

"Sadie Barnette's family legacies are at the center of S.F. solo show 'Inheritance'"

By Tony Bravo

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Sadie Barnette walks through the space displaying her latest exhibit "Inheritance" at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco, Calif. Friday, November 19, 2021. Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

For Oakland artist Sadie Barnette, family history has been a rich well of inspiration. Her father, Rodney Barnette, was not only a member of the Black Panther Party and the founder of the group's Compton chapter, he also opened the first Black-owned gay bar in San Francisco. Her first solo show at Jessica Silverman, "Sadie Barnette: Inheritance," explores both those legacies and more.

"I was thinking of inheritance both as you inherit wealth or family jewels, and so much of this history is jewel-like to me and precious," Barnette, 37, told The Chronicle. "But also thinking about the inheritance of trauma or what planet we're leaving for people to inherit, thinking of the

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SILVERMAN**

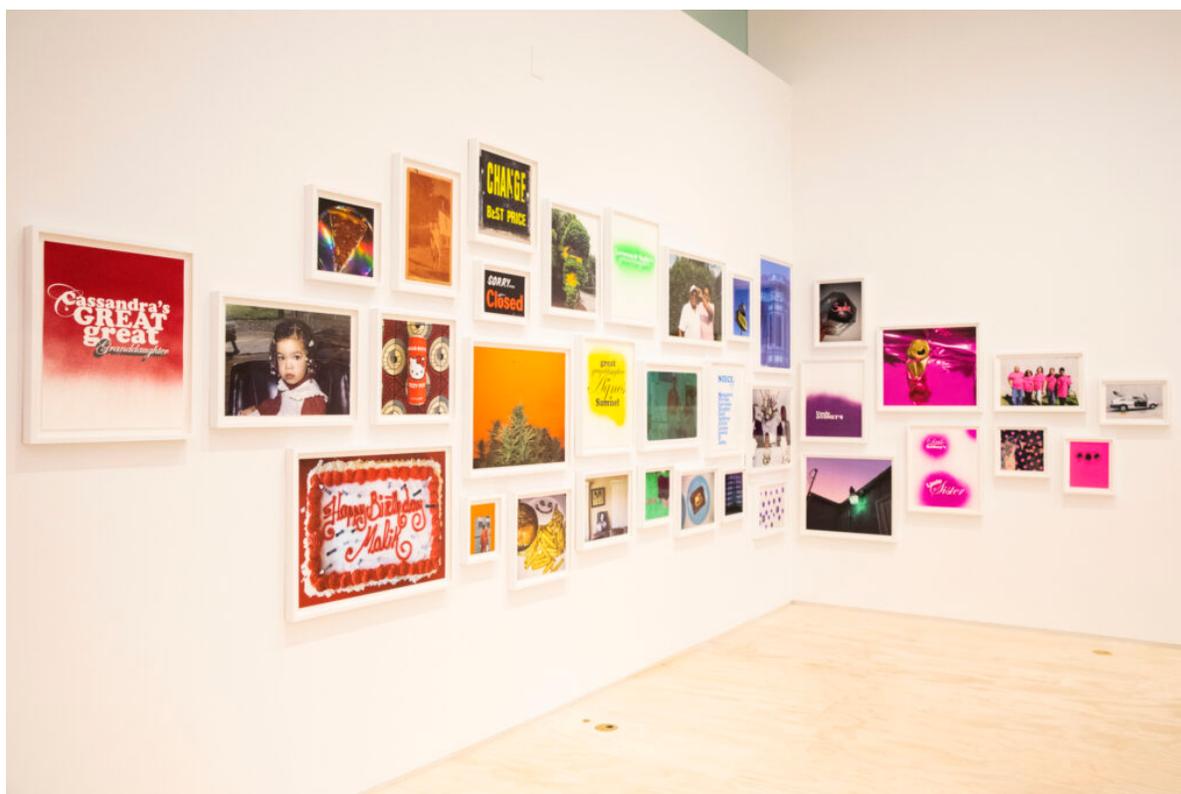
621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

interconnectedness of the good and challenges that are passed down from generation to generation and taking care of that inheritance.”

Her show at the San Francisco gallery runs simultaneously with Barnette’s two-venue exhibition titled “Sadie Barnette: Legacy and Legend,” in Southern California at Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College and Pitzer College Art Galleries, which are on view through until Dec. 18. Barnette was also recently commissioned by the Los Angeles International Airport and the L.A. Department of Cultural Affairs to create a permanent, site-specific installation for a new plaza at the airport slated to be completed in 2024 that will proclaim the words “Sister You Are Welcome Here” in brightly colored terrazzo.

The Chronicle recently walked through Barnette’s show at Jessica Silverman and spoke to the artist about the themes explored in the work.

“I’ve always felt like it’s some people’s job to take care of the future,” Barnette said. “For whatever reason I feel like it’s my job to take care of the past in some ways.”



“Family Tree” from Sadie Barnette’s latest exhibit “Inheritance” at Jessica Silverman. Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

‘Family Tree’

The salon-style, multi-wall grouping of Barnette’s text art, photography and photos of her and paternal relatives speaks to the strong themes of ancestors and family “Inheritance” explores.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

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"Family Tree" was laid out beginning with a text work identifying the artist as "Cassandra's great, great granddaughter."

