





# SYNCRETIC IMPROVISATIONS

A Conversation with

## Sanford Biggers

*The Cartographer's Conundrum*, 2012. Piano, pipe organ pipes, repurposed musical instruments, mirrored glass, Plexiglas, found church pews, linoleum tiles, and sound, view of installation at MASS MoCA.



Above: *The Cartographer's Conundrum*, 2012. Detail of installation at MASS MoCA.  
Below: *Blossom*, 2007. Silk steel, wood, MIDI player piano system, and Zoopoxy, approx. 12 x 18 x 15 ft.



BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

While working in Japan, Italy, Germany, Poland, Brazil, and the United States, Sanford Biggers honed his view that art may simultaneously embrace diverse cultures. For example, he sees the tree as a symbol of growth and connectedness to earth, as the natural form under which Buddha found enlightenment, and as slavery's lynching post. Others may see Christian, Greek, and other myths, so the readings are virtually limitless. In *Blossom*, in which a tree breaks out of a piano, Biggers connects arboreal mythologies with the cultural sphere of music and art—from Beuys's felt-covered piano to composers ranging from Beethoven to Fats Waller. For Biggers, forms are multivalent, embodying a range of associations, some negative, some positive. This emphasis on the transformative power of art charms us into realizing that human nature may also change.

Biggers's exhibition schedule is packed, and he wows audiences whether he's showing visual art, performing with his group Moon Medicine, or hosting discussions with celebrities like Marcus Samuelsson and Yassin Bey (formerly Mos Def). On the heels of his 2011 exhibitions—"Sweet Funk: an Introspective" at the Brooklyn Museum and "Cosmic Voodoo Circus" at the SculptureCenter in Long Island City—Biggers opened 2012 with "Moon Medicine" at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee; "Codex," a solo exhibition at the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida (through October 14); and *The Cartographer's Conundrum*, a massive installation at MASS MoCA (through October). Biggers was recently awarded the American Academy's Berlin Prize, and he has received the Greenfield Prize (2010), the William H. Johnson Prize (2009), and many other awards. He currently teaches at Columbia University.

**Jan Garden Castro:** *How did you develop your voice?*  
**Sanford Biggers:** It's a difficult thing but a good exercise for artists to try to locate themselves somewhere in art history. It doesn't have to fall neatly into a chronology or timeline, but there are probably reference points for each artist as he or she develops. I find myself responding to and thinking about post-Minimalism, Dada, John Cage, Carl André, and the notion of consilience. We're in an interesting time. In the '90s, as I was earning an MFA for painting, teachers would give me a hard time about not claiming one specific medium. Luckily, I was at the Art Institute of Chicago, and they had already started breaking down walls; before that, I was told that I couldn't be a serious painter *and* a serious sculptor—that I had to choose one. I think the needs of artistic expression and the means have changed.

A limitation is exactly that. Once you put yourself into a category, it's immediately a limitation, and it

TOP: ART EVANS / BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GRAND ARTS, KANSAS CITY



Above: *Passage*, 2009. Concrete, wave pomade, beeswax, house paint, and spotlight, 42 x 20 x 15 in. Right: *Lotus*, 2007. Steel, etched glass, and colored LEDs, 7 ft. diameter.

can truncate what you're trying to say. Obviously, that is not to take away from artists working in one dedicated medium. I'm not part of a trend—I've always worked in multiple mediums. I find myself feeling like I need to reinvent the wheel quite often. I admire artists like Pierre Huyghe and Kiki Smith for their flexibility. Obviously, there's a material and aesthetic concern, but there's also a process concern. I am trying to reach a point where it's no longer about what a thing looks like—the making of it—but more about how the intent can define or shape the content.

**JGC:** The Cartographer's Conundrum turned a musical composition by your cousin into a huge, multi-disciplinary installation. Was it about spirit rising up?

**SB:** It was consciousness rising up. It was a formal improvisation responding to John Biggers's composition. He uses African instruments (kalimba, marimba, and African drums), but I have Western instruments (saxophone, piano, clarinet). It's important to look at John Biggers's work in the framework of Afrofuturism. It expands those concepts of looking at the history of the African diaspora, reinterpreting it, and reinvestigating it through the lenses of technology, science fiction, and African historical resources—scholarship by non-Europeans like Ivan Van Sertima and Cheikh Anta Diop, who have different information and alternative accounts of history. There's a lot of referential content, but much of the installation is related to the site's architecture and how to engage it with light, sound, and pattern.





Right and detail: *Bittersweet the Fruit*, 2002. Tree, LCD monitor, single-channel video, headphones, and glass bottles, dimensions variable.

**JGC:** You've described your approach as "syncretic." How do you define that?

**SB:** I believe that you're referring to my conversation with Saul Williams in 2006. We were talking about the idea of Afronomics, or the value and offshoots of African diasporic cultural production. The context of that conversation was finding new ways to contextualize those things for our contemporary needs—cultural, spiritual, philosophical, aesthetic.

