and curator Taylor Renee Aldridge, chided Biggers, arguing that he had "generally glossed over Brown—whose body, lying in the street, has become one of the default images of Black Lives Matter." Instead, Aldridge complained, Biggers "fell back on the image of Fat Albert, a comedic cartoon character," a move that Aldridge deemed "crass and irresponsible." It was an odd critique, suggesting that a work of art must narrow its focus, become more specific—that it must, in a sense, mean less.

Biggers is a relatively under-sung artist. Of the cohort from the "Black Eye" exhibition, he is among those still awaiting their "moment." His career has proceeded steadily, but somewhat diffusely; he works in a variety of media, and the results, though frequently arresting, are rarely, if ever, loud. In a period when overtly political material may be more respected, and coveted, than ever before, he is disinclined to nudge viewers toward conclusions, whether interpretive or emotional. (He mentioned to me more than once that he disliked writing wall text to accompany

his pieces.) His desire not to be pinned down appears to spring from a kind of moral impulse: he wants the audience to do its share of the work. In the case of "Laocoön," what the public discussion seemed to miss, besides the grim comedy of the piece, was that Biggers's determined silence about his real-world inspirations might help to expand the meaning of his work beyond the moment, and into the future.

Biggers was born in Los Angeles, in 1970, the son of a neurosurgeon father and a mother who worked as a teacher until deciding to raise her three children full time. Biggers's parents were raised in Houston, and attended the same high school; they moved west, in 1963, after deciding that Texas wouldn't be hospitable to a neurological practice headed by a black man. They were a stylish couple, popular among the growing black upper middle class in Los Angeles—they often entertained, or went out to parties at night. And they encouraged their son's artistic ambition, which became apparent early on. Sanford was the youngest child. His brother, Sam, is a retired college chemistry instructor, who now works as a tutor, and his sister, Shaun, is an ob-gyn. He had an older cousin, John Biggers, who was well known in the sixties for creating large-scale works, often murals, that mixed West African iconography with highly intricate, often dizzying geometric patterns.

Research on the Underground Railroad, and on the supposed use of quilts as coded signposts, led Biggers to begin painting on them.
Photograph by Eric Helgas for The New Yorker

In high school, Biggers drew and painted and listened to music, his tastes guided, via occasional eavesdropping, by Sam. "He had what the musicians call big ears," Sam told me. "He had ears for all kinds of music. He picked it up like a sponge—even when he was three or four, he'd be riffing on Sly Stone, singing around the house." Sanford now leads and plays keys for a band called Moon Medicin, whose repertoire verges on performance art: often clad in extravagant costumes, the group plays extended funk-soul grooves in front of a huge screen, which blasts out found photographs and video clips to go with the tunes. Sam also introduced his brother to standup comedy, which Biggers has lately come to recognize as an important, if indirect, influence on his art. He had been thinking a lot about Dave Chappelle, he told me. "I'm a big fan of his work, and Chris Rock's—all the way back to Richard Pryor and Dick Gregory, Redd Foxx. I grew up sneaking and listening to my brother's records of all that stuff. It defined a lot of culture for me."

As Biggers deals with ever more harrowing real-world materials, comedy offers him a way to destabilize the work, complicate it. This past August, he saw Chappelle perform at Radio City Music Hall; afterward, he e-mailed me a capsule review: "Lots of trans jokes, which was sorta weird, but he wove it into a comparison to black civil rights. F'd up."

The next day, we met in Harlem again, this time near the National Black Theatre, where he had set up a temporary studio in preparation for a solo gallery show, his first in New York, to be held at the Marianne Boesky Gallery, in Chelsea. We went to a loud bistro near 125th Street, and, as a procession of fire trucks barrelled up Lenox Avenue, I asked him about the challenges in getting humor across in visual art.

"Satire works in standup, film, rap, for sure," he said. "But not as fluidly, really, in visual art."

"But why do you think that is?" I asked. Do people simply not go to museums expecting to laugh, I wondered? Or is there some inherent formal difficulty in making jokes—which often depend on the stable ground of shared references—through images?

"Maybe the audiences aren't necessarily coming for that," Biggers said, looking out the window. "And a lot of times, I think, black artists can be held back—not being able to be abstract, humorous, visceral, abject."

He was quiet for a moment. "Some of this might be my own historical sense of restriction, but the work has to do so many things when it comes from a person of color," he said. "And comedy can be misread, and misinterpreted, and become problematic. But that's what art does: it problematizes things. So I think I'm finding more comfort in that."

