



## Sanford Biggers/MATRIX 197

### Psychic Windows

April 7 – June 2, 2002

MATRIX

University of California  
Berkeley Art Museum

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“Our interactions with artworks are subjective and associative, relying on our previous knowledge and experience of the materials and concepts presented. There are several points of entry in my work, and once inside, other interpretations arise. I hope

No one wants to be identified by an essentialist and reductivist notion of identity, yet the placement of artists and their work in a historical context is relevant. Thelma Golden, Deputy Director for Exhibitions and Programs at the Studio Museum in Harlem, synthesizes the development of “black art” from “the vital political activism of the 1960s to the focused, often essentialist, Black Arts Movement of the 1970s to the theory-driven multiculturalism of the 1980s to the late globalist expansion of the late 1990s.” She sets up art-historical generations, locating artists such as Ellen Gallagher, Gary Simmons, Carrie Mae Weems, and Fred Wilson, among others, as the heirs of Robert Colescott, David Hammons, and Adrian Piper.<sup>2</sup> MATRIX artist Sanford Biggers is part of a new art-historical generation. Biggers creates visually arresting, conceptually imaginative, and poignant works that are unique in combining African American ethnography and hip-hop music with elements of Buddhism and African spirituality.

Biggers’s work is informed by African American installation artist, performance artist, and sculptor David Hammons. Hammons’s utilization of materials (such as hair, foods, bottles) that were once in direct physical contact with black people strongly resonated with similar artistic practices and religious beliefs among West and Central African peoples. Thus, as a creator of “African American power objects,” Hammons inadvertently joined his more conservative black colleagues in their quest to recreate an African sensibility in American art.<sup>3</sup>

The work of Betye Saar can also be seen as a precedent for Biggers. Saar, using discarded bric-a-brac, family mementos, and other ephemera, conjured spirits, evoked memory, and invoked black cultural metaphors that were often ironic, but did so with lyricism and empathy. Additionally, African American painter John Biggers, who may be a relative, influenced the artist. John Biggers “discovered” a modernist impulse in West African art in the 1950s, which inspired European and American artists to travel to Africa, reimagine the continent, and reconceptualize their work.<sup>4</sup> Biggers also cites as an influence the work of 1960s Brazilian sculptor Hélio Oiticica—in particular its insistence on interactivity.

Biggers draws from a wide variety of sources. His intent is to explore the experience of transcendence while examining racial stereotypes, 1970s process art, race politics, urban culture, technology, and black history. Biggers’s process is similar to Hammons’s in their common use of found objects and interest in the

COVER: Mandala V, 2001; rubber tile, Formica, scuff marks, mirrored ball; dimensions variable; courtesy of The Project, New York.



discarded or overlooked; they deviate in content. While Hammons concentrates on a critical commentary of race relations, Sanford Biggers, like John Biggers, employs African art, language, and culture in a semiromanticized manner. There is often a sense of ironic humor in Biggers’s work that can be found in the work of Hammons and of Saar, with whom he also shares an interest in the mystical.

Psychic Windows, Biggers’s MATRIX exhibition, consists of five works that provide a sensory experience when activated by viewer participation. In Poteau Mitan (2002), visitors step onto a circular platform inscribed with a geometric pattern and see their reflection mirrored infinitely. A low-tech attempt at dimensional transformation, this work builds on Biggers’s earlier mandala floors such as Mandala of the B-Bodhisattva #2 (2000), a sixteen-by-sixteen-foot floor piece assembled from brightly colored rubber tiles reminiscent of 1960s public school flooring. Previous mandala dancefloors were silk-screened with silhouettes of the Indian god Shiva, Lord of the Dance. With David Ellis, Biggers created an aerial video of Mandala of the B-Bodhisattva #2 being used during the Battle of the Boroughs, an annual break-dance competition held in the Bronx. In this video, one sees how the acrobatic moves of the dancers echo the circular designs of the mandala.

