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Sadie Barnette: “Guggenheim Curator Ashley James Lives for ‘Unanticipated Epiphanies’”

By Brooke Marine

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Image courtesy of Jens Schott Knudsen.

“There are cycles in a curatorial life,” says Ashley James, the new associate curator of contemporary art at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. One morning, she may start her day by showing up to the museum and installing a show, but in between exhibitions, a lot of the job is just handling emails and trying to find time to read.

Still, being a curator does have its perks when it comes to what James calls “unanticipated epiphanies”—of which she had a few while curating her debut show at the Guggenheim. Opening April 2, [“Off the Record”](#) seeks to interrupt the supposed authority of the journalistic document. And as the press statement notes, the title of the show can also be read in its verb form, “off the record” as in “kill the record”—kill the idea that a historical document, archive, or journalistic reporting is the only form of absolute truth. Works by Sadie Barnette, [Glenn Ligon](#), [Carlos Motta](#), [Adrian Piper](#), Lorna Simpson, [Hank Willis Thomas](#), and [Carrie Mae Weems](#) are included in the show.

In her Culture Diet, James takes us through a day in the life of a curator, talks about being the ultimate Adrian Piper stan (her dissertation incorporates a quote from the artist’s *Mythic Being* series, “*Moist, Fleshy, Pulsating Surfaces*”: *Seeing and Reading Black Life After Experientiality*) and lets us in on her favorite art-related Instagram account to follow.

“Off the Record” is your debut show curated for the Guggenheim. Where did the idea for this exhibit come from?

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I had just arrived and was looking through particularly recent acquisitions to get myself acquainted with the collection. One of the first works that I was really interested in was Sadie Barnette's *My Father's FBI File; Government Employees Installation*; I was interested in what she was doing with the document. Looking through other collection works, I began to see a pattern around a number of conceptual and photo artists who were intervening upon the document in some way—calling attention to its biases or the specific information it had or refuting the information it contained. On the other hand, I think the show reflects my own background in Black studies and a skepticism of archives and mainstream history that is very much the backbone of Black studies.

You recently completed your Ph.D. at Yale University with a background in Black studies and English literature, and it has been noted that you are the first full-time Black curator at the Guggenheim. As you step into that role, how do you feel about being a pioneer, of sorts?

My skepticism of the document extends to my skepticism of all kinds of contextualizations. When I think about something like the “first” I always see myself within a network. I can only ever have imagined myself in any job because of a large network of mentors, advisors, people that I've seen do the things I wanted to do. There's a way in which I think firstness can disconnect you from a very strong lineage, which I see myself a part of even if it's not tied to a specific institution. So in that sense, I feel like I entered the Guggenheim and I'm still at the Guggenheim with a great amount of enthusiasm for the possibilities of presenting artists. That is always what motivates me. That is the case, no matter where I am.

Before you became a curator, who was the first artist that caught your eye?

I don't know that I have an origin story, per se. In the context of my belatedness, because I did not study the art history discipline in undergrad or grad school, a turning point—when I began to see my place in curatorial and art historical research—was when I started writing my dissertation on Adrian Piper. She is a guiding light for me as an artist, a person, and a thinker. Through her work, I began to understand where the issues that I was and am interested in, in a sociopolitical context, intersect with what is understood of removed, theoretical, highly conceptual questions. In studying her work, so many legacies opened up to me at the same time. She presented an example of artists who needed to be studied very seriously and then presented very seriously—between writing on her, and [working on her retrospective at MoMA](#). And she's in “Off the Record,” which is such a pleasure to be able to have her in my first show here.

What are some other art retrospectives you've seen and particularly enjoyed?

I loved [Howardena Pindell's retrospective at MCA Chicago](#), which was co-curated by Naomi Beckwith—who is an incoming chief curator at Guggenheim—and Valerie Cassel Oliver. I love Pindell, similar to reasons why I appreciate Piper. Seeing the trajectory of an artist's life of thinking, and being able to trace how one idea led to another is the joy of being able to see a retrospective. By the end, you can see there were seeds of what their career would be, and it's wonderful to see process when you can. At Pindell's retrospective it included one of her stencils to which she would apply paint to get the sort of pointillism that some of her canvasses present. That was a lovely look into the behind-the-scenes process.

