



Sadie Barnette: "The Woman Making Art out of the FBI's Surveillance of Her Black Panther Father"

By Gabby Bess

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Civil rights activist Rodney Barnette was under government surveillance for over 10 years. Now his daughter, Sadie, has turned his 500-page FBI file into art.



Photos Courtesy of the Artist

Artist Sadie Barnette's first solo exhibition, *Do Not Destroy*, illuminates what government surveillance looks like when the state declares you an enemy: It is invasive, indiscriminately thorough, and ruthlessly unjust. This much is clear when you walk into the Baxter St. gallery at the Camera Club of New York and are visually assaulted by the mass of documents—culled from the files the FBI maintained on Barnette's father Rodney, who was the founder of the Black Panther Compton chapter—barely readable, covering the long, main wall.

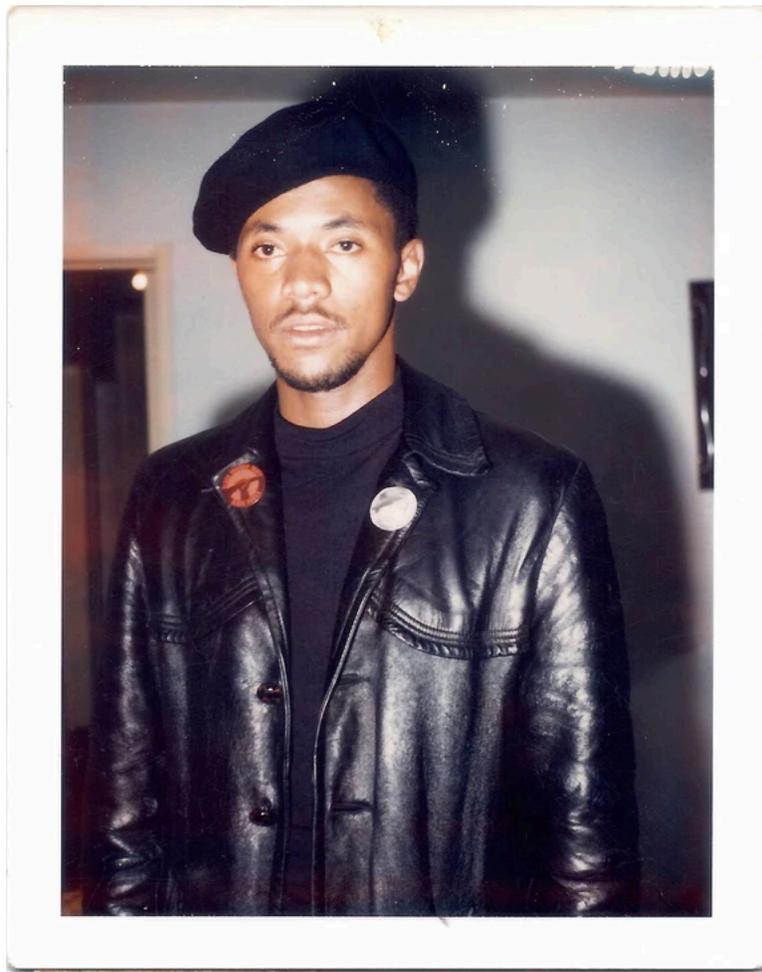
From 1966 to 1977, the FBI surveilled the elder Barnette because of his work in the racial justice movement after he came home from the Vietnam War. His 500-page FBI docket covers the years he was active in the Black Panthers from 1968 to 1969 and also includes reports by informants on his banal day-to-day activities at the post office, where he worked at the time, and even interviews with his childhood teachers and neighbors. This was part of a larger surveillance operation on black political organizers, wherein the goal was to destroy the lives of civil rights organizers and by extension the entire movement. As a result, Black Panther Party activists like Fred Hampton were killed, others were jailed, and many more lived constantly under those threats.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

But the dialogue that the show engages in is not one of victimhood: If you look closer at the paperwork that lines the gallery, you'll see small stickers in the shape of jeweled crowns, and playful, pink spatters of paint. This is the younger Barnette's hand. She sought to transform the government's violence against her father into something they could no longer cover up. Through Barnette's lens, the documents reveal her father's lifelong commitment to civil rights, which includes his role in supporting Angela Davis through her 1972 trial by driving her to court and acting as her bodyguard and strategist when he was a college student in the Bay Area.

