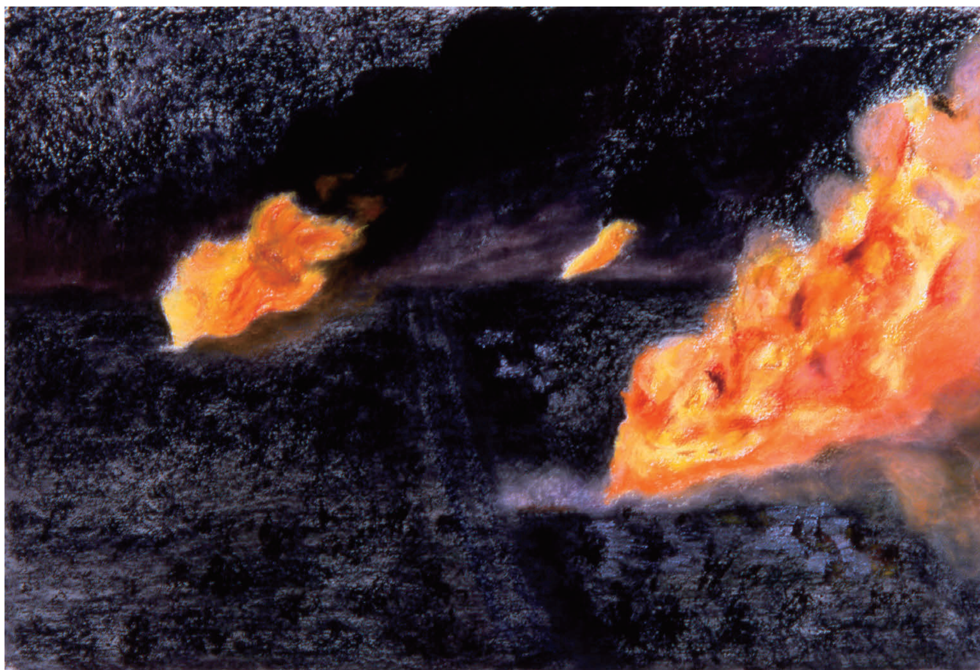

Susan Crile: *Field of Fire*, 1991, oil stick, charcoal, pastel, and pumice on paper, 40 by 60 inches; in "Theater of Operations."

Qadiri's video *Behind the Sun* (2013) features found footage of a Kuwaiti oil-well fire. The dramatic imagery associated with the environmental catastrophe—dark skies and huge trumpets of fire topped with voluptuous plumes of smoke—proved to be the war's most enduring visual legacy. Al Qadiri's work is projected in PS1's basement gallery and can be viewed from a first-floor balcony. The distance between the audience and the event belies the origins of the footage, which was taken by a local resident who jumped in his car and sped off toward the conflagrations to capture them. Its vantage point is closer, more intimate than the usual network footage.

Still, the best works in "Theater of Operations" don't address the war directly so much as have it in the background, like keeping the TV on for the noise. To address the war indirectly also avoids the danger of sensationalizing violence or aestheticizing "resistance." Hiwa K's *Bell Project* (2007–15), a huge bell cast from melted-down munitions, is displayed adjacent to two videos that document the years of labor required to make it. Also of note is Michael Rakowitz's *Return* (2004–), a mixed-medium installation related to the artist's struggle to reopen his Iraqi-Jewish grandfather's date-importing business in Brooklyn. His dates became the first goods available to the American public in three decades that could be labeled "product of Iraq."

Rakowitz's participation in "Theater of Operations" is especially notable given his admirable early withdrawal from the Whitney Biennial in protest of board member Warren B. Kanders. Citing his opposition to MoMA trustee Larry Fink's investments in private prisons, he requested that MoMA PS1 "pause" the video component of his installation—a request that has reportedly been denied. Rakowitz isn't the only artist who employed a strategy of refusal as a protest of Fink. Phil Collins withdrew his work *baghdad screentests* (2002), a series of silent video portraits of Iraqis. The outcome is an empty room save for wall text stating that "this work has been withdrawn from the exhibition at the request of the artist." The dark silence of the gallery is a powerful reminder that you don't need to bring the war home. It's already here.

—*Rahel Aima*

MIAMI

SANFORD BIGGERS

David Castillo

THE CENTERPIECE OF SANFORD Biggers's 2015 solo show at David Castillo, timed to coincide with Art Basel Miami Beach, was the sculpture *Laocoön* (2015), a balloon figure of Bill Cosby's comedic cartoon character Fat Albert lying facedown on the ground, attached to an air pump that caused it to expand and contract. The work incited heated debate among critics, some of whom saw it as a crass commentary on the killing of black men like Michael Brown and Eric Garner by police. "Quadri ed Angeli," his most recent show at the gallery, was as formalist and quiet as the last one was politically topical and sensational, comprising seven new abstract works (all 2019) employing antique quilts.

