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Art in America



IN THE STUDIO

SANFORD BIGGERS

WITH STEPHANIE CASH

Sanford Biggers has been a quiet force in the art world since the late 1990s. His projects often combine video, music, performance, sculpture, painting and drawing, and mix disparate cultural references in oblique explorations of both self-constructed and social identity.

Numerous international curators have included him in group shows on wide-ranging themes, even though—young artists, take note—he is without New York gallery representation. A trio of exhibitions at the end of this year promises to bring much deserved attention to his work: a 10-year survey at the Brooklyn Museum, which he calls an “introspective,” and new works at the SculptureCenter in New York and at Mass MoCA.

Biggers earned a BA at Morehouse College in Atlanta (1992) and an MFA at the Art Institute of Chicago (1999). Last year he returned to New York City from Richmond, where he'd been teaching at Virginia Commonwealth University since 2006. He also spent a year as a visiting scholar and resident artist at Harvard before joining the faculty of Columbia University in January 2010. I met with him in his Harlem studio on a frigid January morning, as he was preparing for a Jan. 15 performance at the Rubin Museum of Art and a panel discussion at the 92nd Street Y on Jan. 20, on the subject of Creative Time travel grants, one of which took Biggers to Brazil last year.

STEPHANIE CASH What's it like being back in New York?

SANFORD BIGGERS It's tricky. There's a lot to navigate. But now that my studio is up and running I've got more of a routine, between teaching and studio time.

SC You're a very visible artist for someone who doesn't have gallery representation. I'm sure young and not-so-young artists would like to know how to pull that off.

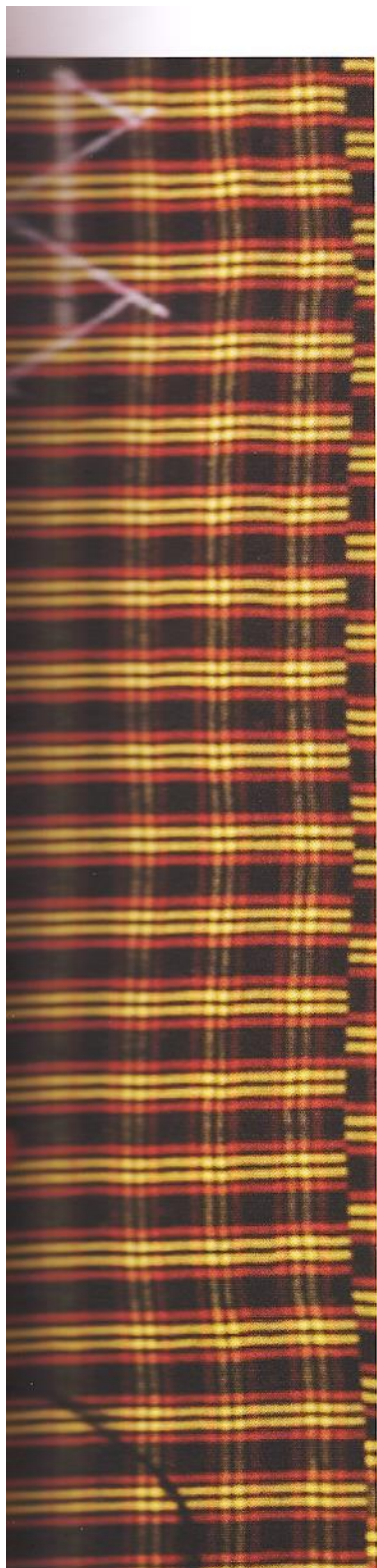
SB I had a gallery in L.A. years ago that has since closed [Mary Goldman]. I've never had New York representation. I've been working with Michael Klein, who acts as a private dealer. I've been in shows in New York galleries and have done projects here. When I got out of grad school and did residencies at the Studio Museum in Harlem, P.S.1 and others, I met a lot of curators who put me into shows, including the Whitney Biennial. I know dealers and they know my work or may have seen a piece here or there, but never a collective body. Because I was doing residencies and out of the country so much my work's exposure here in New York City has been a little spotty. So these shows at the end of the year will be helpful.

SC Where are you from?

SB I lived in Los Angeles until college then went to Morehouse in Atlanta. During my third year there I moved to Florence to study art and Italian. After graduation I moved to Japan for about three years.

