

# Art in America

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## John Biggers at Michael Rosenfeld

John Biggers (1924-2001) is an African-American artist whose work deserves greater recognition than it has so far received. This show of paintings, sculptures and drawings from the 1940s and '50s was a step in the right direction, presenting powerfully graphic images of everyday black life, and its closeness to poverty and suffering, both physical and metaphysical. Biggers's style is somewhat in the tradition of Thomas Hart Benton—he

makes big, powerful realist pictures that communicate the facts of threadbare lives. In some ways, Biggers was an academic artist, first studying at the Hampton Institute in Virginia and then, after the Second World War (he served in the Navy), at Pennsylvania State University, where he worked with Austrian refugee Viktor Lowenfeld, eventually receiving his doctorate in 1954. He spent more than 30 years teaching art at Texas Southern University in Houston, retiring in 1983.

In *The Garbage Man* (1944), a midsize oil on board, he offers us a man in a ragged yellow shirt, torn blue pants and shoes without laces pushing a cart in an alley covered with litter. The cart holds a box of fruit and vegetables, a heap of fish, a container of corn and another of melons. All the details in this crowded, precisely painted composition combine to convey an urgent sense of poverty. The man is hunched over, bent by the difficulties in his life, but his expression is resolute to the point of defiance. *The Garbage Man* is an honest expression of hardship, but also a proclamation of survival—the portrait emphasizes the will to live, no matter how harsh the circumstances.

A later work in conté crayon and gouache on paperboard, titled *The Harvesters* (1947), represents the precarious existence of black agricultural workers, whose downcast faces and sagging bodies are depicted in a dark sepia tone. Two women stand at the front of the group, their breasts and bellies clearly visible through the sacklike dresses they are wearing; their thin forms, as well as those of the men, are given vertical emphasis by the rakes that they carry. In *Old Couple* (1946), Biggers zeroes in on the homely attributes of domestic life; the woman sews embroidery while the man reads from a book. There is a sense of well-being: a fire is burning in the hearth to the right of the couple. Biggers, much like Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, gives us a slice of black American life in compellingly honest paintings that do not romanticize the circumstances being portrayed.



John Biggers: *Old Couple*, 1946, oil on board, 40 by 32 inches; at Michael Rosenfeld.

Unlike Lawrence and Bearden, however, Biggers wasn't much influenced by modernism. Instead, he fashioned his own distinctive realist style in which the struggle of his people is made clear by carefully rendered scenes of near destitution. The results continue to be deeply moving. —Jonathan Goodman

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