"The intention of the file was to suppress his story and his struggle," Barnette told me over the phone when I caught up with her before the exhibition launched last week. "From what I understand, this file is supposed to be so secret and for us to put it on a wall, I think, has made him feel some ownership over his work and this information and his life." Indeed, at the opening, her father stood underneath a picture of himself, smiling; he said he felt free.



January 2017 marked the 50th anniversary of the Black Panther Party. We talked to the artist about her reclaiming her dad's legacy and why we must all fight against government suppression of activists and people of color now that digital surveillance techniques have only heightened the threat.

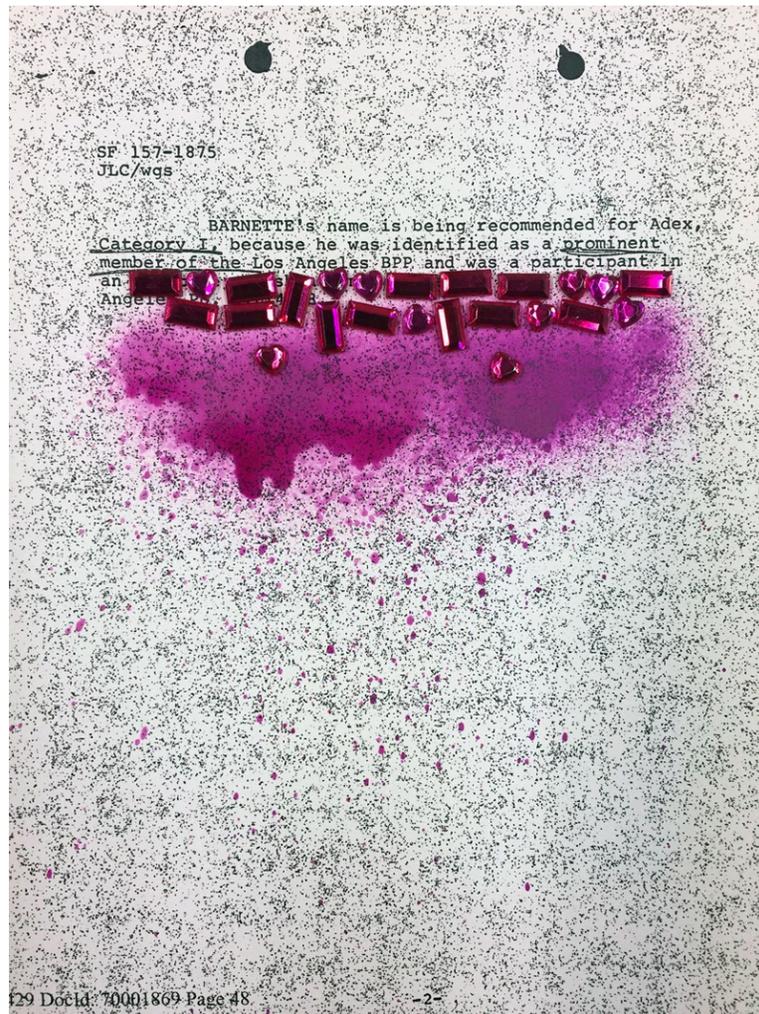
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BROADLY: It's overwhelming to see what it looks like, visually, when your every move is tracked by the government. When did your dad first become aware that he was under FBI surveillance?