SC How did you become interested in art?

SB I've taken art pretty seriously since I was a preteen. I started doing graffiti in the '80s when rap and the b-boy culture was just arriving in Los Angeles. My friends and I saw the film *Wild Style* and got our fat shoelaces, started breakdancing and doing graffiti. I used to write the name Midas. When I was in L.A. a few weeks ago I ran into Jeffrey Deitch [director of L.A. MOCA], who's doing a big



Sanford Biggers in his studio, 2011, detail of a work from his “Constellation Quilt” series. Photo Nora Fuller.

THE TREE "COMES UP A LOT IN MY WORK FOR TWO REASONS: THE WAY IT RELATES TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY . . . WITH LYNCHING, BUT ALSO ITS ROLE IN BUDDHISM."

street art show this spring. We started talking about L.A. and my history doing graffiti, and getting busted at age 15. When I went back to school I enrolled in art classes and got put into Advanced Placement classes, where I started painting with oil. That's how I got into the fine arts.

SC Do you come from a creative family?

SB They're mostly in the sciences and medicine, but they've all had artistic interests. I started undergrad as a psychology major and an art minor. By my second year I thought, "I can't bullshit anymore."

SC What was living in Atlanta like?

SB I haven't been there in years, but there was a Confederate flag flying over my apartment complex when I was there. The first press I ever received for my artwork was for winning second place in a sculpture competition as an undergrad. My work consisted of a metal piece on the wall that was polished and had a beautiful, almost mirrored surface. Hanging from it was a rusty chain with tar and thatch. On the ground was the Georgia state flag wrapped in thatch, tar and mud. The press would not take a picture of me with the piece because it would have been too political, too inflammatory. This was 1989.

SC Japan was pretty formative for you. What took you there?

SB I actually went to teach English. I was teaching by day, and making art, making music, hanging out and learning the language and the culture at night.

When I lived in Italy, I got a phone call from a Morehouse friend who's originally from Memphis. He was living in Tokyo. You know, he was a bumpkin. When he called me from Tokyo, all of a sudden he was really sophisticated and suave, and speaking two languages, and I was like, I want some of that! So I applied to the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme, and taught for three years.

SC What did you learn in Japan that really changed you?

SB Buddhism. Buddhism in real life and how it manifests in the culture. It's there but not really spoken about. In fact, people might tell you "I'm Christian" or "I don't believe in religion." But when you ask, "What about Buddhism?" they say, "Oh yeah, of course I'm Buddhist." It's that ingrained.

SC Do you consider yourself a Buddhist?

SB My beliefs lean towards that but I would not consider myself a strict practitioner. There's a lot of dogma involved, but as a life philosophy I would definitely choose it. I grew up in the Methodist Christian church in Los Angeles, so I have something to compare it to. Buddhism speaks to me more.

SC It has certainly played a role in your work, whereas Christianity doesn't seem to have.

SB Well, at the end of the day, I believe in faith. That's one of the main reasons I went to Brazil, Salvador de Bahia specifically, because there's a major syncretism of religious beliefs there,

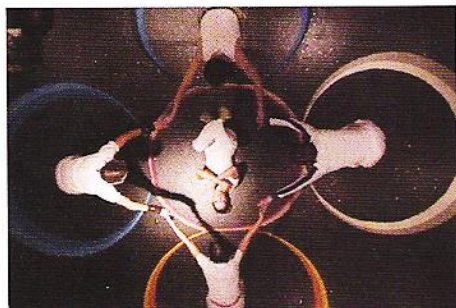
from Catholicism to Candomblé, mixing European and African ideas. I find that to be an interesting metaphor for life's journey and the construction of personal identity, because we all pull different things together.

SC You combine a lot of disparate cultures in your work. Is there an autobiographical component or are you observing culture from a distance?

SB I think it's a bit of both. It's autobiographical but I try not to point the lens too much at myself. I think the approach is autobiographical. I've lived that life so that's how I see things. Using that experience as a starting point gives my work a multivalence, so people from disparate cultures can find something to latch on to and in the process learn some other things.

SC That's true, because you're included in a lot of shows about black art or hip-hop but you're also in, for example, "Grain of Emptiness" at the Rubin Museum, which is about Buddhism. So your work does speak to different audiences. But is that then a problem, if people are looking at it through only one lens and missing some of the other aspects?

