

Brooklyn Museum

Teacher Resource Packet

Sanford Biggers: Sweet Funk—An Introspective

September 23, 2011–January 8, 2012



Sanford Biggers: *Sweet Funk—An Introspective*



About the Artist

Sanford Biggers, who was born in 1970, grew up in South Central Los Angeles and was influenced by the prints that his parents had in their home, including images by important American artists like Elizabeth Catlett, Charles White, John Biggers, and Ernie Barnes. Biggers recalls, “It was largely figurative and Afro-centric images which were influential for me as well as the graffiti that I would see on the streets of Los Angeles and in the train yards.”* As a teenager, he discovered the Surrealist paintings of René Magritte, Salvador Dalí, and Max Ernst; he also developed an interest in Buddhist philosophy and spirituality. Over the past ten years, Biggers has pursued these diverse interests, exploring the concept of cultural syncretism—the attempt to reconcile contrary beliefs, often while melding practices of different schools of thought—by using his art to combine image, sculpture, video, and music.

About the Exhibition

Sanford Biggers: Sweet Funk—An Introspective presents thirteen artworks by Biggers. In different ways, they challenge and reinterpret the divergent symbols and legacies that inform contemporary America.



For example, the sculpture *Cheshire* (2008) refers to two contrary things at once: the smile of the cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, and the caricatured grin associated with racist “blackface” performances by actors in minstrel shows in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Lotus (2007) combines conflicting references to Buddhism and to the era of the enslavement of African Americans. The shape of the lotus blossom, an important symbol of transcendence in Buddhism, is etched in glass; but each petal is made from a diagram of human bodies placed in the cargo hold of an eighteenth-century slave ship.



Description of the Artwork

Blossom (2007) is a large sculpture consisting of a fabricated, life-size tree growing through a baby grand piano, lifting it off the ground as branches stretch upward. The tree has a thick, knobbed

trunk that protrudes from a mound of dirt on the floor. The trunk has pierced the frame and case of the piano, pushing the lid open and upending the instrument so that one leg is raised, while the other two still touch the soil. A piano bench lies toppled on its side. The tree's sinuous branches reach toward the ceiling and are covered with green silk leaves.

Though it has been damaged by the tree's "growth," the piano has the sheen of a new instrument: the keys show no wear and the wooden body is smoothly polished; though broken, it is not splintered.

There is also an audio component to the installation: it performs the song "Strange Fruit" as an instrumental. The opening notes are clearly stated, played in **octaves**, doubling the melody in high and low pitches and lending it a rich, open sound. The rest of the song is performed with **rubato**, varying the rhythm of the written notes for greater expressiveness. The **melody** line, the recognizable tune, is interpreted freely, with various embellishments between the phrases, encompassing practically the entire range of the piano.

About the Artwork

Blossom incorporates references to a range of artistic and cultural traditions, which Biggers discussed in a 2009 interview:

Blossom was a response to the story of the Jena 6 in Louisiana a few years ago. I am sure that you remember the racial conflict that started when a black student asked for permission to sit under a tree that was normally occupied by white students. The following day there were nooses hung from all over that tree. The tree is an elemental form that I have used several times in work before; I find the associations that can be generated from it so lyrical. In the East, underneath the Bodhi tree is where the Buddha finds enlightenment. In the West, lynching is a vestige of our collective American history. On the one side, you have the tree of life, basically, and on the other side you have the tree of death. Certain African cultures see the tree as the crossroads to the afterlife, yet a third perspective. I wanted to create an artwork that was also an experience, at once tangible, tactile, and audible. Blossom is a life-sized tree constructed in the gallery with a piano emerging from it. The piano has been converted into a player piano, and being a musician myself, I programmed it to play my own improvisation of "Strange Fruit."

"Strange Fruit" was originally a poem written by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish high-school teacher from the Bronx, about the lynching of two black men. He published the poem in 1936 in *The New York Teacher*, a union magazine, and later set it to music. The American jazz singer Billie Holiday first performed the song in 1939 at Café Society in Greenwich Village, New York's first integrated nightclub. It became an important protest song.

Questions for Viewing

What do you notice about this work of art?

What different materials can you find? Which materials can be found in nature? Which are synthetic?

A symbol is something that stands for something else. Artists often use symbols in their work. What do you see here that may be a symbol? What might it represent?

Sanford Biggers often selects objects carrying multiple cultural references in order to explore the relationship between them. In your opinion, what is the relationship between the tree and piano?

Listen to the music that is part of the installation (also available online at www.sanfordbiggers.com/2007/blossom-video.html).

Create a list of words that describe the mood of the music. Can those same words be used to describe the mood created by the artwork as a whole? Why or why not?

The poem that inspired this music is called “Strange Fruit.” It was written in the 1930s and refers to racially motivated lynchings of African American people in the United States from the late eighteenth to the twentieth century. It soon became popular as a protest song. Why do you think the artist chose to play an instrumental version of the song in the exhibition instead of one that includes the lyrics?

If you were to give this artwork a title, what would it be? The artist decided to call it *Blossom*, which means to flourish or develop or flower. Is the actual title similar or different from your idea? Why do you think Biggers chose the title *Blossom*?