Sadie Barnette: It was always known in the Black Panther Party, and among other anti-war activists. At the time, they were under not only surveillance, but the party was infiltrated with informants. Sometimes FBI agents would present themselves as agents in order to intimidate people and sometimes it was more covert. But it wasn't until a few years ago that my dad wanted to request his FBI file.

I think, for a lot of people, it's emotional and maybe not something that they really want to have firsthand contact with, but my dad really wanted the validation. He wanted to know what experiences he had that were a result of interaction with the FBI. So he requested the file through a filing FOIA request and it took about three years to get the files. What we received was over 500 pages of surveillance documenting my father's whereabouts, interviewing every employer he's ever had, interviewing his high school teacher, his neighbors, all of his siblings, and observing him getting on airplanes. It was just a really intense level of surveillance.



**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

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When did you decide that you wanted to turn the documents into a show? What was that process like?

I always knew that it would be amazing primary source material for an artwork. I didn't exactly know what form it would take. The content is so powerful and it's also really personal. It's really heavy. So I wasn't sure what to do with it at first. I knew that we wanted to use these files to do something productive which is, like, to have this conversation about what dissent means and what it means to protest against the government, which is our constitutional right.

The way I ended up approaching the artwork was with a fairly minimal intervention on my part. I really wanted the files to speak for themselves. I added these splashes of spray paint—mostly pink and some black spray paint. Some people think it references tagging or graffiti, and interpret it as my generation looking back at my father's generation. Some people think it looks like bullet holes or blood splatters. There's a reference to violence there. I also think of the pink as this little girl looking at her dad—like father-daughter, daddy's girl conversation. My dad is a person who I look up to as a hero. He's someone who I think was so brave and generous for dedicating his life to fighting for more people than just himself, but the FBI considered him an extremist and put him on the ADEX Category I list, which is a list of people who could be rounded up and detained in an emergency situation without due process.

The other art intervention element is the rhinestones I used to adorn some of the pages. It's an act of reclaiming, but it's also a loving act to try to heal this violent, aggressive surveillance. My dad was really lucky because it wasn't just that the FBI was surveilling people; people were murdered at the time, people are still in jail. Mumia Abu-Jamal's case is widely known and yet he's still in jail. We're celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Black Panthers, but he's celebrating from a jail cell.

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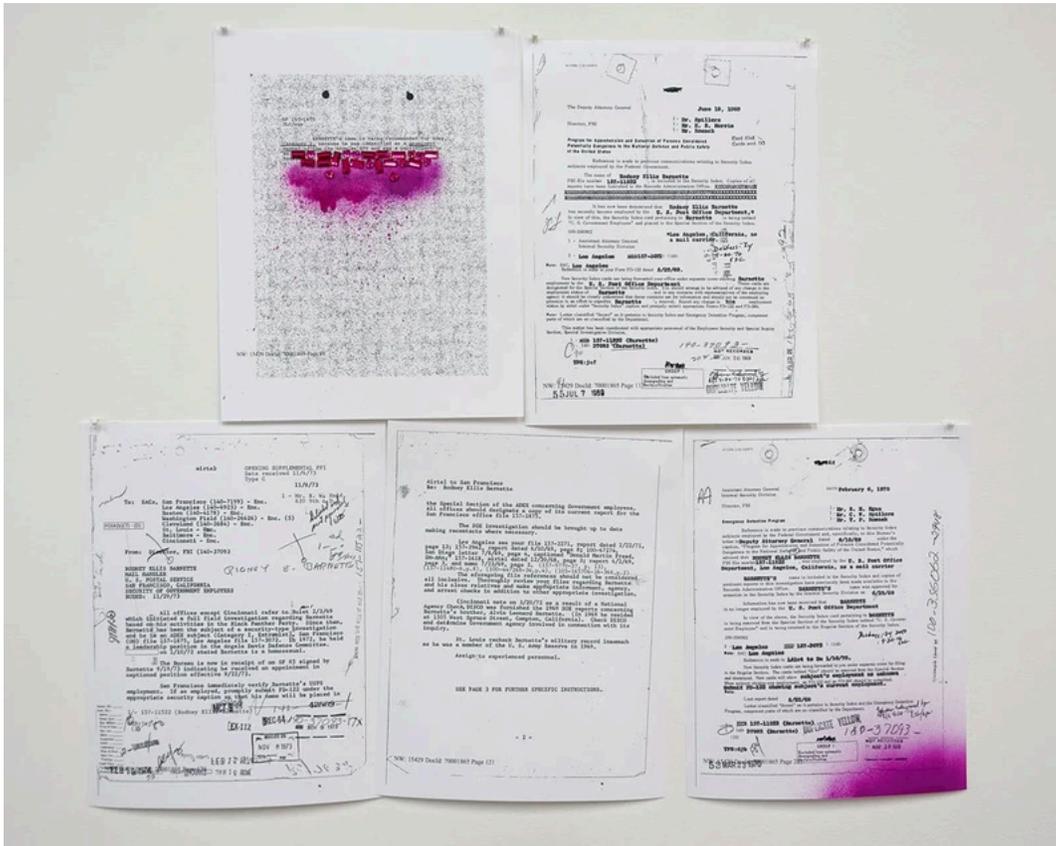
-Sadie Barnette

