Sanford Biggers
Madrigal

A Percent-for-Art Commission
Edward and Joyce Linde Music Building

MIT List Visual Arts Center

Madrigal: A Visual Tonic

Darla Migan

Sanford Biggers invites us to be rhythmically present for *Madrigal* (2024), his new Percent-for-Art commission outside of the new Edward and Joyce Linde Music Building. Standing on the horizon of West Campus and rising seventeen feet high, the vertical sculpture is composed of variegated polyhedrons in a panoply of colors.

Madrigal works like a sundial, or a metronome in which we become its meter. At first, isosceles faces and stacked sections of alloyed aluminum in bright colors visually beckon. Its disparate arrangements of patterned prismatic shapes invite sweeping and staccato motions as we experiment with navigating around the object. Recessed shelves of implied cubes form an array of conjoined cubbyholes that appear to both rotate and expand or to collapse flatly into two-dimensional trompe-l'œil at various heights and angles. As we seek to synthesize the arrangement of patterns, we can only comprehend a few degrees of the structure's circumference at a time. It is through this movement that we are activated, as performers arriving at and departing from a spontaneous proscenium or outdoor theater—not unlike members of a traditional madrigal.

The musical term "madrigal" refers to a choral form from the Italian Renaissance that enjoyed a popular secular revival in eighteenth-century England. A madrigal achieves rhythmic balancing by interlacing singers' unique parts performed as a group. In Biggers's *Madrigal,* geometric blocks are installed at intervals or stages as angles protrude up and out from the ground, their uniquely painted patterns changing at paced intervals that vary (if only slightly) from those on a neighboring surface. For example, repeating parallel bands of yellow, artichoke green, sky blue, orange, and light pink are offset by dark blue-black zigzags that converge toward a bright red heptagon. Taking another step around the object, we see black, white, and gray equilateral triangles on one area, followed by a surface with black squares layered with white ellipses or white squares with black ellipses.

Although repetition makes different patterns recognizable as the viewer approaches, when flush with the structure, patterns of a particular flank never recur. The sculpture is a puzzle that can only be appreciated through its geometric articulations since each "side," section, or part of the work is subtended and subsumed by broader sets of patterns and color orders. Sides and angles converge, jut out toward the sky, and form pocketlike corners. In an attempt to find a central orientation, we might move around the structure, repeatedly seeking out a stable point enjoining the fragments arranged to cross lines of sight with one another. But by further subtending parts and patterns, no one "side" or continuous area on the sculpture's surface mimics another from any available perspective.

Sanford Biggers (with David Ellis), *Mandala of the B-Bodhisattva II*, 2000 (still). Single-channel video; 12:21 min. Video captures installation with the same title of linoleum tiles with Formica backing, 180 × 180 in. (4.57 × 4.57 m). © Sanford Biggers

Cover: Sanford Biggers, *Madrigal*, 2024. Aluminum stainless steel, resin, mixed media. Commissioned with MIT Percent-for-Art funds and a generous gift from Robert Sanders ('64) & Sara-Ann Sanders. Courtesy MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Photo: Dario Lasagni

Second page: Sanford Biggers, *Madrigal*, 2024 (detail). Courtesy MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Photo: Dario Lasagni

Sanford Biggers, *Moonmedicin*, 2019. Courtesy the Kennedy Center. Photo: Brian Fitzsimmons

The rhythm of what Biggers refers to as "retinal pacing"—inciting bodies to move and seek their own center while observing *Madrigal*—carries forward the spirit of a much earlier work he made with David Ellis, *Mandala of the B-Bodhisattva II* (2002). This mandala-inspired patchwork of linoleum tiles served as a stage for live breakdance performances, and the video work of the same title shows these performances documented from an aerial perspective that flattens and frames the mandala as a ground for these bodies in orbital motion. The staccato back and forth and semicircular sweep necessary to suspend one's body in relation to *Madrigal* become an ensemble of physical traces happening between sight and space. The sensation of learning how to play a new song arises; we experience a new register of presence as the body begins to appreciate and trust the breadth of possibility for movement around a 360-degree circumference. Is this what it's like for a breakdancer as their limbs are learning how to take flight? With *Madrigal*, Biggers transforms the idyllic MIT campus lawn and teaches rhythmic variation like an emcee on a mic, setting up the rhythm for his impromptu viewer-performers.

As a visual artist and a keyboardist in the rock and jazz fusion concept band Moonmedicin, Biggers has embraced traditions from around the globe. Whether learning from Japanese monks, with whom Biggers investigated transubstantiation by creating singing bowls from melted hip-hop-style jewelry, or the artist's turn to Nkisi—a talismanic object activated through his uptake of African diasporic lines and carried Dada-like as a briefcase among suburban Chicago commuters—the artist has learned from the whole world how to formulate the ongoing expansion of his aesthetic curiosity.