**JGC:** Why have you chosen to focus on these things?

**SB:** I think it's important to note that though that was the focus of a lot of my work shown last year, particularly in "Sweet Funk," my 10-year survey at the Brooklyn Museum, there was a personal need to fill in some historical gaps and an intellectual need to reify what I consider the vast inspiration that the aesthetic world has received from cultural products of the African diaspora. If you go into Fauvism, Cubism, Dada, and Fluxus happenings, of course their origins are not strictly an African thing, but these are notions that have been in African diasporic arts forever. There aren't those delineations between ceremony, ritual, the griotic tradition, spoken word, sound, talking drums, and dance as communication. These are all coded forms used in the African diaspora for more than a surface level of entertainment, and they have been researched and adapted by many European and non-African peoples. For me, it was to bridge a gap, to say, well, the Cubists were inspired by looking at African masks, among other things, and developed this form of expression that has been revered since. What if someone from that tradition were to come back and re-approach Cubism? Or, more importantly, for me, what about Duchamp? How do you look back at Postmodernism and find ways to use some of these offshoots of the African diaspora? A lot of people have dealt with this question in their own ways, but as an artist, I wanted to contribute my voice.

**JGC:** Is your imagery personal? Does it address the complexities of African American identity?



**SB:** I can't speak for the larger framework of African American identity, but I can speak about it on a personal level. Yes, all those references are deeply personal. I grew up with a lot of these images: the photograph of the slave with welts on his back produced by lashings and whippings directly translates into how

Installation view of “Cosmic Voodoo Circus,” with (left) *Cheshire (on tilt)*, 2011, vinyl, 27 x 11 ft.; (right) *Jóia Do Orixá*, 2011, polystyene, aqua resin, raffia, skateboard wheels, steel, LED, and tulle, 23 x 8 x 8 ft.; and (foreground) *Constellation 4.0*, 2011, mirrored glass, dimensions variable.

I used Japanese bondage rope when I bound the main character of the *Shuffle* video to the tree. I was basically remixing those images—taking them from the sepia tones, the black and white, and the postcards of lynching—and modernizing them with bright colors, different materials, and other cultural references that complicate the historical images.

**JGC:** *Could we discuss some themes in “Sweet Funk”?*

**SB:** “Sweet Funk” was a thematic introspective featuring *Blossom*, a piano growing out of a tree. Another piano piece, *Kalimba*, consists of an upright piano cut in half and rotated, with a tall wall between the pieces. Both halves can still play, so two people can sit down, play a duet, and walk away without having seen each other.

**JGC:** *Does this refer to racism or the divides between people?*

**SB:** No, the idea is to communicate with a stranger strictly through music and vibrations between a wall. It can be an anonymous duet. “Sweet Funk” also included *Passage*, a found concrete bust of Martin Luther King, Jr. Its shoulder span is about four and a half feet, and the height is around three feet. I discovered it in a junkyard in Virginia. Using black hair pomade, I made a mohawk on King’s head that goes down his forehead and down his lips. A spotlight on the bust casts a shadow of Barack Obama on an adjacent wall.

**JGC:** *Its meaning?*

**SB:** It was made during the inauguration; it is about passing on the torch, the legacy of black leadership, and humanitarianism. There is also a reference to the Middle Passage of the North Atlantic slave trade.

**JGC:** *Your glass piece Lotus (2007) also refers to the Middle Passage.*

**SB:** From a distance, *Lotus* looks like a mandala or even the iris of an eye, but when you get closer, it’s a diagram of a slave ship showing how they placed the human cargo to maximize space. It’s a



transcendent experience related to the impact of slavery on citizens, both black and white, in America. It’s a slow reveal: you can see viewers’ bodies on the other side as you’re walking by. It implies everybody’s relationship to slavery.

**JGC:** *What else was in “Sweet Funk”?*

**SB:** The *Cheshire* video (2007), which started in the Headlands outside of San Francisco, was included. Basically, I set up a camera and video tripod in front of various trees in



*The Bridge is Over (biddybyebye)*, 2006. Plastic and metal, 24 x 41 in.

the woods, and then asked some friends—a businessman, a lawyer, an artist, and a disc jockey—to dress up, climb a tree, hang out there, and then come back down. The idea was to have them rest comfortably on a branch like the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. The further up they go, the more alone they are. This is a metaphor for survival, assimilation, and climbing the corporate ladder. Interestingly, just like the Cheshire Cat, which disappears, these black men are invisible men in the Ellisonian sense. You can think of tons of other meanings.

**JGC:** *You play the piano in some of your videos, starting with Bittersweet the Fruit (2002). You said that this was a memorial to James Byrd, Jr., who was brutally murdered in Jasper, Texas, and that the image of your nude body seen from behind sitting in the woods and playing an upright piano represented your “hope to reclaim nature and the African American male’s entitlement to be in nature without the fear of torture or death.”*

**SB:** My body was used to present an archetype and a contrasting visual to the images of tortured black bodies found on lynching photographs and postcards.