"She's as far back as we trace our family on my father's side," Barnette noted. "My dad did a lot of family research, that's why we have these giant, 500-person family reunions every two years (where) everyone who is there is a descendant of Cassandra... The story goes she was a Cherokee woman who escaped from enslavement."

Rhinestone embellished images of food recall the sharing of family meals, and throughout the installation the text works function as familial markers. The piece titled "Uncle Rodney's Daughter" is a nod to the role her father plays in the family. A photo showing a portrait of her father's nephew, Eric, who died in the Vietnam War, in his U.S. Army uniform hanging in a relative's home is another clue to her inspiration.

"I'm definitely thinking of this salon wall as a mirroring of those family photo moments where you preserve and tell your history," Barnette said.

While Barnette has done other salon style installations before, gallerist Jessica Silverman said this is arguably her most ambitious. Silverman sees the work as Barnette asking, "Who are those who came before me?" and placing herself in relationship to her ancestors.



**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

A piece from Sadie Barnette's latest exhibit "Inheritance" at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco, Calif. Friday, November 19, 2021. Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

'New Eagle Creek Saloon'

From 1990 to 1993, Sadie Barnette's father Rodney, who identifies as gay, owned and operated the New Eagle Creek Saloon at 1884 Market St., the first Black-owned gay bar in the city. Her project is not a recreation of the bar, which closed in 1993, but explores the space's legacy based on her own aesthetic and what the New Eagle Creek Saloon felt like to her as a daughter and an artist.

"The reason why he set up the bar wasn't that it was his lifelong dream to have a nightclub, it was because of the racism he and his friends experienced when they were going to white gay bars in San Francisco," she said.

That racism included being asked for three forms of ID to enter gay bars, dress and dancing being policed and "generally being met with disdain and disrespect in a moment when you're celebrating yourself, your friends and community and trying to have a drink. He set up the Eagle Creek as a place of refuge for a mixed community."

The wall-mounted bar is one work from a larger series, of which an earlier installation was previously on display at the Mission District arts space known as the Lab. The arching pink neon evokes the bend of a rainbow, a symbol of LGBTQ liberation. Saloon patron Sammy is pictured above the bar, who Barnette calls both an icon of the bar community and "the life of the party." Glitterized, metal-flake aspects of the installation are a signature of Barnette's that recur through the show.

"The bar meant so much to so many people, and I always thought there should be some way to re-create it... some way to not let it just die," Rodney Barnette told The Chronicle, proud of the bar's place in LGBTQ history.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



"FBI Drawings: Legal Ritual" on view at Sadie Barnette's latest exhibit "Inheritance" at Jessica Silverman in San Francisco.
 Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

'FBI Drawings: Legal Ritual'

The 500-page dossier that the FBI compiled on Rodney Barnette during his years as a member of the Black Panther Party and founder of the group's Compton chapter has been an ongoing source of artistic exploration for Sadie Barnette. Earlier incarnations of the "FBI Drawings" series have appeared in the Oakland Museum of California's exhibition "All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50" in 2016.

The text in this latest powdered graphite work documents Rodney Barnette's firing from the United States Postal Service for living with a woman he was not married to.

"We worked to obtain my FBI files because I always wanted to find out the particulars of the derailment of the Panthers by the government," Rodney Barnette said. "When Sadie said she was going to make art with the documents, I couldn't imagine what she would do. I was shocked by the methodology she came up with to re-possess the file, to counteract Hoover and his agents, to use her talent and artistic vision to determine what to highlight and extract from the documents."

While earlier work in the series included color and elements, like pink glitter added to the enlarged copies of pages from the file, Barnette wanted the work in "Inheritance" to move away from color

**JESSICA
 SILVERMAN**

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and feel "strong and big and human-sized" in their black and white boldness. She then used stencils of roses, images of Hello Kitty and diamonds on the pages, an intervention that challenges the masculine authority of the government agency.

"(I was) thinking about roses as this thing of care and healing, and my engaging with the source material as a process of repair," Barnette said. "Not as a destination and 'this is fixed' or 'I've fixed the history of criminalization, and state surveillance and the prison industrial complex with flowers.'"



Textual compositions by Sadie Barnette on display in "Inheritance" at Jessica Silverman. Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

'Sister, Sister,' 'Together, Together, Together' and 'Family Style'

The three text compositions on display in "Inheritance" are created through a process of stenciling and masking, then applying powdered graphite to the paper.

"The white is the negative space where the masking was," explained Barnette. "I'm now also working with colored pencil, so you can see more of the strokes and the pencil marks."

Part of what drew Silverman to including the works in the show was how they "fit the biggest ideas into the smallest amount of information."

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SILVERMAN**

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"The concept in these compositions capture grand or overwhelming social structures," Silverman said.

"Together, Together, Together" was partially inspired by Barnette's ruminations on the word during the pandemic, "both the warm and fuzzy 'together,' but also there's so many togethers ... For better or for worse we're in it together."

"Family Style" is a play on the idea of the aesthetic and swagger within certain families, and also a reference to the term for sharing food at restaurants.

"Sister, Sister" is the first all-colored pencil drawing Barnette has done in the series. A black and white version of the pattern the words formed was made into a wallpaper that is part of the holographic couch installation that greets visitors upon entering the gallery.

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