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Sadie Barnette: "Q&A: Dr. Ashley James on 'Off the Record' and the limits of documents"

By Lauren Harris

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Sadie Barnette and her father, Rodney Ellis Barnette, in front of Winfield Street, 2018.

Photo credit: Ally Green/For The Times

DOCUMENTS ARE THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF JOURNALISM. Reporters depend on them in order to shape their inquiries and develop their narratives. We also create them, producing stories across a range of media, much of which shapes public notions of the historical record. A document—be it a government record, a photograph, a newspaper, or a coloring book—is a vessel for power, a product of forces, often covert, that shape understanding.

"Off the Record"—an exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum whose run concludes on September 27—calls these dynamics to our attention. For one work, Sadie Barnette used spray paint to tag FBI records on her father, who was surveilled after founding a Black Panther Party chapter; the work "deforms the notion of the sterile, objective, and authoritative state archive, and reclaims the history as subjective and hers for the taking," an accompanying note reads. For another, Carrie Weems retrieved and built upon daguerreotype images of enslaved Africans taken by a naturalist "to make purportedly factual, though categorically false declarations justifying the dehumanization of Black people." The exhibit "questions the vaunted 'objectivity' of journalistic reporting and historical 'fact,' Holland Cotter [wrote for the New York Times](#).

The show, whose title repurposes journalism's best-known phrase, interrogates forms of authoritative communication and expression, including the news; it performs an act of media criticism in the broadest sense. "There really isn't an objective truth, which is a main theme," Dr.

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Ashley James, the show's curator, told *Essence* earlier this year. "No single record should have the power of saying everything." James, recently spoke with CJR about art as media criticism, how media forms meaning, and the role of self-reflection in producing information. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.



"My Father's FBI File; Government Employees Installation," by Sadie Barnette. Image courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

CJR: How did this exhibition come about?

"My Father's FBI File," by Sadie Barnette, sparked this larger idea, which is artists who are engaging with documents—written, photographic, even things that we wouldn't think of as "documents" per se, like a coloring book—as a way of speaking to a specific history, and also picking up this concept of history, writ large, and how it's constructed.

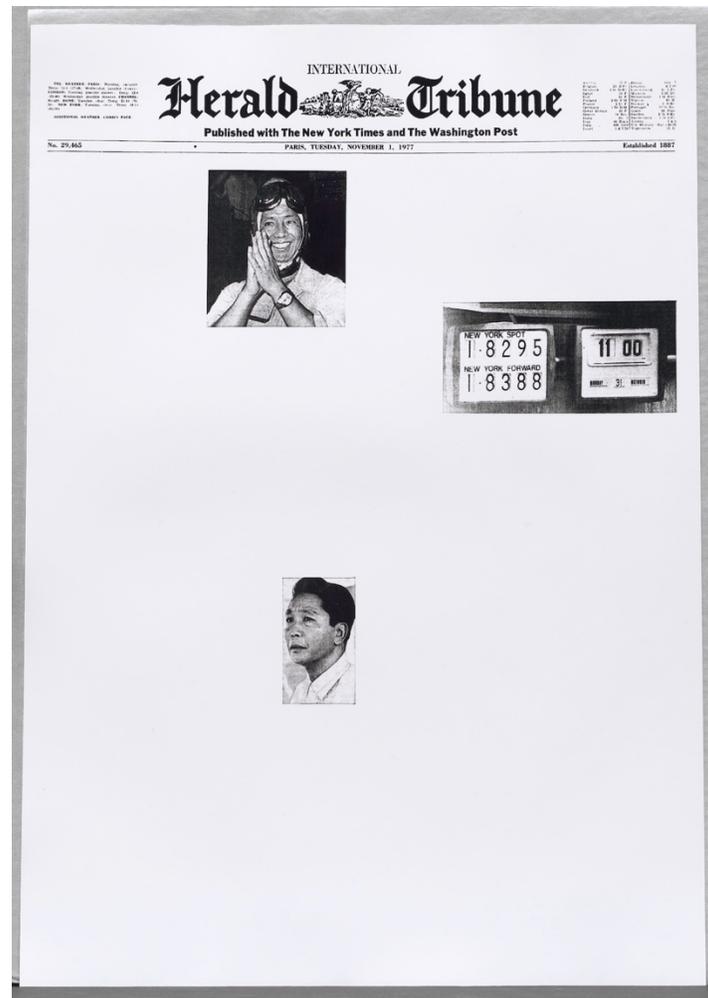
Sadie's work features pink and black spray paint against her father's FBI files. Those gestures are conceptually complex, but materially simple—refined gestures that carry a lot of meaning. They speak back to the very destructive history that these FBI files represent, but also to the FBI in general, to what it means to surveil.

