

# ARTFORUM

Sadie Barnette: "Bar None"

By Jess Barbagallo

February 14, 2022



Shaun J. Wright performing inside of Sadie Barnette's The New Eagle Creek Saloon. Performance view, the Kitchen, New York, January 22, 2022. Photo: Paula Court.

## Sadie Barnette's bacchanal shrine to queer Black love

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES! Or—in the case of my recent two-part trek to the Kitchen to experience multidisciplinary artist Sadie Barnette's installation-as-performance-site *The New Eagle Creek*—a couple of weeks. Presented in collaboration with the Studio Museum in Harlem, Barnette's work (or the beginning of it) is a shimmering recreation of her father Rodney Barnette's now-shuttered San Francisco watering hole, The New Eagle Creek Saloon (1990–1993). The establishment held special significance as the first Black-owned gay bar in the area, a response to the urgent need for a non-discriminatory social space where queers of color could relax, celebrate, and build community. Set in the recesses of the Kitchen's cavernous first-floor black box, Barnette's installation—shown for the first time on the East Coast—presents itself almost like

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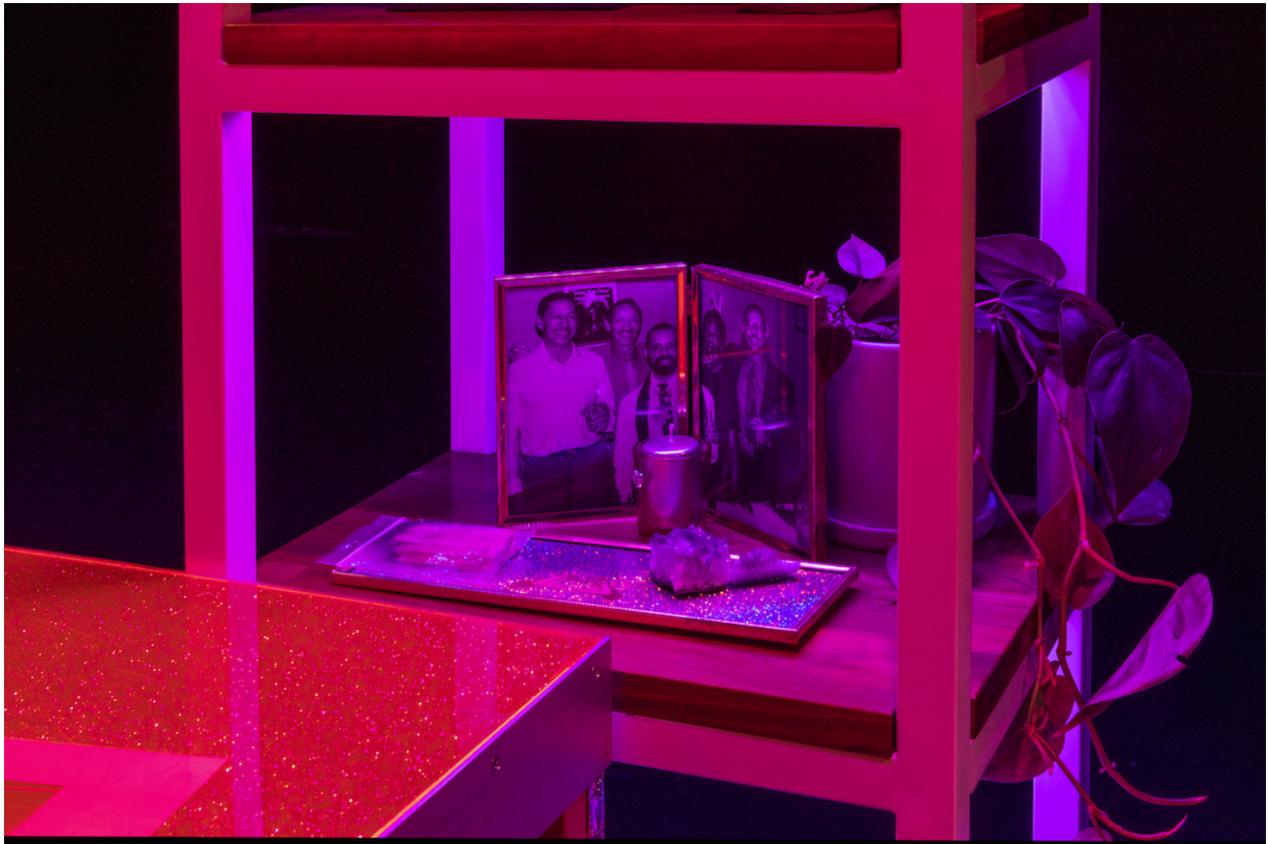
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a neon mirage in a time-space warp, the words "Eagle Creek" emblazoned above the U-shaped structure in hot-pink neon. In and of itself, the fabricated bar is a gorgeous gesture operating in several registers: It honors a neglected history of Black resilience while also offering up an ideal model of intergenerational love. These propositions are amplified and expanded by the vision of the exhibition's organizer and the Kitchen's new executive director and chief curator, Legacy Russell, who has paired Barnette's work with the Kitchen's inaugural nightlife and club culture artist-in-residence, madison moore.