In Tibetan Buddhism, a mandala is an imaginary palace that is contemplated during meditation. Each object in the palace has significance, representing some aspect of wisdom or reminding the meditator of some guiding principle. Mandalas are usually displayed in two dimensions, and are commonly made from paper, textiles, or colored sand. Since each grain of sand in the sand mandala is charged with the blessings of the ritual process, the entire mandala embodies a vast store of spiritual energy. It is said that a person who simply sees a mandala may feel peace on many levels.<sup>5</sup>

In Poteau Mitan Biggers transforms his use of the mandala, sometimes defined as a doorway between heaven and earth, from a viewed surface into a physical experience, effectively allowing the viewer the sensation of being inside of the mandala. Placed at the entrance to the MATRIX Gallery, Poteau Mitan serves as a physical and metaphorical point of entry into the multisensory space the artist creates. The title Poteau Mitan describes a column used in Yoruba and Voudun rituals. In these ceremonies, people dance around a central column that acts as a portal, which allows spirits to come in and inhabit the bodies of the dancers. Similar

Mandala of Co-Option, 2001; resin, lighted mirrored turntables, mixed media; five figures, each 8 1/2 x 6 x 5 inches; courtesy of the artist.



to the dance floors Biggers created for the breakdancers, the floor of Poteau Mitan is a place for the viewer to enter, move around, and possibly be transported to a spiritual place.

In Cosmic Slop (2002) Biggers creates a portal to yet another dimension. It is a reductivist version of a mandala, one stripped of referential forms. As with Poteau Mitan, there is an inherent dichotomy between the mundane material Biggers uses in Cosmic Slop—floor tiles from Metropolitan Transit Authority<sup>6</sup> buses—and the notion of transcendence. His use of an overlooked and trod-upon material evokes the Buddhist concept of wabi-sabi.<sup>7</sup> Wabi-sabi represents a comprehensive Japanese worldview or aesthetic system. Briefly explained, wabi-sabi is the location of profundity in the mundane, and recognition of the beauty of rusticity.<sup>8</sup> Wabi-sabi is the beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete, modest, and humble.<sup>9</sup> Through the use of a simple material and a simple action—cutting the tiles and affixing them to the floor and the corners of the wall—Biggers posits that beauty and knowledge exist in simple gestures.

Bounce, Rock, Skate, Roll (2000) is a series of circles within and upon each other. The exterior ring, made of aluminum bent into a large circle, is partially filled with discarded roller-skate, skateboard, and shopping-cart wheels, some of which belonged to the artist. The sculpture is named after a disco skating song by the Vaughn Mason Trio that was popular in the early 1980s. The song was later inducted into hip-hop repertoire and is often heard during the portion of a DJ session dedicated to classic hits. Conceptually, Bounce, Rock, Skate, Roll is a power object based on an African memory board called a Lukasa. Lukasas are used by the Luba peoples of the Democratic Republic of Congo as part of an initiation into their Budge society.<sup>10</sup> The memory boards are covered with beads and cowrie shells used to signify spirit capitals, migratory routes, and chieftaincies. To those who can read them they serve as a type of map that charts the journeys of a king and indicates the location of sacred lakes and trees. The wheels in Bounce, Rock, Skate, Roll are a record of contemporary American transportation and migration.

In Kalimba II, a small piano is cut in half and rotated and reconstructed so that two players face each other—except that their view is blocked by the wall Biggers has constructed between them. Composing with someone you can hear and feel (through the vibration) yet not see and may not know provides a sense of

Om (ॐ), 2001; installation view—Yerba Buena Center for the Arts; colored sand poured loose on floor; dimensions variable; courtesy of the artist.



disjointed interaction. Playing is further challenged by the size of the piano and the notes, which are limited to a single register. The piano functions as both a personal and historical object for Biggers. The artist grew up playing the piano, which, he notes, was derived from the Kalimba, an African precedent westernized when it was brought to Europe. And while the piano is the leading tool of composition it remains a percussion instrument, percussion being a primary African contribution to music. Here Biggers offers a physical place for tangible, if challenging, interaction. It is an allegorical opportunity to come together to fuse that which has been severed and thereby create harmony. Through fusion of disparate elements, Biggers is suggesting unity as a noble and enlightened goal.