Right. It's also frightening to think about how, at the same time all of this secretive surveillance was occurring, black community organizers were also being publicly demonized so that any action by the government taken against them was seen as acceptable. It's was an entire campaign of managing perception so that the Black Panthers were seen as radical terrorists instead of real people trying to assert their humanity. We see the same sort things happening with the Black Lives Matter Movement, which has also been under surveillance.

I definitely want people to extend this work to the conversation that's happening now. I think it's super important. The levels of surveillance obviously now look a lot different because of digital communication. You don't need to literally follow someone around because you can tell where they are. With the Patriot Act, a lot of people were ready to sign away their rights to privacy in the name of national security. I don't think that less privacy leads to more civility. I think it leads to less ability for people to hold the government accountable.

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SILVERMAN**

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There's so much information contained in your dad's FBI file. It's almost laughable because most of it is so mundane and pointless. There's one document that's like, "Subject started working at the post office today." Did the FBI's surveillance of your dad come up with anything to use against him?

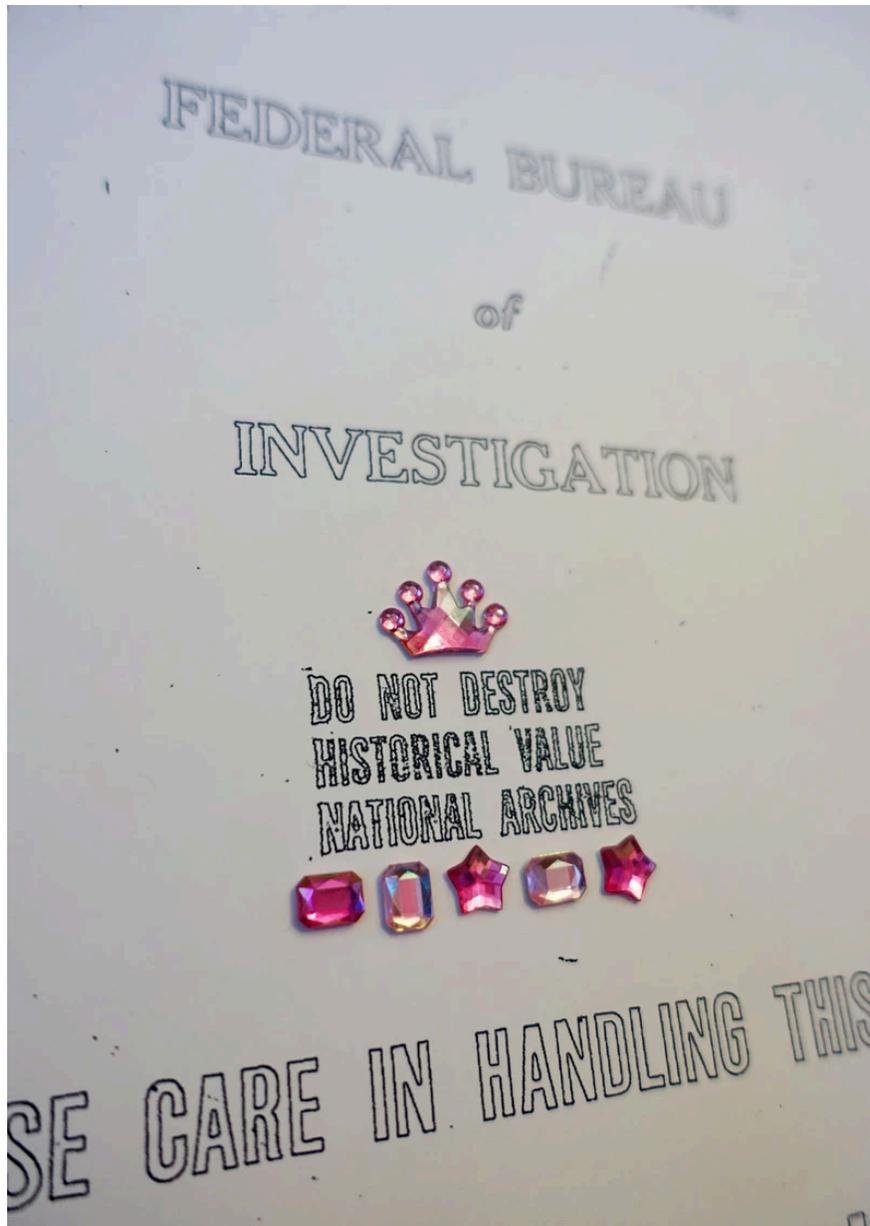
They couldn't find anybody to say anything bad about my dad. Which is a testament to my dad's personality, but it also points out the futility of this mass surveillance. It doesn't work.

The thing with the post office was an informant observed him at one of the Black Panther meetings in his post office uniform; he was a letter carrier. So because he was a government employee they were surveilling him under the guise of security of government employees. They found out he was living with a woman who he wasn't married to at the time. This was 1972 and everyone's living with people they're not married with. They had a child and they were very much a family. But [the FBI] had him fired from the post office for behavior unbecoming of a government employee: cohabiting with a woman he wasn't married to. Although, obviously, it really was because he was an activist and that was the real behavior they thought was unbecoming.

The law that they used, which talked about behavior of a government employee, was a law that Truman put onto the books, Executive Order 10450. It was actually enacted to kick gay people out of government jobs. So, to me, it's really one of those examples where people think a law might not affect them—like, *Oh that only affects immigrants, that affects Muslims, that's not me.* But these laws can be used against whomever the government decides is an enemy at that time. So they had him fired.

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Is it strange to have this deep history documented from this perspective? It's almost like a family album authored by an aggressive, violent force.

There's a sort of cognitive dissonance when you look at it because it has all the birth dates of all my dad's siblings, he's one of 11 children. It lists all the apartments he lived in that he may have forgotten about or neighbors that he didn't remember. In a way you're reading this information like, "Oh, I remember that!" and you're filled with this joy and then you remember that the reason you're reading this document is because all those people were under a threat. This wasn't history that was recorded because you have such a wonderful family, but because the government considers you an extremist and considers you an enemy, even though my dad had just come back from fighting in the Vietnam War.

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Was there ever any sort of apology for what your father went through on behalf of the US or an address to your family from the government?

Nope! Definitely not. I wonder now that we're making this public artwork if at any point anyone from that standpoint will be aware of it or have anything to say about it. But yeah nope. I think if anything it's just intensified for activists today.

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