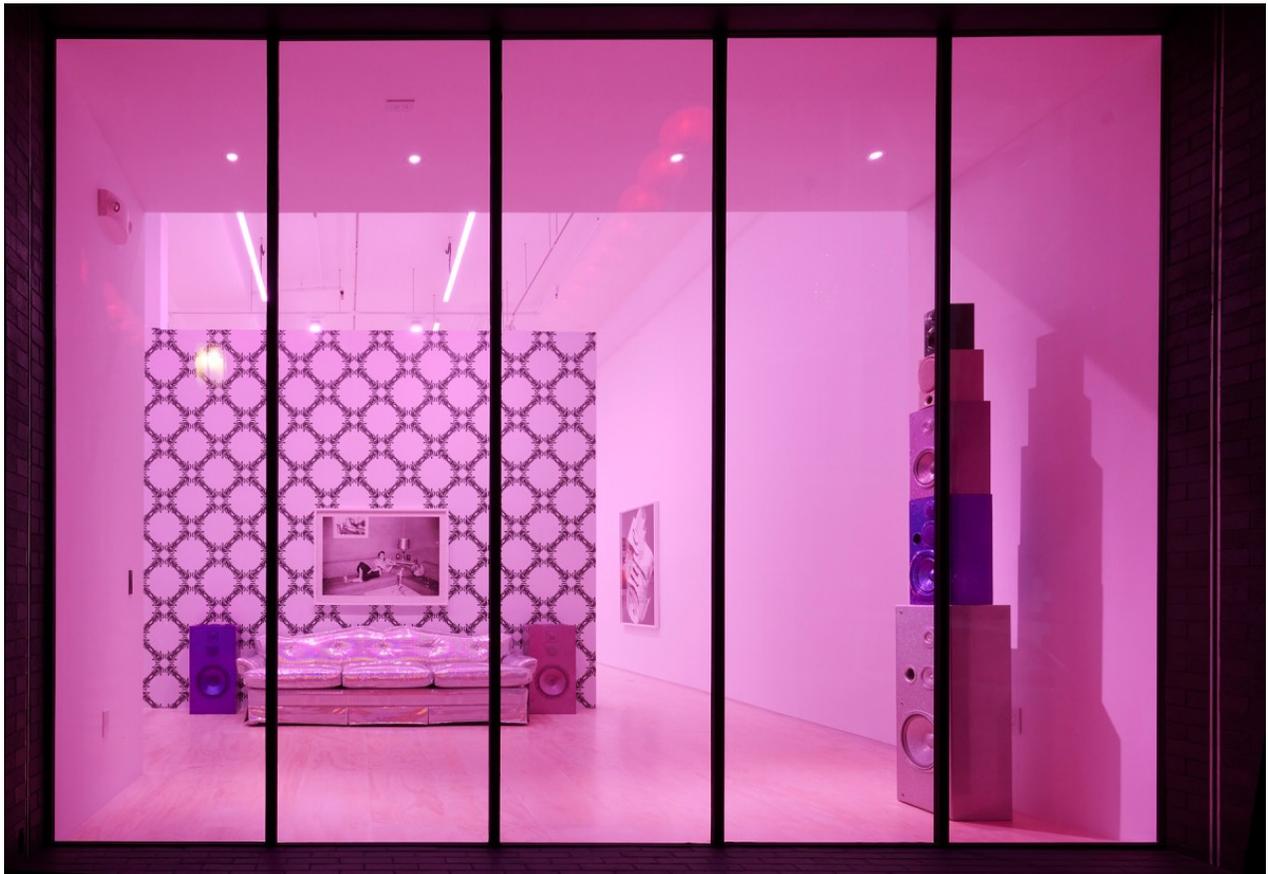


HYPERALLERGIC

Sadie Barnette: "The Necessary Art of Leisure"

By Luke Williams

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Sadie Barnette, *Inheritance* (2021), installation view at Jessica Silverman, San Francisco (photo by John Wilson White)

Rest, as bell hooks told us, is a dynamic place for creative engagement and imagination of the world.

It was just a few weeks before the news came out that [bell hooks had passed](#) that I stood transfixed in front of a luminescent vinyl couch, created by [Sadie Barnette](#) for her [solo show at Jessica Silverman Gallery](#). It was here that I recalled the 1995 short meditation in which hooks writes, "Always wedded to the couch, the back porch, the swing, I want to see the world standing still. My thoughts are movements, my ideas, my adventures."

The couch, the site of leisure, is not simply a place of rest. For hooks, it was a dynamic place for creative engagement and imagination of the world. She continues by describing her place of

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leisure, "This solitary space is sometimes a place where dreams and visions enter and sometimes a place where nothing happens. Yet it is as necessary to active work as water is to growing things." Although leisure is necessary, it is scarce, especially for women artists. "It is this stillness, this quietude, needed for the continued nurturance of any devotion to artistic practice — to one's work — that remains a space women (irrespective of race, class, nationality, etc.) struggle to find in our lives."