Traditions of impermanence resonate and adapt to exemplify how a multiverse of cosmic clues may engender a unity of enlightenment to promote mutual freedom and understanding among all peoples. For example, the earth's minerals used to power a smartphone's AI-driven meditation app monitors everything from scrolling patterns to heart rate, only in order to scrape our data in exchange for calming tones at 432 hertz. Big tech is a continuous feedback loop selling our data back to us through every new application powered by the exploitation of people and labor sourced from the mineral-rich world and along the same exact trade routes used by slavers. Yet in *Lotus* (2007), a sculpture Biggers refers to as a "transcendent device," the artist transforms the cross-section of slave ships (diagrammatic instructions on how to pack human cargo efficiently and for profit) into the shape of a lotus flower to signify the Buddhist idea of continual rebirth in a detailed etching on fine glass. By experimenting across cultures with methodologies that depart from ongoing global generational violence initiated by the Euro-ethnic Age of Exploration, we continue to innovate and heal (although hardly by way of any directly linear progress).

In a public lecture Biggers gave at the MIT Department of Architecture in 2021, titled "Oracular,"[1] he introduced his practice by sharing a Moonmedicin music video exemplifying a tonic chord progression. We see Biggers's shirtless back as he plays a small organ situated in a log cabin. In the artist's imaginative interpretation of escaping to freedom, a vocalist soulfully croons: "He polishes his suit and tie / His smile is a lie / This is the great escape / This is the great escape." This lyrical visualization imagines a decisive moment of agency, symbolizing hundreds of

1 See "Sanford Biggers Interdisciplinary Artist and MLK Visiting Professor: Oracular," MIT Architecture Fall 2021 Lectures, September 16, 2021, https://web.mit.edu/webcast/architecture/f21/1/.

years of calculating decisions about when to run to freedom. The video memorializes the stealth moments that must remain hidden but continue to happen over and over as captured peoples learn the routes and ways of the land and captors, learn to intuit when to move, to breathe a breath, or when to stay still. Herein lies the meeting of knowledge and faith, where praxis means being convinced of being covered by the protection of ancestors who inspire us to continue getting free.

When Moonmedicin performs, the musicians don masks to communicate directly with audiences as instrumentals accompany visual documentation honoring the history of Black expressive culture, often excluded from Western art history's canon. Just as the co-creation of waves of air form a sound, *Madrigal* performs by setting bodies in motion. Just as a spiritual guide, a shaman, or priest conducts the soul of a seeker, a beatboxer, or a band leader performs a unique sonic ceremony guiding rhythms to invoke new rituals. A public installation is a mise-en-scène breaking the gallery's choreography beyond the rote memorization of E. H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art* or the procedural steps indicated by the order of wall texts. Tradition and canonical sources become tools available for near-infinite variations in an answer to the question: What is art? What new rituals will arise around *Madrigal* to at once exemplify and enact learning through experimentation?

A Moonmedicin performance at Lincoln Center works as a primer on African rhythms synthesized on Turtle Island. A baritone vocalist makes an act of imprinting through repetition, exclaiming, "Dance Sucker!!!" which feels as much like a command as a healing exhortation. Behind the live band, the audience is treated to moving images showcasing an aesthetic history of our continental African origins of movement splitting and riffing off in the Americas. This includes the influence of African diasporic forms becoming recognizable as uniquely American movement, later archived in the earliest films marking the emergence of a new twentieth-century medium.

But Biggers connects musical traditions with chord progressions familiar to jazz, such as "the tonic," referred to by musicians as "home base" because a player always returns to the tonic note. The tonic chord progress, just like the tradition of choral parts in the madrigal, initiates movement with a force of fugitivity also felt in the practice of chanting, when the articulation of a repeated sound begins to move the breath as if the breath starts to have a will all its own, operating from a realm outside our everyday waking consciousness.

Across Biggers's practice, the artist makes fugitivity an instrument with which to move freely between mediums—to take flight and return home. His series *Codex* (2009–ongoing), for example, began with the study of stained-glass windows at Philadelphia's Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and led to gestural painting on nineteenth-century quilts. These works, which later traveled to Biggers's hometown of Los Angeles to be exhibited at the California African American Museum, recast the art-historical genealogy of Abstract Expressionism (already inspired by twentieth-century jazz [Pollock et al.]) to acknowledge its kinship with African American visual art forms.