**JGC:** *The works in “Cosmic Voodoo Circus” at the SculptureCenter were more flamboyant.*

**SB:** Thematically and conceptually, I was using the pomp and bombast of conflating voodoo, carnival, and the circus. People who practice Vodoun take offense at the Hollywood “voodoo” version. You see a more authentic version in Maya Deren’s film *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. I was also playing with monumentality. The 23-foot-high girl, *Jóia do Orixá*, and the 27-foot billboard of the Cheshire grin on its side were playing with the height of the space. I used the floor, the ceiling, sound—I used the whole space. At the SculptureCenter, I also started to experiment with the star mirrors.

**JGC:** *Could you talk about living in Italy, teaching in Japan, your interactions with Buddhism, and how those experiences have affected your work?*

**SB:** I studied in Italy for a year as an undergrad. Aside from the beauty of Florence, one thing that stood out for me was the perspective I gained on the U.S. by seeing it from outside—not only that, but also how people perceived me on the streets of Italy. This was during the first Gulf War (1991), and there was an anti-U.S. sentiment in Italy at the time. I found that I could sometimes pass for African and would not get the same flack as when I was with a group of recognizably American students. It made me see myself in a different way.

That persisted in Japan, probably due to where I was mentally at the time. I was meeting like-minded Japanese people; on the surface, we would seem to have very little in common, but I met some of my closest friends while I was there. We had deep, deep connections and long conversations about everything from food to music to fashion, Japanese and American politics, and ideas of inclusion and exclusion, a very important dynamic in Japan.

The thing that struck me first about Buddhism in Japan was the concept of the middle way—a way of going through life without falling to either extreme, negative or positive, taking the good with the bad. Growing up as an African American in the U.S., I had learned to travel the middle way early on, because that’s the way of survival and matriculation through American society. Obviously, this is not exclusive to black people; anyone who’s not of the dominant culture must learn this skill.

**JGC:** *We began by talking about artists locating themselves in art history. Where do you see yourself going?*

**SB:** I want to push the interdisciplinary aspect of my work further. I enjoy how the objects relate to the videos, performances, and dialogues surrounding them. The performances, like the one that I did at the Hammer, are a way of working that feels free and improvised. I often think of the collaborative work that I’ve done—the first dance floor I did in New York was with Squirm, a.k.a. David Ellis and the Rock Steady crew. My piece for the Whitney Biennial (2002) was done with my friend Jennifer Zacken. It was a split-screen video of my childhood growing up in Los Angeles and her childhood growing up Jewish in Connecticut and New York—and how similar they were. This is my way of trying to reclaim that nimble, collaborative instinct when musicians perform—riffing, inspiring, and pushing each other forward.

The Moon Medicine performances are centered largely around the VJ—the video jockey who has all my videos from the last 12 years and his own video content and a console where he can mix real time, special effects, recombine video, play things backwards, change the color, and solarize. He can do anything he wants by twisting a couple of knobs, and we as a group have to respond musically. We have some forms that we’ve rehearsed, but once the video starts playing, we have to respond to that, giving each other eye signals across the stage. There’s a lot of vitality and



Right and detail: *Prayer Rug*, 2005. Colored sand poured on floor, 40 x 20 ft.

life in that kind of collaboration, and the notion that it can't be contained appeals to me.

That was in my mind when we were doing the sand piece *Prayer Rug* (at Triple Candie, West Harlem, 2005). This was a 20-by-40-foot prayer rug influenced by a sixth-century Afghan prayer rug but rendered in colored sand poured on the floor. It was highly intricate and detailed and then at the end of the exhibition, it was swept up in a matter of minutes. The piece is about memory—how viewers can be engaged by this object, but the only thing that exists is their mental snapshot, which changes and becomes either more neutral or grander over time. Performance works in that way, too. That's why there's such a problem with recording and documenting performance. You can allude to it, but you never get its true energy.

The quilts that I've been doing in a formal, traditional way also deal with this issue. The quilt by its material nature is a syncretic device. It's a consilience of material, of human effort, of different references per stitch, per pattern, and per



combination of elements. I become a further collaborator by taking repurposed quilts and drawing or painting on them—beautification, modification, and defacement of form and history at once. Quilts are loaded, and that allows me to play, to make freeform drawings.

**JGC:** As a teacher at Virginia Commonwealth, Harvard, and Columbia, you have met some of today's brightest sculpture students. How do you see your role as a teacher?

**SB:** I don't claim to have all the answers, but I try to help people ask better questions of themselves and their colleagues. Dissecting information is one of the more helpful things I can do. I take some time to develop a dialogue and rapport with my students. Anyone can teach students how to use a bandsaw, but it's more essential to teach them to use their minds in unlimited ways.

*Art historian Jan Garden Castro is a Contributing Editor for Sculpture.*