Two "paintings"—large quilts from which sections have been excised—hung on either side of the gallery. In *Somethin' Close to Nothin'*, Biggers has removed two slender curving shapes from a quilt with a red, yellow, and blue lattice pattern, the forms matched by hazy ones painted in black on the quilt's surface that suggest shadows. *Twintriloquism*, whose front is patterned with diamond-shaped forms in muted shades of green, yellow, and brown, has a pair of tall rectangular flaps cut from its center. The flaps spill onto the floor, opening windows onto the white wall on which the work hangs and revealing the bright red plaid pattern on the quilt's reverse side.

The other works on view were sculptural. Biggers glued pieces of antique patchwork quilts onto birch plywood with gilded edges, producing geometric compositions that

Sanford Biggers: *Semaphore*, 2019, antique quilt, birch plywood, and gold leaf, 55 by 36 by 38 inches; at David Castillo.

variously recall origami, Rubik's Cubes, and fractals. Most of these works hung on the wall, projecting out into space. One of them, *Polyglot*, is composed of a series of five cubic forms that rhyme with the bright, multicolored tumbling block patterning of the quilt segments adorning it. The transformation of the patterning into three dimensions produces an enigmatic structure that evokes something otherworldly, like an alien starship. Similarly, *Semaphore*, the only freestanding work in the exhibition, looks like a shuttle ready to lift off into space. More than five feet tall, the vertical structure comprises primarily triangular forms that jut from the work like fins.

As Biggers has described, his quilt works, which he began making in 2012, allude to the—probably apocryphal—practice of using quilts to mark safe spaces along the Underground Railroad. Indeed, many of the works' titles refer to forms of coded communication: semaphore is a system of visual signaling using flags, while ventriloquism is the act of disguising one's voice by projecting it so it appears to come from a different source. Taking up the traditions of coding and patterning, Biggers functions as an interlocutor between past and present. Throughout the show, particularly in the sculptures, the artist demonstrated his interest in Afrofuturism, an aesthetic that imagines the future of Africa and the African diaspora by reassessing the past through science-fiction tropes. In the exhibition materials, he characterized Harriet Tubman as an "astronaut" who led slaves to freedom by "navigating the stars." In contrast to the explicit symbolism that had yoked *Laocoön* to current events, the abstraction in the new works allows them to gesture to speculative futures.

—*Alpesh Kantilal Patel*

CHICAGO

JOSEPH STERLING

Stephen Daiter

JOSEPH STERLING HAS BEEN CONSIGNED to the bush league of midcentury Chicago photographers, whether justly or not. He died in 2010, at age seventy-four, having never received the sort of blue-chip retrospective that helped canonize Ray Metzker and Kenneth Josephson, his contemporaries and fellow students at the city's legendary Institute of Design. Nor did he have the unusual biography that has made Vivian Maier, a longtime Chicago nanny who took street portraits in her spare time, so irresistible to curators and editors. Sterling's main series, "The Age of Adolescence," a paean to American teenagers of the late 1950s and early '60s, grew out of his master's thesis but wasn't exhibited until 2002. He spent most of his career doing corporate photography gigs, and sometimes taught.

Joseph Sterling: Untitled, ca. 1957, gelatin silver print, 5¾ by 6 inches; at Stephen Daiter.

But he also continued to make creative work. Stephen Daiter's recent exhibition featured unseen prints from Sterling's archive and demonstrated what a versatile photographer he was. The images—all of them black-and-white and most of them untitled and from the 1950s—showcased Sterling's strengths as well as his shortcomings. He was formally adventurous in his experiments with motion blur, light, and double exposure, yet so promiscuous in style and subject that he seemed to recycle the visual techniques of his era rather than stake out his own themes. His ability to synthesize the innovations of America's postwar photographic vanguard sensitively and dramatically may have been his greatest gift.

In his documentary work, Sterling adapted the social realist tradition of Walker Evans to the new urban underclass. In a photograph not on view but reproduced in the catalogue, three young black boys stroll down a blighted city street, a junked mattress leaning against a building and a shred of newspaper littering the foreground. A black laborer in overalls and an engineer's cap approaches the boys, the image implying a head-on collision between innocence and experience. A kind of companion photo displayed in the exhibition shows three young black girls clutching each other and screaming at the camera gleefully or in mock fright. The white curtain in the window behind them is askew, and the glass reflects a chunk of Sterling's silhouette—the photographer insinuating himself into the image in much the way that Lee Friedlander went on to do in the subsequent decades.

Generally, though, Sterling seems more imitative than prescient. There's a hint of Helen Levitt in his unsentimental portrayals of children adrift in the city. His attentiveness to textures and architectural ruin recalls Aaron Siskind, one of his teachers at the Institute of Design. In Sterling's abstracted, almost calligraphic prints from the 1980s and '90s, four of which were in this show, there are traces of

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