SB I worry about that sometimes. One challenge for me is thinking about what my work means in Japan. What does it mean in Hungary or Switzerland or London or South Africa? There are certain unmistakable signifiers like blackface or the Confederate flag. Curators often put that work in black art shows because America still lives with that binary divide—black artists make black work. But when the work is shown



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overseas it's typically not in that context at all. I was recently in a show at the Kunstmuseum Luzern in Switzerland called "Signs of Life: Ancient Knowledge in Contemporary Art" that was about process, transience and ephemerality. I had one of the major works in that show, and there are no signifiers that would speak of "African-Americanness."

SC What was the piece?

SB A video of a work originally performed in Hungary [2002] and a re-creation of a sand mandala, but not in the Tibetan sense. It has five large circles done in colored sand. It was used as a stage for five dancers, all from Hungary, with one dancer per circle performing a choreographed dance. Three of them are trained modern dancers, so the piece touches on traditional

Hungarian dance, classical, modern, breakdancing and freestyle.

SC Hungarian breakdancers in Switzerland? That is multivalent.

SB When I pitched the work to the Trafo Art Space in Budapest they asked "how are you going to find breakdancers?" And I said, "I guarantee I can find them in two days," and I found them in one.

SC How did they dance on a sand mandala?

SB The circles were defined by sand, and the interiors had just enough space, about a 4-foot diameter, for the dancers to do their dance. They practiced so that they didn't disrupt the sand. It's a 10-minute piece. After about 5 minutes they start to "battle," crossing the circles and dispersing the sand. Up until that point the circles appear to be drawn

or painted on the ground. The piece is a metaphor for the universe, with the dancers representing five elements that are at first in consort and then in conflict with each other. It's called *Creation/Dissipation*, referring to the creative/destructive nature of the universe. At the end, when the whole thing is completely erased, I sweep up the sand and start drawing the circles again.

SC What is this quilt on the wall?

SB It's part of a new series of drawings and collages on quilts. This one I'm just beginning. A recently finished one is now on view at Marcus Samuelsson's Red Rooster restaurant, which just opened in Harlem. They're related to a larger project that will premiere at Mass MoCA in December. Right now I'm placing circles of paper on the quilt to get an idea of what I want to do, because I'll be drawing on it

IN THE STUDIO

THE QUILT WILL HAVE "PATCHES WITH THE IMAGE OF MY SLAVE SHIP LOTUS, WHICH IS BASED ON A WELL-KNOWN DIAGRAM OF A SINGLE SLAVE SHIP."

with charcoal, oil stick and spray paint, so there's no chance to erase.

SC Quilts have a rich cultural history. What do they mean for you?

SB Like the mandala, the quilt is based on pattern. Recently I met a woman who used to collect quilts and had a lot of pre-Civil War pieces. She donated several to me. Quilts were used along

the Underground Railroad as a means of communication. So for example, if a quilt of certain colors was hanging on a banister or folded a particular way it meant, "We're under surveillance, keep going" or "We're open, you can stay here." There's been a lot of controversy about that coded language. There are quilt historians who say that they weren't used at all for that purpose. But there's a whole cultural tradition that says, in fact, they were. I'm interested in where those two stories overlap, where the mythology and the vernacular culture become more real and important than the academic.

SC What do the temporary dots on the quilt represent?

SB Travelers on the Underground Railroad also read the stars at night to follow the trail up to Canada. I started looking at the quilt like a star chart—Harriet Tubman being an astronaut, navigating the road via the stars, and all those metaphors. I started this quilt project in Philadelphia, in an area that had a lot of Underground Railroad stations, or homes. I made an overhead map of the city and drew points where all those stations were to make a "constellation" and drew it onto the quilt in oil stick.

I'm also interested, oddly enough, in Op art. I wanted to see how I could transfer some of those more graphic elements onto the quilts. Some of the imagery on them are tweaked dance diagrams, which I also intend as references to footprints on the Underground Railroad and as constellations.

SC What will the dots be in the finished piece?

SB Patches with the image of my slave ship lotus, which is based on a well-known diagram of a single slave ship. I repeated it in an overlapping circular pattern to turn it into this lotus. I wanted it to be seen in a different way. To use it as a patch that then goes back into the quilt sort of closes the historical loop of Middle Passage and ways of escaping slavery.