It is through these words that Barnette's couch became more than a simple piece of furniture to me, but instead came to activate and articulate the multiple valences of rest. The couch, ordinarily a place of lounging, is encased in holographic vinyl which energetically disperses light and color across its surface. The effect is an active exterior with a muted interior, the sparks across the couch coming at us like the "dreams and visions" that hooks talks about. It is a glowing reminder that, at times, the most amazing things can emerge from a place of leisure.



A detail of Sadie Barnette's couch (photo courtesy of the artist)

Flanked by speakers adorned in Barnette's signature style, and framed by tessellated wallpaper, the couch sits just below an image of Barnette's Auntie Viv, who lies in repose on a couch cover she sewed herself. The installation conjures the feeling of a leisurely living room, an interior view of Black life at ease.

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It is a space of possibility, as Barnette explained to me, "Where we create and enact our own stories and values, whether or not we're overcoming the challenges and systems that are just on the other side of the door."

But this leisure is contested and in need of protection. Barnette places the living room in conversation with her "FBI Drawings," based on the 500-page FBI surveillance file that was kept on her father, Rodney Barnette, who founded the Compton chapter of the Black Panther Party. "The living room is supposed to be the threshold between the public and the private space, you're supposed to be granted an invitation, but we know that it also doesn't escape the gaze of state surveillance."

Referring to the continued struggle against the anti-Blackness of state surveillance, Barnette emphasized, "Who's missing from the living room? What safety and protection is the living room supposed to offer, but when does that fail?"



House/Full of BlackWomen, Oakland (photo by Robbie Sweeny)

It is a similar question that drove Amara Tabor-Smith and the Oakland-based [House/Full of BlackWomen](#) to begin a five-year community engaged project that asks, "How can we, as Black women and girls, find space to breathe, and be well within a stable home?"

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The project, which is co-led by Ellen Sebastian Chang, focuses on addressing the displacement, sex trafficking, and the well being of Black women and girls in Oakland. One of its events, "Black Women Dreaming" (2017), was a seven day-and-night continuous ritual of rest that no one got to watch. "We were not going to be under the gaze," Tabor-Smith told me, "because that is not restful for Black women."

House/Full of BlackWomen was set to end in the spring of 2021, but the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the conclusion of the project. Tabor-Smith shared that one of the hardest parts of running the program was embodying rest as a part of her own artistic practice. Despite emphasizing the importance of rest in the work, enacting it presented a challenge. "It was very clear that to address these topics of displacement, well being, sex trafficking as outside of ourselves and not address them in ourselves was going to be disingenuous. However, that's usually what we as artists do. We talk about a thing, but we don't often address it in our own lives. And I went into this project really refusing to participate in a continuation of that practice."

There is a personal cost of labor on artists, especially Black women, whose conscripted labor — as bell hooks argues — prevents their own leisure, especially in times of struggle.



House/Full of BlackWomen, "Dreaming Sleep" installation, Oakland (photo by Robbie Sweeney)

[The Nap Ministry](#), based out of Atlanta and Chicago, encourages a culture shift away from productivity and towards a culture that resists the pressures of capitalism. Created in 2016 and led by artist and activist Tricia Hersey, the Nap Ministry stages workshops across the country in which participants nap together. Through this framework of "rest-as-resistance," the Nap Ministry encourages incorporating leisure and rest as the foundation for a practice of Black Liberation.

As a program rooted between Black Liberation Theology and Womanism, the Nap Ministry seeks to respond to this scarcity of Black women's leisure by providing spaces and a culture in which it is acceptable for Black women to rest. Most recently, Hersey released a song to activate meditation. "Rest Life" opens with an incantation to invite listeners into the dreamspace, a place of rest where we might "imagine a world with justice, imagine a world where capitalism doesn't exist,

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and poverty is no longer created." It is a world made possible by resisting the capitalist impulse to constantly work by entering into the realm of rest.

"It's a double-edged sword," said Sadie Barnette. "Intellectually, we know people need rest. Capitalism is making us think that we are just these productivity machines. But personally, it is a little bit more challenging. You definitely don't want to complain about being too busy because, as an artist or somebody else who is self-employed, the opposite of busy is worse."

Barnette, Hersey, and Tabor-Smith all point to the reality that leisure for Black women remains as elusive and ephemeral as the light dancing above the holographic couch, and the effort to protect it — its vitality, its possibility — can seem like too much. It can leave you wondering how one might realize bell hooks's charge at the end of her essay, when she writes, "Fundamentally, we must create the space for feminist intervention without surrendering our primary concern, which is a devotion to making art, a devotion intense and rewarding enough that it is the path leading to our freedom and fulfillment."

[Sadie Barnette: Inheritance](#) continues at Jessica Silverman Gallery (621 Grant Ave, San Francisco) through January 8.

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