What's the biggest revelation you've had while curating your first show for the Guggenheim?

I always learn something. When you're making your show, you have your checklist, you've chosen the works and know why they all fit within the scope of the show. Then, when you place them in space, it opens up this additional level of information, additional opportunity, because you're literally seeing things in relation to one another. I love the unanticipated epiphanies that happen in the negotiation of space.

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Sadie Barnette, *My Father's FBI File; Government Employees Installation*, 2017. Five archival pigment prints, 22 x 17 in. (55.9 x 43.2 cm), edition 3/5. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Purchased with funds contributed by the Young Collectors Council, with additional funds contributed by Peter Boyce II 2018.57. © Sadie Barnette. Courtesy Fort Gansevoort

What else did you not anticipate, but begin to notice once you started to install the works?

In hindsight, there are interesting punctuations of color. There are some pink moments that are very interesting to me; the Barnette piece *My Father's FBI File* is a good example. That was the first work, so it was always there, but after seeing things in relation to each other, it had me think a bit about why that color is drawn upon within this context of the revision of the document. As one would see in the show, black and white is so key to the concept of the authoritative document, the objective document. And pink emerges as this kind of unruly, decidedly feminine, subjective counterpoint to this masculinist, authoritative, objective realm of the “record.” It made me rethink Piper’s work, which has red or pink ink. There’s printed text and a screen print of a young Anita Hill, and seeing it next to Barnette’s piece allowed me to see Piper’s work in color in a different light as well.

How else did you decide to incorporate color into this show?

I love working with graphic designers because they bring a new skillset. Working at its best, graphic design will take your idea, enhance it, and bring it to a different aspect of the project. The graphic designers took the Manila folder as their inspiration. The Manila folder is the container for documents, and that golden-yellow color is on the title wall. What I love about the Manila folder is that in addition to being a beautiful color, it brought me down this rabbit hole of searching Manila folders, which are from Manila, Philippines. The folder gets its name because it was, in its original context, processed from the Manila plants, which is like a banana plant. That was a huge revelation because the literal material that records exist within are implicated in all of these questions that these artists are taking up in terms of content, like imperialism and colonialism. You cannot escape it. The most supposedly benign thing—a simple folder for containing documents—is so wrapped up in processes and hierarchies of power, down to the literal pulp.

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Leslie Hewitt, *Riffs on Real Time (3 of 10)*, 2006–09. Chromogenic print, 30 x 24 inches (76.2 x 61 cm), edition 5/5. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Purchased with funds contributed by the Photography Committee 2010.55. © Leslie Hewitt. Courtesy of Leslie Hewitt/Guggenheim

Let's get into the Culture Diet questions—what's the first thing you do when you wake up?

Right now, I come to the museum and install. It's very different in the lead-up to a show. It can sometimes be like any other office job, where you're responding to inquiries about your collection. If you're looking to acquire something into the collection or you're doing research on the collection, or working on a show, no matter what, you're always reading about an artist and writing about the artist. That's the most consistent thing.

What books are you currently reading?

I'm reading a lot about Ellen Gallagher. That's my research interest right now. I also like to read anything about the artists in my shows and answering a lot of questions and doing a lot of tours. Once a show is up, we spend a lot of time speaking with different groups about the show.

Do you have any social media accounts you love to follow?

I like [@HoodMidCenturyModern](#). This guy basically takes photos of mid-century modern buildings. He just made a print with Solange on top of the Guggenheim.

Any television shows keeping you up at night?

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I watch a lot of TV. [Laughs.] I have different categories of reality shows. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is currently on, and I'll watch *Married to Medicine*, which started a couple of weeks ago. I have my comfort TV, which are usually procedurals. Television has been in a bit of a hiatus because of Covid, so there are a lot of shows that have not come back yet. But I'm definitely caught up on the [Bravo side of things](#).

Are there any songs on repeat for you?

My favorite album this year was [Haim](#), *Women In Music Pt. III*. I listen to a lot of [FKA Twigs](#). Even though she doesn't have a new record out, I listen to her album on a loop.

What's the last thing you do before bed?

I hate that the answer is just "scroll." [Laughs.] But I also definitely say good night to my cat. I am on social until I fall asleep.

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