Sanford Biggers creates African American power objects. What he believes about their power is left unsaid. One can sense that Biggers's objects communicate a profound knowledge regarding the inherent interconnectedness of all spirituality as well as of all spiritual people. By combining Indian gods with B-boys and the principles of the Japanese tea ceremony with African tourist masks made in China and sold in Harlem, he is offering a clue about a concentricity in contemporary society. The generosity inherent in his objects is also a form of shared knowledge. As the Dalai Lama explained regarding the power of the mandala, "It is a way of planting a seed, and the seed will have karmic effect."<sup>11</sup>

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson  
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

<sup>1</sup> Artist in conversation with the author in the artist's studio in New York City, February 20, 2001. <sup>2</sup> Thelma Golden, "Post..." in *Freestyle* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), p. 14. <sup>3</sup> Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 155. <sup>4</sup> Ibid. <sup>5</sup> The descriptions of the mandala and its effect are derived from information included in two websites: www.tibet.com/Buddhism and www.graphics.cornell.edu/online/mandala. <sup>6</sup> The New York City transportation agency. <sup>7</sup> Artist in conversation with the author in the artist's studio in New York City, February 20, 2001. <sup>8</sup> Ibid. <sup>9</sup> phpwiki.sourceforge.net/phpwiki/WabiSabi. <sup>10</sup> Robin Herbst, "Uncommon Directions," www.neh.fed.us/news/humanities. <sup>11</sup> www.tibet.com/Buddhism.

Mandala of the B-Bodhisatva #2, 2000 (with David Ellis); performance view—Battle of the Boroughs; rubber tile, Formica; 16 x 16 feet; courtesy of the artist.



Sanford Biggers was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1970. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1992. He attended the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1996, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine, in 1998. Biggers received his Master of Fine Arts degree from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999. He lives and works in New York City.

#### Selected Solo Exhibitions

2002  
"Afro Temple," Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX (upcoming)  
1997  
"Gomi no Tendankai," Cabaret Mago, Nagoya, Japan  
1996  
"In the Mind's Eye," Wight Gallery, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA

#### Selected Group Exhibitions

2002  
"Whitney Biennial 2002," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY  
2001  
"Freestyle," The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY  
"Zoning," The Project, New York, NY  
"One Planet Under a Groove," The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, NY  
"Fresh: The Altoids Curiously Strong Collection 1998-2000," New Museum for Contemporary Art, New York, NY  
"Rapper's Delight," Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA  
"Portland Museum of Art Biennial," Portland, ME  
"2001 Emerging Artist Fellowship Exhibition," Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, NY  
"Group of Four," NFA Space, Chicago, IL  
2000  
"Artists-In-Residence 2000," The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY  
"Clockwork 2000: P.S.1 National and International Studio Program 1999-2000," Clocktower Gallery, New York, NY  
"Confluence," Five Myles Art Space, Brooklyn, NY  
"Culture of Class," Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD  
"Full Serve," Rove, New York, NY  
1998  
"Altered Objects," Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, IL

Cosmic Slop, 2002; rubber, Formica; dimensions variable; courtesy of the artist.



1997  
"Bank Holiday," Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME

#### Selected Catalogues and Books

Artists-In-Residence 2000 (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2000).  
Clockwork 2000: P.S.1 National and International Studio Program 1999-2000 (Long Island City, NY: P.S.1 Contemporary Arts Center, 2000).  
Freestyle (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001).  
One Planet Under a Groove (New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2001).  
Portland Museum of Art Biennial (Portland, ME: Portland Museum of Art, 2001).  
Whitney Biennial 2002 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2002).