Part of the argument that a number of these works make is that there are invisible forces that we don't see when we engage with any kind of document, whether because of their circulation—like with newspapers—or because of their authority—like with history books. The invisible things are the people who made them, the editors, all the history that preceded them. What the artist can do is make those forces visible.

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Sarah Charlesworth's work, for example, masks the text on the front pages of newspapers, which then makes the images hypervisible and allows you to see what is already there by bringing it to the surface in a clearer way. Making it visible. One could argue that artists have a certain kind of facility with materials, and as such, they're able to aesthetically make these things come to light.



"Herald Tribune: November 1977," by Sarah Charlesworth. Image courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

The note next to Charlesworth's work says that "media is implicated in the formation of history and even in meaning itself." How did you think about the latter in your work?

This show represents a meeting of a number of different discourses—from our historical discourses around legacies of photo conceptualism to the Black studies critique around who writes history and how it's transmitted. So, in Charlesworth's piece, looking at the *Herald Tribune*: these are the images that are making history. A newspaper is a container for the writing of history. But it's also the bounds of how we begin to understand what history is.

Meaning-making happens around archetypes of power and leadership, and around the hierarchies present in the newspaper itself. Think of the front page: What does it mean to open up a paper to see what's happening elsewhere versus making meaning from what is presented as a

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priority? One step removed from the information itself, there are these frameworks that are also presented to us.

This is also an indictment of the show, too. There are certain conventions of a museum—even just how you move through an exhibition space itself—that govern the way that we understand the show. Even if we say, "It's neutral to move from space to space," it's not, necessarily.

"I am interested in artists who are feeling their way around the limits of things, and either saying what those limits are, or else working within the limit, breaking the limit down. That interplay between what we know and how we know it is interesting."

As you constructed this exhibition—mindful that it is, itself, a construction—how did you determine its limits?

For the most part, this is a show that is post- 1990s, but the Charlesworth from '77 is one preliminary work. There are also literally limits in the structure; there are works that cannot physically fit in here. There are works that conceptually fit but maybe just didn't look good with the rest.

This is a majority Black woman show. Nine of the thirteen artists are Black. There is a version of this where it could be all Black artists—something I wrestled with. Coming from a marginalized position, it makes sense that marginalized people will have a more skeptical relationship to the historical document. It also makes sense to have white women artists who are thinking about gender. It makes sense to have a Latinx artist who's thinking about imperialism in the US.

"Off the Record" encourages visitors, powerfully, to consider the construction of the official record. Is it enough to consider the construction? Is it possible to go beyond that?

There's work here that I see more aligned with making the structures of the record known. But then there are artists like Tamashi Jackson and Leslie Hewitt where I think it's about making a new structure. There's always benefit in knowing the structure—even if it's just so that you proceed with the knowledge that these are the things that are governing your choices. Limits are something that I'm very interested in. What are the limits of knowledge? I am interested in artists who are feeling their way around the limits of things, and either saying what those limits are, or else working within the limit, breaking the limit down. That interplay between what we know and how we know it is interesting.

When this show first began, there were comments about the idea of "fake news." In some ways, the show can feed into this idea that "I don't trust the media because of bias." I understand how one can make that connection. But it's a question of which constructions you keep and which ones you refuse, right? Anything that you think of as progressive media has a specific framework, as does Fox News, but those aren't the same things just because they both have bias. I think it goes back to this question of power. Who has the power?

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Photo by David Heald. Courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Was there a lightbulb moment in your own life where you realized that knowledge is constructed?

I don't know for sure. In undergrad, we read a number of religious texts, talking about what it means to look at something contemporarily versus from a past lens. For me, it felt like one of the first times that "the document" was destabilized as a thing that was self-evident—that could not be another way. Multiple interpretations have come from the same text. This is such a foundational idea in African American Studies: what the archive can say, what it includes, all of those things.

Something that became more clear to me through this show is what we consider relevant cultural objects. Even a coloring book—which is by no means a conventional document—has an ideological underpinning. Everything does. I like leaving the show on that note because it just reminds you to always be thinking about that—even in the most "innocent" spaces.

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