These days, star artists tend to climb an increasingly regular professional ladder: name-brand art school, group shows, gallery courtship, solo début, and a lucrative stream of studio visits by art-world pilgrims. Biggers has made his living through teaching, and has financed his work by winning fellowships in America and abroad. "I've gotten really, *really* good at applying for those things," he said. After Morehouse, he did short stints at the Maryland Institute College of Art and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, in Maine, before earning a master's degree in fine arts from the Art Institute of Chicago. Since then, fellowships have taken him to Berlin, Warsaw, Budapest, Vancouver, and all over the States. In 2000, he was one of the World Views Artists in Residence at the World Trade Center, an experience that afforded him "great exposure," he says; he left the residency in the spring of 2001, after being offered his first two museum shows, at the Matrix Program for Contemporary Art, in Berkeley, and at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. On September 11th, another of the World Views artists, Biggers's friend Michael Richards, was killed in the Trade Center's north tower. He had stayed overnight to work on a sculpture in a studio on the ninety-second floor.

A few days after our lunch on Lenox Avenue, Biggers and I met at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where he had contributed to a small show called "Talking Pictures," a series of smartphone photo "conversations" between artists. Biggers had tossed darkly lit captures back and forth with Shawn Peters, a cinematographer and an old friend from Morehouse. We breezed through the iPad slide show; he was anxious to walk me around the Asian wing, his favorite section of the museum. (In a series that he began in 2000, traditional sand-drawn Buddhist and Hindu mandalas are reimagined as hip-hop-inflected dance floors, on which Biggers invites viewers to break-dance. In 2003, he pursued his interest in Zen Buddhism during a residency in Japan; Zen practice has since been a recurring theme in his work.)

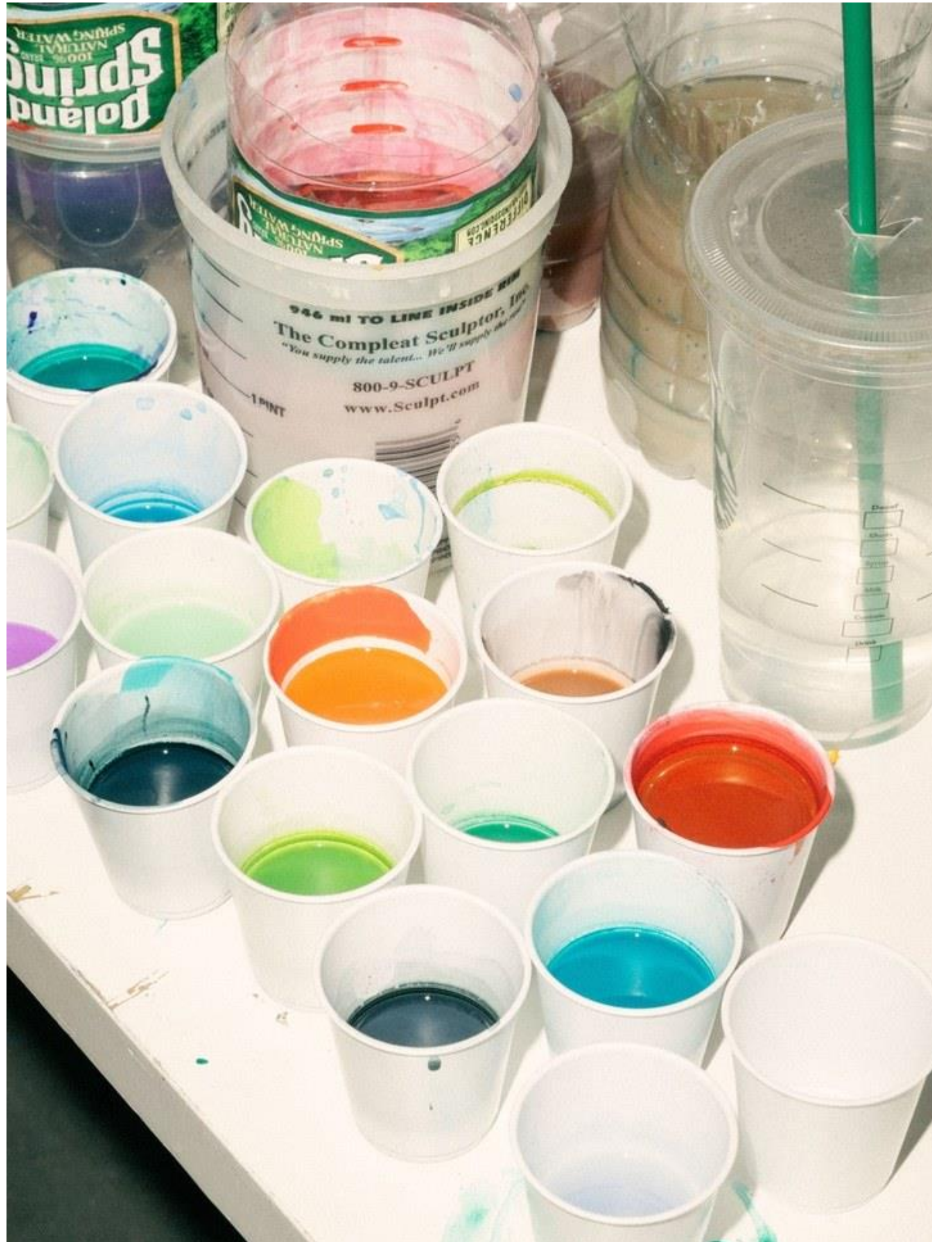
We stopped in the wing's echoing main lobby, where tourists craned their necks in order to snap pictures of huge stone sculptures of emperors on thrones. "I love these," he said. Such figures had stoked his interest in "power objects"— sculptures that, in some religious cultures, are thought to have special metaphysical significance, with the power to ward off danger for those who made them, or visit it upon others. That interest led him to start collecting small wooden African statues of human figures in various stately poses. He dipped the statues in wax and, in 2015, took them to a clearing outside Los Angeles, where he "resculpted" them by riddling them with bullets. He recorded video of the process for future installations. He didn't do the shooting himself—"That didn't feel exactly right," he said. He asked his longtime director of photography to pull the trigger. After the shooting, Biggers cast some of the figures in bronze and coated others with ferric nitrate.