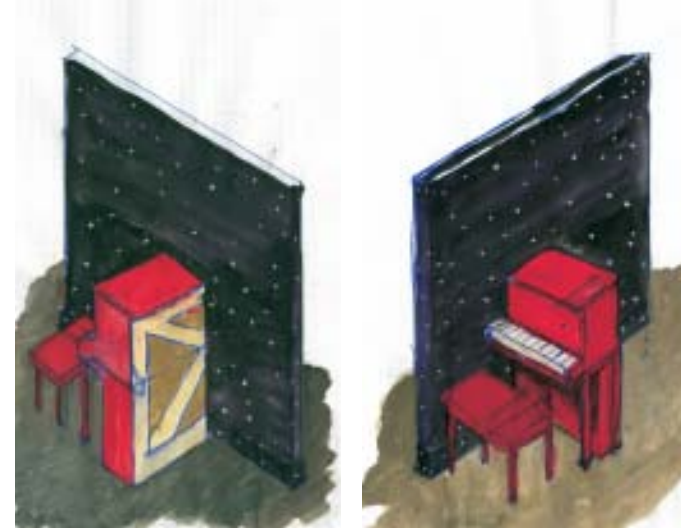
#### Selected Periodicals

Anderson, Tomika. "Art For Heart's Sake," *Vibe*, April 2002, p. 70.  
Berwick, Carly. "Power Spins," *ARTnews*, November 2000, p. 224.  
Cook, Dara. "Players/Rookies 2001," *Vibe*, September 2001, p. 182.  
Cotter, Holland. "Picking Out Distinctive Voices in a Pluralistic Chorus," *New York Times*, August 18, 2000, p. E31.  
—. "A Full Studio Museum Show Starts with 28 Young Artists and a Shoehorn," *New York Times*, May 11, 2001, p. E36.  
Erikson, Emily. "Color Coded," *Artforum*, May 2001, p. 52.  
Fowler, Gabe. "Gang of Four," *New Art Examiner*, November/December 2001, p. 87.  
Gioni, Massimiliano. "New York Cut Up," *Flash Art*, July-September 2001, p. 72.  
Girst, Thomas. "Power Enormous: The Art of Sanford Biggers," *NY Arts*, April 2001, p. 24.  
Griffin, Tim. "Race Matters," *Time Out New York*, May 24, 2001, pp. 55-56.  
Jackson, Brian Keith. "Dharma on the Dancefloor," *Paper*, September 2000, p. 43.  
Robinson, Knox. "The Show," *The Fader*, Winter 2001/02, p. 48.  
Saltz, Jerry. "Post Black," *The Village Voice*, May 22, 2001, p. 51.  
Stevens, Mark. "The Studio Museum in Harlem's 'Freestyle': More about art than about race," *New York Magazine*, May 21, 2001, p. 84.  
The Charlie Rose Show (television interview on PBS), June 8, 2001.

#### Work in MATRIX

**Bounce, Rock, Skate, Roll, 2000**  
Aluminum, fire hose, rubber, and polyurethane wheels  
30 x 30 x 6 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

Bounce, Rock, Skate, Roll, 2000; Aluminum, fire hose, rubber, and polyurethane wheels; 30 x 30 x 6 inches; courtesy of the artist.



**Mandala of Co-option, 2001**  
Resin, lighted mirrored turntables  
5 figures, each 8 1/2 x 6 x 5 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

**Cosmic Slop, 2002**  
Rubber, Formica  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist

**Kalimba II, 2002**  
Bisected piano, mixed-media installation  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist

**Poteau Mitan, 2002**  
Rubber tiles, Formica, plywood, and mirrors  
120 x 120 inches (floor), 120 x 120 inches (ceiling)  
Courtesy of the artist

**Please Note:**  
MATRIX Curatorial Assistant Adrienne Gagnon will lead a walkthrough of Sanford Biggers/MATRIX 197 **Psychic Windows** on Thursday, April 18, at 12:15 pm.

The MATRIX Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum is made possible by the generous endowment gift of Phyllis Wattis.

Additional donors to the MATRIX Program include the UAM Council MATRIX Endowment, Ann M. Hatch, Eric McDougall, Glenn and April Bucksbaum, and Chris Vroom and Illya Szilak.

The museum wishes to thank [place holder: The Peter Norton Family Foundation?] Wanda Kownacki and John Holton for their support of Sanford Biggers/MATRIX 197 **Psychic Windows**.

Special thanks to Rick Smith of the Piano Exchange, Glen Cove, NY.

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Study for Kalimba II, 2002; watercolor on paper; 5 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches; courtesy of the artist.