But Biggers does not stop moving, and so the paintings that started in Philly transmute and evolve into origami-inspired three-dimensional wall works such as *Khemetstry* (2017) and *Kubrick's Rube* (2020). This play and arrangement of patterns, inspired by African American quilt traditions transformed into three-dimensional objects complementing ancient mandala motifs, also resonate with his temporary installations of mandalas in colored sand. Biggers describes the laborious installation of the sand works (requiring teams of artist assistants working together) as "welcoming the breeze." These floor installations call attention, for even the briefest visitor, to our own impermanence—a universal condition for all living creatures and our only home here on earth.

Khemetstry, 2017. Antique quilt, birch plywood, gold leaf, 70 × 97 × 24 in. (177.8 × 243.8 × 61 cm). © Sanford Biggers

Madrigal, inspired by a musical form, may be felt in its instigating sculptural surround as a type or token of a raised mandala. Biggers was inspired to translate the traditional Tibetan form found on temple floors to the gallery floor to show how the natural reverberations of air may inspire memorable improvisational techniques (from the repetition of the sacred "ohm" for thousands of years to new music forms born in the twentieth century). To be aware of the way we carry time, from breath to breath, or through a complex rhythm with a tapestry of beats, means carrying parts of the past and projecting the traditions of humans who left the earth long ago into an as-yet-untold future mode.

Although *Madrigal* has been commissioned to remain and is intended to be appreciated at MIT for generations, the idea of a permanent sculpture lasting for eons seems further from our human ways of life, which appear to become more fragile and less permanent as the future enters the present. Yet, the universal language of mathematics is present in *Madrigal*'s composite polyhedron shape. Biggers's sculpture is reflective of his syncretic practice of forging ongoing connections between seemingly disparate ways of life across human traditions that can and do recur across our global present. We are now heading toward a future that is increasingly informed by universal human practices already tested and long proven to survive wherever and whenever they arise.

The List Visual Arts Center, MIT's contemporary art museum, collects, commissions, and presents rigorous, provocative, and artist-centric projects that engage MIT and the global art community.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Sanford Biggers (b. 1970) was raised in Los Angeles and currently lives and works in New York City. His work has been presented in solo exhibitions at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (2021); Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, MO (2018); the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, MI (2016); MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA (2012); and the Brooklyn Museum, New York (2011); among others. Additionally, his work has been presented in group exhibitions at the Menil Collection, Houston, TX (2008); the Tate Modern, London (2007); and, more recently, at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC (2024); the Barbican Center, London (2024); Centre Pompidou-Metz, France (2023); the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2017); and the Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA (2017).

Biggers is the recipient of numerous awards, including 2024 Best Alternative Jazz Album at the Grammy Awards for his contribution to Meshell Ndegeocello's *The Omnichord Real Book*. He was also the 2021–22 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Visiting Professor and Scholar in the MIT Department of Architecture.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darla Migan is a critic and curator based in New York City. She is committed to thinking about how theories of culture and strategies of artistic making may implicate one another and potentially motivate the formation of justice-seeking communities. Her writing on the conditions of contemporary art and visual culture can be read in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, Artnet News, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Cultured*, *Spike*, and *Texte zur Kunst*.

ABOUT PUBLIC ART AT MIT

MIT's world-renowned Public Art Collection reaches across the Institute and is enjoyed by students and visitors alike. New works are added through the Percent-for-Art program on the occasion of new campus construction. Formally instituted in 1968, the program continues to expand MIT's Public Art Collection through artworks by important and critically acclaimed contemporary artists, including Olafur Eliasson, Jeffrey Gibson, Sol LeWitt, Sarah Sze, and Ursula von Rydingsvard, among others. The List Visual Arts Center oversees MIT's art collection across campus and presents contemporary art exhibitions at the museum located in I. M. Pei's Wiesner Building (E15). The Public Art Collection and museum are free and open to all.

ABOUT THE COMMITTEE

Sanford Biggers was selected for the commission by Percent-for-Art committee members, including Richard Amster, Director, MIT Campus Construction; Paul C. Ha, Director, MIT List Visual Arts Center; Joyce Linde, Trustee, Linde Family Foundation; Keeril Makan, Section Head and Michael ('49) and Sonja Koerner Music Composition Professor, MIT Music and Theater Arts; Vasso Mathes, Senior Campus Planner, MIT Office of Campus Planning; Melissa Nobles, Dean, MIT School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences; Sonia Richards, Director of Capital Projects, MIT Campus Construction; Kim Sutherland, CRSP Space Liaison, MIT Office of the Provost; Yumiko Yamada, Partner, SANAA; Sarah Yazici, Senior Project Manager, MIT Campus Construction. The Institute gratefully acknowledges the generous gift from Robert Sanders ('64) and Sara-Ann Sanders in support of the artwork.

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