In an exhibition of the figures, called "BAM," he was somewhat less vague than he was with "Laocoön," which débuted a few months later. The "BAM" sculptures had names like "For Michael" and "For Sandra"—as in Brown and Bland—and they were praised by critics in sombre terms. Beneath the topicality, though, was a bit of art-historical humor. Biggers had become interested in the German critic Carl Einstein and his 1915 book, "Negerplastik," the grand purpose of which was to introduce Western audiences to African sculpture. (Einstein knew Picasso, who had gone through an African period a few years earlier.) The book is full of black-and-white pictures of such works, but the sculptures have been denuded of the hats, beads, and feathers that originally adorned them. Einstein's photographic plates put forth an entirely new, and historically bogus, sculptural corpus, one that mars our idea of African art even today. It also created an odd incentive for a class of African artisans and merchants that sprouted up during the twentieth century: they started to make serious-looking, monochromatic tchotchkes that recalled Einstein's plates, happy to regurgitate the mistake—and to sell the results to tourists.

"It's sort of hilarious, actually," Biggers said.

Much of Biggers's work strives for a balance between formal play and an interest in race and history that manages to be at once sincere and ironic. An older work, "Lotus," an etching on a circular pane of glass, made in 2007 and included in a small solo show in 2011 at the Brooklyn Museum, looks from afar like a perfectly round white blossom. But the viewer, drawing nearer, finds that the flower's long petals are actually the hulls of slave ships, full of tightly packed human cargo. The first of Biggers's pieces to garner serious critical attention was a video installation that was included in "Freestyle," a group show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, in 2001, curated by Christine Y. Kim and Thelma Golden, the museum's director and lead curator. (In the year before the show, Biggers had been a participant in the museum's well-regarded Artist-in-Residence program.) The video was simple and almost sweet: in a split screen, we see two middle-class birthday parties, not unlike the ones Biggers must remember; one family is black and the other is white.

"What I want to do is code-switch," Biggers told me, sitting on a bench in the Asian wing, looking at a rock garden. He often talks with his hands, drawing invisible figures and gently slashing the air. At the mention of code-switching, he made two circles, one with each index finger, then drew his fingers closer together. "To have there be layers of history and politics," he went on, "but also this heady, arty stuff—inside jokes, black humor—that you might have to take a while to research if you want to really *get it*." The result of this mixture is a beguiling tone that stretches across Biggers's eclectic body of work: an almost placid surface giving way, over time, to a dark, ambiguous joke.



"Sanford's practice is quite nuanced and rich and broad," the curator Eugenie Tsai said, "so you can't just say, 'He does that.' "
Photograph by Eric Helgas for The New Yorker

"I don't want to just necessarily shock," he said. "If shock happens here and there, fine. If spectacle happens here and there, sure. But it's not spectacle for the sake of spectacle."