Activities

Social Studies

Biggers created *Blossom* partly in response to the story of the Jena 6, a group of African American students who faced racial discrimination at their high school and by local authorities in Louisiana in 2006–7. Select a newspaper or magazine article that highlights the Jena 6 or a current event that has importance to you. Read the article and discuss it with a partner. Select two objects that could represent an aspect of the event. Discuss the relationship between the two objects and how they could be combined in a meaningful way. Create a simple sketch and plan for creating an artwork that combines the two objects. Next, identify a piece of music that could further reflect that event. Finally, share your artwork with others. Invite them to discuss the current event and identify some of your choices as an artist.

Language Arts/Social Studies

Inspired by a number of cultural influences, Biggers wrote his own arrangement for the song “Strange Fruit” as another way of bringing important events from United States history into his artwork. Identify an event or person in United States history that interests you and express the story or an aspect of that person’s life through song. Research the event or person thoroughly, identifying key players, actions, and points of view that are essential to telling the story. Describe the mood of the story (joyous, melancholy, victorious, proud, etc.) and select an existing song with a melody or instrumentation that complements the mood. The existing song might be a lullaby, children’s music, pop, hip-hop, or country music. Once you have selected the appropriate melody, listen to it carefully and write new lyrics based on the research you conducted. Use descriptive words, names, dates, and key terms that will help your audience remember the story. Perform your song for your classmates and friends.

Performing Arts—Music

Sanford Biggers once said, “Just as a jazz musician may cover a musical standard, artists often ‘cover’ art historical and visual standards as well. Of course, in both cases they must claim it for themselves by changing it.” The way in which a piece of music is adapted for different instruments and/or voices is known as an **arrangement**. Listen to a recording of Billie Holiday singing “Strange Fruit.” Notice how it is arranged. How does the **melody** (the series of pitches, or notes, that creates a recognizable tune) connect to the **lyrics** (the words of a song)?

Now listen to the instrumental arrangement written by Biggers (available online at www.sanfordbiggers.com/2007/blossom-video.html). How does the melody in his arrangement connect to *Blossom*? Biggers says that his version of “Strange Fruit” “follows the basic chord progression of the song but with different alliteration and more of an improvised melody. If you are really familiar with the song, you can catch it, but at the same time it sounds more like a searching and elegiac improvisation of the original.”

In the chart to the right, read the definition for each musical term. Listen to both arrangements—Biggers’ and Billie Holiday’s—again. Focus on the similarities and differences you notice. Use the chart to record your observations.

Next, listen to the arrangement again. Notice the tempo, instrumentation, dynamics, and mood. On a sheet of paper, respond to what you hear by creating marks with a pen or pencil that symbolize these four musical elements. After the song has finished, take some time to complete your rendering. Repeat these steps for the second arrangement. Compare the renderings on each sheet and discuss the ways in which you illustrated tempo, instrumentation, dynamics, and mood.

Musical Term	Similarities	Differences
<p>Tempo is the pace of the music; how fast or how slow it is played. By listening to the rhythm, or the beat of the music, you can tell whether the tempo is fast or slow. Hint: If you can't find the rhythm, try clapping your hands as you listen to the beat of the music.</p> <p>Instrumentation is the instruments (including voices) that are selected to perform a piece of music. Any song can be arranged to have a different instrumentation.</p> <p>Dynamics refer to how loudly or softly a piece is played. The dynamics may change many times throughout a piece. For example, a piece may begin very softly (<i>pianissimo</i>) and then get loud (<i>forte</i>). Some pieces have the same dynamic for the entire song.</p> <p>Mood is the emotional character of a piece of music. Sometimes the tempo, instrumentation, and dynamics affect the mood of a piece. Other factors also contribute, such as the harmony (several notes played at once).</p>		

Resources

<http://www.sanfordbiggers.com/>

Sanford Biggers' professional website includes resources on his life and work, including a biography, images of his artworks, a list of his current and upcoming exhibitions, and a bibliography of interviews and articles.

<http://newarttv.com/Sanford+Biggers>.

This 2009 video presents Sanford Biggers in his Harlem studio discussing his work, influences, and artistic training.

PBS, *Independent Lens*: "Strange Fruit"

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/film.html>

This website offers background information about the PBS documentary *Strange Fruit*, which explores the history and legacy of the song made famous by Billie Holiday. Reference materials highlighting the significance of the song within the context of race relations in America include the original poem, a clip of Billie Holiday in performance, and an interview with the filmmaker. Educators will also find links to relevant articles, books, and websites.

This packet was written by Keonna Hendrick and Kristin Scarola, Senior Museum Educators, with assistance from Alexa Fairchild, School Programs Manager, and Eugenie Tsai, John and Barbara Vogelstein Curator of Contemporary Art.

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Illustrations:

Cover and page 7: Sanford Biggers (American, b.1970). *Blossom* (detail), 2007. Steel, zoopoxy, silk leaves, wood, piano w/MIDI system, piano bench. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Klein Arts

Page 2: Sanford Biggers, 2010. (Photo: Zachary Lerner)

Page 2: Sanford Biggers (American, b. 1970). *Cheshire*, 2008. Aluminum, plexiglas, LEDs, timer. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Klein Arts

Page 2: Sanford Biggers (American, b. 1970). *Lotus*, 2007. Etched glass. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Klein Arts

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