

Coded Narratives

Lesson Plan

Recommended for middle school and up



Sanford Biggers is a multimedia artist who works across materials such as sculpture, textiles, performance, installation, and video. For the past decade, he has used antique quilts as a canvas to collage, draw, and intervene upon. These objects, themselves holding a place in American history and expressing narratives from historical events like the Underground Railroad, are repurposed to create cross-generational communication and collaboration.

In *Haute Mess* (2014), Biggers combines fragments of antique quilts, fabrics, acrylic, house and spray paint, and Buddhist iconography, a tradition he was exposed to during a residency in Japan. In this work, Biggers references the broader tradition of quilting within the United States, as well as his personal history and relationship with textiles, which he first explored through visiting fabric stores in immigrant communities in Los Angeles with his mother. The patterns and colors reference languages of music and painting. Here, Biggers remixes these codes with found materials, symbols of pop culture, international cultural imagery, and historic narratives to create a work that exists between painting, drawing, and sculpture.

Sanford Biggers
Haute Mess, 2014

Textiles, fabric and antique quilt fragments, double-sided adhesive, treated acrylic paint, treated interior paint, and spray paint on archival paper
39 ½ x 37 in.
2018.40.35

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Objective

To engage in visual inquiry around the work of Sanford Biggers and learn about the history and influences in his practice. To create a collaged work that experiments with sharing your narrative through symbols, colors, and patterns.

Essential Question

How can we tell our story with symbols, either existing or invented? What can be communicated through symbols, colors, and patterns?

Materials

Construction paper
Fabric scraps
Patterned paper scraps
Paint markers or other markers
Scissors
Glue or glue stick

Preparation

1. Cut the construction paper into a large square. This will be the base of your work.
2. Create smaller pieces of fabric and paper scraps if needed.
3. Look at *Haute Mess* by Sanford Biggers and engage in visual inquiry around this work.
 - What symbols do you see and recognize?
 - What symbols are you not familiar with?
 - What do the colors and patterns communicate to you and do they remind you of anything?
 - What story do you read from this work?
 - How might you tell your own story through such techniques?

Vocabulary

Intervene

To come between or occur incidentally so as to modify

Remix

A variation of an original made by rearranging or adding to the original

Narrative

A way of presenting or understanding a situation or series of events that reflects and promotes a particular point of view or set of values

Collage

A technique of composing a work of art by pasting on a single surface various materials not normally associated with one another

Multimedia

A technique for expressing ideas (as in communication, entertainment, or art) in which several media are employed

Pattern

A discernible coherent system based on the intended interrelationship of component parts

Symbol

Something used for or regarded as representing something else; a material object representing something, often something immaterial; emblem, token, or sign

Methods

1. Use the square construction paper as your base.
2. Begin by selecting the paper scraps you will use. Pay special attention to what colors and patterns you are gravitating toward. What draws you to your selection? You can cut and layer these pieces as you see fit.
3. Arrange and glue down the paper pieces to cover your entire construction paper. How have you decided to arrange your patterns and colors?
4. Next, with the paint markers or markers, draw a symbol or image on top of your paper collage. This can be something from your everyday life, or imagery that is invented. You can reflect on a feeling, mood, or recent occurrence in your life. What from your narrative do you want to communicate and how?
5. With the fabric piece, create a pattern that interprets your day or week and layer it on top so you can still see parts of your drawing and paper collage underneath. What does your daily pattern look like? You can cut and layer these pieces as you see fit.
6. Glue down your fabric pieces and allow enough time for your work to dry.

Reflection

Display your work on a table or wall.

Engage in a group discussion or self-reflection around the works created and the process.

What symbols did you include, whether common or invented?

What codes did you incorporate in this work?

How do you interpret these symbols? How might others interpret them?

What would you want others to learn from your narrative?

Additional Information on Biggers's Practice

About Sanford Biggers: studiomuseum.org/artist/sanford-biggers

"Cracking Codes with Sanford Biggers," *New York Times*: www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/arts/design/sanford-biggers-quilt-bronx-museum.html

"Fool's Folly, Sanford Biggers," *PBS NewsHour*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmtqPO7K28o