He recalled a review for the Brooklyn Museum show that included "Lotus." "The writer wanted more David Hammons and Kara Walker," he said. "Which I thought was odd—the idea that I would just do what they do." He rolled his eyes and shrugged. "They weren't ready to see something subdued, or not be *shocked*."

I asked Eugenie Tsai, the curator of that solo show, what accounted for Biggers's relative obscurity. "People like to pigeonhole artists," she said. "And Sanford's practice is quite nuanced and rich and broad, so you can't just say, 'He does *that*.' I think that has worked against him in terms of creating a kind of 'brand' that's easily recognizable."

The review that Biggers complained about was by Ken Johnson, an art critic for the *Times*. A year later, Johnson was the subject of an open letter, signed by a host of artists and critics, accusing him of bias against artists of color and women, citing several previous reviews. Johnson's references to Hammons and Walker do seem clumsy, as though any piece about a new black artist must compare him with other, better-known black artists. Still, Johnson ended on a hopeful note. "Mr. Biggers is beginning to deliver on his promises," he wrote. "His best may be yet to come."

Much of Biggers's work is commissioned, and it is often site-specific. These projects tend to be sculptural and audiovisual installations, and are often large in scale: during the World Trade Center residency, he made a huge, leather-clad Afro pick designed to serve as the headboard for a bed with red satin sheets; for a series of public installations in Chicago, he made a billboard featuring a bright-red set of grinning lips, adapted from an earlier sculpture called "Cheshire."

Between such gigs, Biggers threads together series of smaller pieces, like the "BAM" figures. Partly to break up this routine, and to work in a medium less dependent on the generosity of institutional patrons, he recently began painting on quilts. He first had the idea in 2009, after he was commissioned by Hidden City, an arts organization in Philadelphia, to create work to be shown at the Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church. In the nineteenth century, the church served as a stop along the Underground Railroad. In his research on the church, and on the Railroad, Biggers read about the legend—spurious, as it happens—of quilts that functioned as signposts for slaves, carrying coded messages from one fugitive to the next: "Keep moving," "Turn back," "These people are safe." Biggers had moved away from painting, but in the quilts he saw a painterly challenge—he'd add his own codes to these already coded fields, and in this way double down on the communicative possibilities of visual abstraction. He started collecting old quilts, mostly from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and added his marks.

Biggers's latest quilts made up the bulk of the Boesky show. "Sanford was on my radar, particularly after his impressive show at the Brooklyn Museum, but I assumed he was represented," Marianne Boesky told me in an e-mail. He'd just won the Rome Prize—he'd go to Italy soon after the opening—and, earlier in the year, he'd been an honoree at "Art for Life," the annual fund-raiser for Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation, the art-education nonprofit run by Russell Simmons's art-minded older brother, Danny. Among the other honorees, fêted at a party in the Hamptons, were the pioneering rapper Chuck D and Stephen G. Hill, the former programming director of BET.

Biggers called his show "Selah," after the ancient Hebrew word that appears as a kind of poetic interjection throughout the Psalms, and which is thought to have been a musical notation designating a rest. In the churches I grew up in, a preacher or a teacher would deliver the crux of the lesson, the part designed to reach past narrative and deliver a prick to the listener's heart, and

Untitled, by Sanford Biggers, from 2014. Courtesy the artist

then, softly, say “Selah,” as if to insist: Think about *that* for a second, before we move on. The word, applied to Biggers’s work, might act as an acknowledgement of a stubborn but essential quietness, engineered to demand a pause from the viewer. As images proliferate on Instagram and other social-media feeds, threatening to replace the impulse to visit museums or galleries, Biggers is adamant about the necessity of seeing art in person. For him, a successful piece “sort of stops time,” he said. “Things slow down, they get quiet, and there is literally, to me, a sort of aura, or energy, that comes out of the work.”

On the evening of the “Selah” opening, black-clad gallery-hoppers in gaudy glasses, dreadlocks, and interesting hats crisscrossed the Chelsea sidewalks. Several shows opened in the neighborhood that night, including Kara Walker’s, which had already received several glowing reviews. The exhibition at Boesky was relatively spare, just a dozen or so works across two rooms. There were the quilts, which hung an inch or two away from the blank gallery walls, seeming to float, looking in almost every sense—give or take a neon brushstroke or an angular, clashing new pattern—like exalted versions of ordinary blankets, ready for someone’s bed. One was named “Chorus for Paul Mooney,” after the great standup comedian and Pryor collaborator whose act hinges on barely controlled racial anguish. Near the quilts, multiple video screens showed the “BAM” figures under fire, splintering as the bullets made contact.

