



Sadie Barnette: "ANGELA DAVIS - SEIZE THE TIME Now Open at Zimmerli Art Museum"

By Alex Criscitiello

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Wadsworth Jarrell, "Revolutionary," May 20, 1972, color screenprint on paper. Lisbet Tellefsen Archive. © Wadsworth Jarrell.

Angela Davis - Seize the Time is on view at the Zimmerli from September 1, 2021, to June 15, 2022 and will travel to the Oakland Museum of California

A groundbreaking exhibition documents the image, influence, and activism of [Angela Davis](#). [Angela Davis](#)-Seize the Time was developed at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, where it is now on view. With some 220 objects, Seize the Time not only examines Davis's arrest, incarceration, trial and the national and international campaigns to free her, but also positions her as a continuing touchstone for contemporary artists.

Rutgers co-curators Donna Gustafson, the Zimmerli's interim director and curator of American art and Mellon Director for Academic Programs, and Gerry Beegan, professor in Art & Design at Rutgers' Mason Gross School of the Arts, present a compelling and layered narrative of Davis's journey from incarceration to freedom as told through archival materials and contemporary art.

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"The events of 1969 to 1972 launched a young, Black UCLA philosophy professor into international prominence, making her image an icon of hope and a symbol of Black resistance," Gustafson said. "An extraordinary international campaign eventually overcame the full power of the American state: J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, California governor [Ronald Reagan](#), and President Richard Nixon, who were united in their determination to silence her."

Beegan added, "The archive includes multiple, sometimes contradictory, viewpoints on Davis from these few intense years, from wanted posters to newspaper reports, court sketches, and press photos, on the one hand, to many images made by supporters in England, France, Cuba, the USA, and behind the Iron Curtain. How was she seen by these different groups and how can this story be recalled now?"

The exhibition introduces newcomers to this controversial American activist and intellectual, but also provides opportunities for those familiar with Davis to delve into rarely seen materials. The exhibition is inspired by and centered on a collection compiled by Oakland archivist Lisbet Tellefsen. The sense of the archive as an active communal conversation shaped the conception of the exhibition. Davis has always seen herself as part of a community, a collective of brothers and sisters working for judicial reform and racial equity.

This rich accumulation of historically grounded material is interwoven with the work of contemporary artists in a productive tension between past and present. The artists included in the exhibition - Sadie Barnette, [Mel Edwards](#), Renée Green, Yevgeniy Fiks, Steffani Jemison, Juan Sanchez, Carrie Schneider, among others - further expand our focus to explore how images, music, and words actualize and revisit communal memories of Davis and the issues that she has been committed to for more than fifty years.

The exhibition opens with material from the spring of 1969, when Davis was offered a teaching position at UCLA, which was rescinded, reinstated, and ultimately terminated - all within about a year's time - because of her membership in the Communist Party and her political activism. In the summer of 1970, she was accused of involvement in a shootout that resulted in the death of four men, including a superior court judge. Having witnessed the violent repression of the Black Power Movement and fearful for her life, Davis went underground, spending months as a fugitive, until her arrest in New York City in the fall. Denied bail, she spent the next 16 months in jails in New York and California. During this time, the white media painted Davis as a dangerous Black radical, but her image also became a key weapon in an unprecedented international effort to free an incarcerated Black woman. The work of Black artists who produced art in support of Davis, including Faith Ringgold, Elizabeth Catlett, and Wadsworth Jarrell, are shown in the galleries alongside anonymous posters by activists.

Davis's trial began in February 1972 and is presented through television footage, magazines, press photography, court sketches, and legal writings. In June, the all-white jury returned a verdict of not guilty on all counts. While many saw the trial as proof of American justice, Davis and others stated that the only fair trial would have been no trial at all.

Works by contemporary artists assert Davis's significance in a broader narrative. Coco Fusco's 2004 video *a/k/a Mrs. [George Gilbert](#)* critically looks at the FBI's frenzied pursuit of Davis and the arrest and harassment of young Black women whose natural hairstyles aligned them with images of Davis. Sadie Barnette's installation focuses on the FBI's surveillance and pursuit of Black radicals,

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including her father Rodney Barnette, who was a Black Panther and acted as bodyguard for [Angela Davis](#). A new installation by artists Steffani Jemison and [Justin Hicks](#) engages with Black history and memory with references to [Angela Davis](#), Nina Simone, and [Lorraine Hansberry](#). The work points to the elusive experience of being "present in passing," and connects to the exploration of restlessness, migration, and fugitivity.

Upon her release, Davis resumed her academic and teaching career, publishing foundational writing on intersectional feminism, such as *Women Race and Class*, and engaging in the ongoing struggle for justice and prison abolition.

A series of exhibition-related programs are scheduled throughout the academic year, kicking off with Three Archival Events in October (check the museum website for more details). In addition, the exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue of the same title, which is available in the museum and from Hirmer Publishers and [The University of Chicago Press](#).

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