

ARTFORUM

Sadie Barnette: "Sadie Barnette @ Fort Gansevoort Gallery"

By Chloe Wyma
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Sadie Barnette, *My Father's FBI File: Government Employee* (detail), 2017, five ink-jet prints, each 22 x 17".

On the ground floor of Sadie Barnette's solo exhibition, a group of five framed and enlarged COINTELPRO- era documents, sporadically misted with passages of black and hot-pink spray paint, reported that Rodney Ellis Barnette was observed wearing a postal uniform at a meeting of the Black Panther Party in Los Angeles on December 18, 1968. Barnette, we learned, was also "living with a woman to whom he was not married" at the time and, on June 6, 1969, received a letter from the US Civil Service Commission advising that he did "not meet the suitability requirements for employment in the competitive Federal service because of immoral conduct." Titled *My Father's FBI File: Government Employee*, 2017, this cache of documents revealing the FBI's covert dismissal of Rodney Barnette, father of the artist and founder of the Compton, California, chapter of the Black Panther Party - is part of the Sadie's Barnette's ongoing project, *My Father's FBI File*, 2016-. In this body of work, Barnette detourns documents from five hundred pages of surveillance - obtained by the Barnette family via the Freedom of Information Act - into text-based artworks touched with stains and semi-transparent fields of aerosol paint.

The title of Barnette's show, "Compland," invokes a fictive space subsuming Compton and Oakland,

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California, '90s hip-hop, and '60s Black Power. Blackness - its social constructions, structures of signification, material cultures, oppressions, and modes of resistance - is pronounced and urgent in Barnette's work. The color pink also presents again and again, from baby to bubble-gum to hot fuchsia, in the pulsating chevrons of Barnette's tessellated photo-wallpaper that showed a child sitting in a wicker "Huey Newton" chair; in the bags of Hello Kitty cotton candy strewn around the gallery; and in an acrylic glitter bar - part object, part sculpture - installed on the third floor. Pink spelled out PRESTO DINERO (I LEND MONEY) on a Spanish-language payday loan sign, supplied the ground in the abstract painting Untitled (Black dots on pink), 2016, and popped from behind a chain-link fence embellished with Swarovski crystals in the photograph Untitled (Pink fence sparkle), 2017.

In the photocollage Untitled (Pointing in pink), 2017, a tiny foreshortened cutout of Rodney Barnette stood inside a glittering artery that tunneled into a depthless pink hole. The work belongs to a group, displayed in a salon-style hang, where vernacular photographs - some of the artist's family members, others taken on the streets of Oakland- are ensconced within sparkling, crystalline surfaces. While one might assume that such embellishment would occlude the photos' evidentiary status, or even seem to mockingly undercut their value as documents or testimony, the effect was the rhinestone appliques - supplemented and amplified the viewer's sense of these photographs as indexical traces of the real.

In perhaps the deepest and most ambitious piece of criticism of Barnette's work to date, Sampada Aranke has situated the artist within "contemporary black radical aesthetic practices that [...] ineluctably trouble, if not unravel, the panoptic qualities of the visual itself" and "disturb visibility as a measure of black presence." Dramatizing the spray paint's obfuscatory force on the text, Aranke's reading of My Father's FBI File foregrounds an anti-ocular turn in black aesthetics that values opacity as a strategy of resistance against policing and surveillance, as well as a deliverance from retrograde and essentialist expectations that artists of color "represent the race" in sloganeering or ethnographic ways. Nonetheless, it seems counterintuitive to read a body of work that so explicitly stages the operations of transparency, exposé, and enlightenment according to their opposites. In its revelatory capacity, "Compland" embarrasses current center-liberal fantasies of the deep state as a beneficent and redemptive force in American politics. It also forces a confrontation between art's communicative and abstracting potencies, between depth and surface, opacity and iridescence. Better than critiquing ocularcentrism, Barnette exposes the brilliance in its contradictions.

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