SC When you have so many symbols coming together in a coded language, do you think your audience connects the dots, so to speak? Is it important to provide wall text or other information?

SB Sometimes I do. Even though my work is so loaded, I still consider myself a formalist. Part of being an artist is being able to communicate visually. So people might say, nice drawing, but then realize there's something more, and they might start to do their own research. And the more you know my work the more you know there are layers to it.

SC Who's the man tied to the tree in these photographs?

SB They're images that I took while filming a project in Stuttgart a few years ago. It's a 4-minute video called *Shuffle*, which features this performer, Ricardo Camillo. I met him on a bus in Stuttgart while trying to have a conversation with a German kid wearing hip-hop gear who, turns out, didn't speak any English. Ricardo was on the other side of the

Opposite, *UGRR #2*, 2010, from the "Constellation Quilt" series, quilt, oil stick, silk-screened muslin, charcoal and embroidery, 96 by 90 inches.

Below, *Lotus*, 2007, steel, etched glass, colored LEDs, 7 feet in diameter.



“I’M INTERESTED IN WHERE . . . STORIES OVERLAP, WHERE THE MYTHOLOGY AND THE VERNACULAR CULTURES BECOME MORE REAL AND IMPORTANT THAN THE ACADEMIC.”

bus, laughing, and offered to help. He translated English to German, and his native language is Portuguese. We’ve been thick as thieves since then. He’s a Brazilian expatriate living in Germany for 25 years now. I became fascinated with his life and how he’s figured out so many ways to navigate German society as an outsider. I see his journey as a metaphor for all of us—social nomads. In the video he’s dressed as a clown, and we see him putting on clown makeup and taking it off. That symbolizes his navigating through society, which all of us do at some point—putting on the mask, taking off the mask. I shot the second part of this project while in Brazil for two months this past year.

SC A lot of your work seems to be about identity.

SB I think my work in general deals with cross-cultural syncretism, maybe political syncretism, religious syncretism. And I think identity is a malleable substance. Identity is fluid. Every person probably has multiple personalities. I’m interested in the idea that all of us construct our identities, and often on a daily basis. We frequently show different sides at home than at our job than on the street.

SC What symbols are at play in the *Shuffle* photos?

SB There’s the tree, which comes up a lot in my work for two reasons: the way it relates to African-American history, particularly in the South with lynching, but also its role in Buddhism, because under the bodhi tree is where Siddhartha found enlightenment. There are myriad readings in between, but I like those two extremes. In the video, one of my Cheshire Cat smile sculptures is hanging in a tree, so it’s blinking and almost taunting Ricardo. Finally he confronts the grin and gets bound to the tree. I used a particular Japanese bondage knot. People who are into that culture know that it’s a relationship based on sensitivity and communication, which is very different—or maybe not—from how people were bound and lynched in the South.

There’s a famous image of a slave being burned against a tree, his body is tied with chains. Ricardo is in this position. I saw that image when I was a kid and it has always stuck with me. This work directly references it but in a much more tender way. That particular

relationship between the lynch mob and the victim, there’s more to it, I think, than just violence and hate. There’s some weird twisted passion or some strange master/servant relationship. There’s an intimacy in grabbing someone’s balls to cut them off. It’s very confusing. So I’m exploring some of that imagery but changing the context, which I think all my recent work is about—trying to find a way to reinterpret symbols.

SC Kind of reclaiming symbols?

SB Reclaiming but at the same time I’m not trying to nail the meaning down. I just want to erase past meanings and leave them open for new meanings. As an artist I use symbols as a medium. Are those icons static or malleable? I look at the flexibility, the plasticity of symbols, politics, religion, form, context.

SC Yes, it’s like the swastika being the Nazi symbol. It’s originally Hindu but you can really never use it in any positive way now. Having grown up in the South, I think the Confederate flag can mean different things to different people. It can be an indication of racist beliefs but for some it’s an expression of Southern pride.

SB It’s hard to respond to that. I think that many things are in play. A lot of African-Americans associate it with the

segregated past. I’m sure there are some younger people who look at it with some nostalgia, like, I’m a Southerner, without looking at all that it entails.