The most prominent piece was a large sculpture, also called “Selah,” which takes its shape from one of the “BAM” figures, with an ovoid face and a hollow interior. It is covered in patchwork, the colors of which are darker and more autumnal the closer they get to the floor. Near the top the patches are bright variations on red, white, and blue; the figure’s arms reach upward. Like the smaller figure from which the piece is extrapolated, the sculpture has undergone some kind of violence: one side of the face is exploded, and the surface of the interior is coated with glitter. Later, I spoke with Tsai, who was excited about the show. “It just seemed to touch on everything he can do,” she said.

The gallery filled slowly at first, but soon it was almost impossible to carry on a conversation over the chatter, or to move without bumping into somebody. Every once in a while, the sound of gunfire—from the “BAM” installation—made people wince. A dense, smartphone-wielding crowd formed around a piece called “Khemetstry,” which features fabric patches affixed to a starlike three-dimensional form, hollow in the middle and open like the beak of a Technicolor bird. Something about its geometric complexity made it perfect for social media, Biggers’s preference for physical presence notwithstanding. Viewers jockeyed for angles and aimed their cameras.

Biggers arrived wearing all black, with gold jewelry and gold-rimmed shades. He held court for a while, shaking hands, accepting congratulations. His outfit reminded me of a conversation we’d had a few weeks earlier, about artists and self-presentation. I’d asked if he ever felt pressure to build a persona that somehow mirrored the experience of looking at his work. He’d said, sounding rueful, “I’ve been in so many situations in the last three years, at shows where my work is, and I’ll be with friends. People will come up and start talking to my friends, because my

friends look—they've got these huge fro-hawks, and Mohawks, and big hair, and rings, and all kinds of stuff. And they're, like, 'Oh, I love your work. You're the artist, right?' Because my friends look like artists. And I always end up being overlooked!" Over the summer, when Biggers was honored in the Hamptons, he was introduced by the curator and professor Isolde Brielmaier. "I affectionately like to refer to Sanford as the quiet storm," she said.

Another piece that attracted a crowd at "Selah" was called "Overstood." Four small black figures are positioned a foot or so away from the wall. Stretching from the figures, up and onto the wall, are long shadows rendered in black sequins, culminating in four faces, which Biggers drew with his fingers, flaking over the sequins and exposing their gold undersides. He found the faces while searching through images on Google, which is something of a pastime for him. The source photograph is of the Black Panther chairman Bobby Seale and a man named George Murray, who, when the picture was taken, had just been fired from the faculty of San Francisco State University, after joining the Panthers and advocating that black students take up arms against racist violence. It was 1968. Seale and Murray are flanked by Ben Stewart, the president of San Francisco State's Black Student Union, and an unnamed onlooker. They crowd around a microphone at a press conference decrying Murray's firing and urging protests, which eventually spread across the country. Hundreds of students were arrested, and some were seriously injured. The protests led to the establishment of black-studies departments, including one at San Francisco State.

On his way to the show, Biggers got a text message from a friend, Tangie Murray, the executive director of Rush Philanthropic. George Murray is her father. This was news to Biggers. After she sent George a picture of herself standing next to "Overstood," he and his daughter and Biggers texted back and forth about the image and the work. Later, George collected some of his thoughts and memories in an e-mail. "We took this picture after we had a four-person presentation featuring Bobby and Huey," he wrote, referring to Seale and his Panther co-founder, Huey Newton. "That was the last time the four of us were together. . . . then they locked us all up. First Huey, shortly after that lecture, then me, and then Bobby. Before they got me and Bobby, they got Dr. King permanently!"

At the opening, people took turns posing for pictures in front of "Overstood." Seale, Murray, and Stewart sparkled over their heads, in stark, almost eerie contrast to the more withholding fare elsewhere in the gallery. The little figures on the ground were shaped like the "BAM" figure in the center of the gallery: power objects casting Black Power shadows. The promotional copy for the show had provided some context for "Overstood," and noted that the work might "remind us that the pursuit of social justice and equality remains just as relevant today as it was fifty years ago, and in the fifty years prior and prior to that." But Biggers insisted that he chose the faces before knowing their full history. "I just liked the way they were composed," he said. "That came first."