

# ARTFORUM

Sadie Barnette: "Sadie Barnette @ Charlie James Gallery"

By Andy Campbell

March 2019



View of "Sadie Barnette," 2018. All works untitled, 2018.

In Sadie Barnette's photographic collage Untitled (Pink Diamond/ Jump), 2016, the gleaming facets of a pink diamond adjoin the upper torso of a young black girl playing in a bounce house. Part of the artist's recent solo presentation, evocatively titled "Black Sky," this image contains references to stereotypical girl culture and class aspiration, both of which were consistently and vibrantly invoked throughout Barnette's expansive, multiroom installation. The upper gallery featured paintings, photographs, collages, and light boxes, while the lower space, set up to function as a living room or den, complete with an iridescent couch, was drenched in hot-pink paint and carpeting.

The work was hung within the salon-style arrangement of the lower space, and thus assumed a familiarity and informality. In conjoining the photographs of the gemstone and the girl (could it be Barnette?), the artist offered the old saw of abstraction versus representation, but also revealed the ways in which each is bound up with the other. The pink diamond is both an accessory marketed to young girls within heteronormative culture and an extension of the overt gendering that begins (increasingly, annoyingly) with "gender reveal" parties. This is Barnette's wheelhouse, as she has a particular gift for getting into the rough with "girl culture," both adoring

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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

its dazzling properties and critiquing its pernicious effects. But the halving of the otherwise joyous figure, frozen in midair, disturbed any potential for this work to be read as a representation of an uncomplicated childhood utopia.

Building on these themes and on the geometry of the alluring facets, matrices of various kinds recurred in the exhibition, suggesting at times unity or obstruction. One of the most entrancing examples was *Untitled (Fence)*, 2018, a black-and-white photograph of the whirling shadows cast by a chain-link fence onto the industrial privacy screen covering it. Barnette carefully placed multicolor Swarovski crystals at the intersections of the chain links. The result is a formal investigation that both swells and collapses with Barnette's incisive use of gendered materials. *Untitled (From Here)*, 2018, a Risograph print appearing elsewhere in the exhibition, echoed the form with a smattering of layered spray-paint marks. Sprinkled among these was the repeated phrase from here, as though the dots were merely points on a map. This message was given a Janus-faced specificity in *Untitled (Compton)*, 2018, one of three shelf displays downstairs, wherein Barnette positioned a black- and pink version of *Untitled (From Here)* as a literal background for a combination of objects installed on a pink shelf: two gold-glitter encrusted crushed beer cans, a floral baseball cap embroidered with the word *compton* in black letter font, and an Oakland Raiders souvenir glass. That Compton and Oakland—two California cities with significant black populations, each of which Barnette lists as her domicile—are separated by more than three hundred fifty miles further attenuates the seeming straightforwardness of the assemblage.

Home as a place of safety and intrusion served as another key theme throughout Barnette's show. In one evocative installation, a gilded mirror was hung on top of a piece of crinkly gold paper (in a playfully tacky doubling of reflective material) and placed kitty-corner to a photograph of a young Barnette wearing sunglasses and holding a pink bear, her hair gathered into a glorious side pony. Two stickers of cars were placed above her shoulders, as if mechanical familiars. In this photograph, which could be viewed straight on or via the mirror, Barnette appeared to be at ease, performing a child's version of cool. Though a seemingly minor arrangement within the scope of the installation, this pairing strategically deployed the opposing effects of reflectivity and opacity—by means of the looking glass and the aloof sunglasses—to bolster a larger argument about home as a place of family, politics, and surveillance. For example, hanging nearby were two large prints that appropriated formerly confidential documents from the FBI file dedicated to Barnette's father (an organizer of the Black Panthers), in which key passages were redacted with iridescent tape. Hiding information under the shine, Barnette provocatively used the supposedly innocuous "girly" material to reveal the entanglement of family history, social revolution, and governmental suppression in her own childhood.

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

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