My Cheshire Cat grin speaks to this, because in Germany, in London, it’s just a smiley face, or an *Alice in Wonderland* reference. In the U.S., it’s blackface minstrelsy. It’s the exact same image; I’m doing nothing to it. But depending on where it is, it can flip. That’s what intrigues me. It’s pushing buttons, but does that trigger a response or does it start to ameliorate those responses? Can you now see this as merely a smile? Kids growing up today aren’t burdened by some of those meanings. In 50 or 100 years will these things have any meaning at all? I mean, people were wearing Che Guevara as a fashion statement three years ago.

SC A tree also figures prominently in *Blossom* [2007], intertwined with a grand piano. What is that piece about?

SB It was influenced by the Jena Six incident that happened in Louisiana a few years ago, where a black kid asked if he and his friends could sit under a tree where the white kids usually sat, and his teacher said, “Yes, of course, sit where you want.” The



Above, *Bound Triptych*, 2009, one of three digital C-prints, 30 by 40 inches.

Opposite, *Shake*, in-progress video.



next day there were nooses hanging from the tree. That started a racial feud in the city that lasted for a year and ended with the arrest of six black boys who had attacked a white kid, even though there had been previous attacks on the black kids by white boys. So in *Blossom*, you can't tell if the piano is coming out of the tree or the tree out of the piano, and the piano is playing my rendition of *Strange Fruit*.

SC Your work is very political but not in-your-face. You have to really go looking for the meaning behind the work. Are you intentionally trying to soften your political statement?

SB I wouldn't say soften. I would say complicate. I don't want to be on a soapbox. Those are past tactics. I'm not necessarily interested in providing the answers but in provoking better questions.

SC Tell me about this drawing of the African sculpture with these geometric elements. You don't often do much painting or drawing.

SB I finished this one a couple of weeks ago. I call it *Psyche*. The idea was to take an African sculpture and abstract it a bit. Then I used the grid and the dots to create more depth, like what I'm doing with the quilts. They have many of the same elements. The lines on the drawing are actually sewn in with thread, not drawn. This was the second edition that I did with Goya-Girl Press in Baltimore. The first was *Afropick* [2005], this oversize woodblock. It has my chop at the bottom in Kanji and Hiragana. It's the stamp I used to sign my checks when I lived in Japan.

SC What's the story behind *Afropick*?

SB I was in a show many years ago at the Princeton University Art Museum. A few artists were invited to go through the encyclopedic collection and make work responding to it. In the pre-Columbian section I found a small Olmec head. There's been some debate about whether the Olmecs were of African or Asian origin. They have very pronounced noses, lips and Afros. Next to that was a 6th-century Aztec dagger that had a

big fist on it. Those two together made me think of the *Afropick* comb that had a big fist on it that was used to fluff Afros back in the '60s and '70s. With that in mind, I got a piece of rosewood that was indigenous to the southern portion of Mexico's Gulf Coast, and carved an *Afropick* that looked like it was from the 6th century. So based on that sculpture from the show, which is about 7 inches tall, I made the oversize woodblock.

SC What's inside those clear Buddha sculptures?

SB I did these around 2000-01. I was cultural shopping, and critiquing my own cultural shopping. I found a Buddha in a botanica in Chicago. It was white and clear on the bottom and it had a four-leaf clover, grains of rice and other good luck symbols from different cultures, and the whole thing was made in Mexico. I thought, this is the most bizarre thing ever. So I made a mold of it and started casting my own version in clear acrylic and throwing different objects inside. You can see that there's

“ONE CHALLENGE FOR ME IS THINKING ABOUT WHAT MY WORK MEANS IN JAPAN. WHAT DOES IT MEAN IN HUNGARY OR SWITZERLAND OR LONDON OR SOUTH AFRICA?”



a small disco ball inside his head, a leather medallion of Africa in his chest, a fat gold chain that we associate with hip-hop—all of course made in China. I like the idea of this syncretic consumer culture. I made about 10 of these and used eight in a work called *Mandala of Co-option* [2001].

SC The Brooklyn Museum show is a 10-year survey. What will you be showing at Mass MoCA and the SculptureCenter?

SB The Mass MoCA show really focuses on the painter and muralist John Biggers.

SC Any relation?

