

ARTFORUM

"Critics' Picks: Sadie Barnette"

By Danica Sachs

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View of "Sadie Barnette: Inheritance," 2021-22. From left: Eagle Creek I, 2021, Eagle Creek Neon, 2021, Eagle Creek III, 2021.

Installed in the back corner of this space is Sadie Barnette's large installation, *Family Tree*, 2021, a collection of framed photographs, collages, and drawings that visually map the artist's lineage. From left to right, the work's dominant colors shift to form a rainbow across two walls. Except for one childhood snapshot of Barnette, she is notably absent from all of the photos on display, which mostly feature birthday cakes, plates of food, domestic interiors or exteriors, and gatherings of kin. In the spray-painted drawings, however, the artist elusively positions herself in relation to everyone around her, showing us how she's a niece, sister, or great-great-granddaughter. In this piece and the others that make up "Inheritance," Barnette's solo exhibition here, viewers are invited to join the artist in making sense of her own identity.

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The artist susses out her history by interrogating that of Rodney Ellis Barnette—her father, who’s a rather extraordinary man. He founded the Black Panther Party’s Compton, California, chapter and was the proprietor of Eagle Creek, the first Black-owned gay bar in San Francisco. A diptych of photographs showing her father—one in his military duds, the other in his Black Panther uniform—appear next to an homage to Eagle Creek, which is made up of two photographic still lifes of archival pictures from the bar surrounded by red roses and a glowing pink-neon sculpture that spells out the venue’s name. Nearby, five new works in Barnette’s “FBI Drawings” series, 2016–21, reproduce pages from the massive dossier compiled by the federal agency on her father while he was active with the Black Panthers. These painstakingly made, large-scale drawings feature white texts on black grounds that are playfully covered with stock images of flowers, gems, and Hello Kitty. By pairing these drawings with the other works on display, the artist wittily undermines the state’s surveillant gaze while also making a case for her father’s patriotism. Barnette shows us that identity is a complicated construction, mediated by family, history, and politics.

Sadie Barnette

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