DJ and scholar moore is the author of *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (2018), a book that extols the political virtues and life-saving possibilities of fabulousness, an orientation that doesn't necessarily cost much in the way of money, but risks "making a spectacle of yourself not merely to be seen but because your body is constantly suppressed and undervalued." I first visited the installation early on a chilly afternoon in late January to check out guest DJ Shaun J. Wright. The space was sparsely populated by a crowd that fluctuated between ten and fifteen people. A straightlaced couple in complementary peacoats took selfies while seated at one of the tall white square stools flanking the bar's counter, which doubled as Wright's DJ booth. Behind the bar were large projections of footage selected by Wright from "The New Dance Show," a public access dance show filmed in Detroit from the mid-to-late '80s through the '90s, as well as several contemporary ballroom clips posted by Ballroom Throwbacks, Serve The Kids, and kameisharevlon09. I observed the details of the installation: the Whitney Houston record, a pale purple crystal, and a bowl of Eagle Creek matches free for the taking, arranged on shelves and the lip of the bar. I felt a bit silly, trying to move to the music all by my lonesome, precipitating a nostalgic tour of those long ago nights when I went out into the world looking for a gay stranger who could give my then-burgeoning queerness a little validation. But then the bass started traveling up through my feet and into my legs, and I noticed a Kitchen staff member enjoying the beat, giving the DJ a fist bump in gratitude for the gift of these rhythms that, frankly, defy my capacity for description. As the saying goes: You had to be there. Or, as my partner says, "just download Shazam, Jess."

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View of Sadie Barnette's *The New Eagle Creek Saloon*. *The Kitchen*, New York, 2022. Photo: Adam Reich.

Two weeks later, I found myself returning for sets by Nita Aviance, joined by other members of the House of Aviance, and the twin sister DJ collective, Analog Soul. Despite the frigid weather, a small line formed outside the door. This time, I had to wait to get in! (Who knew this could ever feel like a good thing?) A man, wiping sweat from his brow, exited through the Kitchen's heavy doors, and a small group of us were allowed inside, where a little over a hundred people were already in the throes of a bacchanal. On a table upstage, three tiny monitors streamed bird's-eye views of the dance floor. Opposite them was a heavy rack of garments and a table covered in rubber or latex accouterments forming a makeshift, open-air dressing room; just above hung charcoal drawings of beautifully fierce faces produced by one of the day's major attractions, dancer and recording artist Kevin Aviance. (In a dynamic post-performance talkback, he described the drawings as portraits of his "gaygels.") During the session, Aviance would intermittently work the room in a series of stunning looks—his gold Wonder Woman thigh-high boots were particularly blinding—as the crowd organically formed a loose circle to better see his falling, crawling, lip-syncing magic. He was joined by the performer Xander, each of them emerging from the changing station again and again, their syncopated theatrics whipping us all into a frenzy with their extra-presence. I kept discarding layers of winter armor: my bag, my coat, my hoodie, and finally, my self-consciousness. As Xander would remind us a little later, while grandly delaying the talkback in order to find an accessory, "There is only one life to pump the runway."

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View of Sadie Barnette's The New Eagle Creek Saloon. The Kitchen, New York, 2022. Photo: Adam Reich.

Alongside Moore and an exuberant Barnette, the crew assembled to briefly share some stories and field questions from the crowd. I learned that Kevin, now in his early fifties, had needed a double hip replacement and was told by a doctor at the time that he might never wear heels again, to which Kevin replied "Fuck that." He implored young queers to show curiosity for the experiences of elder queens, many of whom have lost their sisters, and encouraged them to accept a drink when offered by an elder at a bar, and to listen for a minute because he and others like him still have so much to give. When Madison asked how these seasoned nightlife impresarios felt about doing a daytime set at a performance space in Chelsea, Nita and her friends reflected on the richness of the neighborhood, recalling it as a tristate nexus in the '90s and early aughts where Harlem dwellers and Brooklynites collided and produced culture with astonishing speed. They remembered hearing Frankie Knuckles's "The Whisper Song" and De'Lacy's "Hideaway" for the first time at the Sound Factory on Twenty-Seventh Street. As a coda, each of the DJs played a track that they held dear, and as I type this I am relistening to Dr. Mary Sullivan Bain's 1985 12-inch ["Do You Know Black History,"](#) offered up by Analog Soul's Kat Smith. Inside so many vectors of activation, from the eliciting of complicated memories to somatic revelations, I hear the chorus declare "yes I know Black history," but I myself still have a lot of listening to do.

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