SB A cousin, but we never figured out how close while he was still alive. He died in 2000. He used a lot of quilts, geometry, symbolism and layered meanings in his work. I first met him when I was a child and he was a very big influence on me, obviously, even though our esthetics are totally different. I wanted to do a show that highlights his research and ideas and some of mine. I'm trying to get one of his big murals transported to Mass MoCA to use as a centerpiece and then I'll be riffing on that.

At the SculptureCenter, concurrent with the Brooklyn show, will be new work. The Brazil video will probably premiere there. It's the second part of *Shuffle*. Ricardo walks out of the ocean on the beaches of Brazil. He goes through the city and undergoes transformative moments until he becomes an androgynous being. He wears an outfit inspired by the '70s Tropicalia movement, and his face and dreadlocks are silver. Hopefully there will be a third version that I'll shoot in Ghana or the west coast of Africa. So the three videos go from Europe to Brazil to Africa, which sort of follows historical trade routes.

SC What sculptural component will be there?

SB This piece called *Anikulapo*, for one. The title is the middle name of the Nigerian musician Fela Kuti, and it means "he who walks with death in his pouch." The 8-ball leather jacket alludes to '90s hip-hop, drug culture and the 'hood, so essentially some-

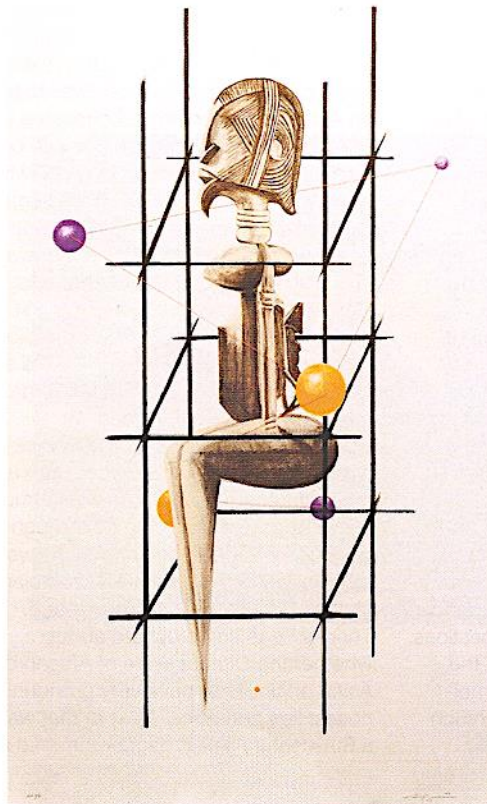
one who's dealing death. When it's finished it will look like a head is in the hood, so it's sort of a ghostly figure.

SC Music always plays an important role in your work.

SB When I first moved to New York I was doing a lot more music, performing downtown with Saul Williams, the poet, and Martin Luther, and I did a lot of open-mike nights at CBGB Gallery, the Spy Bar, Knitting Factory and even the Chris Rock Show. Saul's lyrics and music really inspire a lot of what I do. His work is very political, very charged, genius stuff. It's hard for me to listen to a whole album at once because he throws together so much heavy shit.

SC Do you still write music?

SB Well, my improv sound-video ensemble, Moon Medicine, performs tomorrow, and I just had a jam session a few weeks ago with Jon Kessler and Kara Walker. Kara on vocals, Jon on guitar, me on keys. We'll see where that goes. ○



Top, *Mandala of Co-option*, 2001, acrylic resin, fat gold chains, fat shoelaces, microphones, African mask and mixed mediums, 6½ by 6 by 5 inches.

Left, *Psyche*, 2010, lithograph, thread, 43 by 25½ inches.

Goya Contemporary
Opposite, *Smirk*, 2010, aluminum, Plexiglas, LEDs, timer, 33 by 33½ by 8 inches.

"Grain of Emptiness" remains on view at the Rubin Museum of Art, New York, through Apr. 11. "Sanford Biggers: Sweet Funk—An Introspective," curated by Eugenie Tsai, will be at the Brooklyn Museum, Sept. 29, 2011-Jan. 8, 2012.

A show of new work opens at the SculptureCenter, New York, in September. "Sanford Biggers: The Cartographers Conundrum" can be seen at Mass MoCA, North Adams, Mass., beginning in December.

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