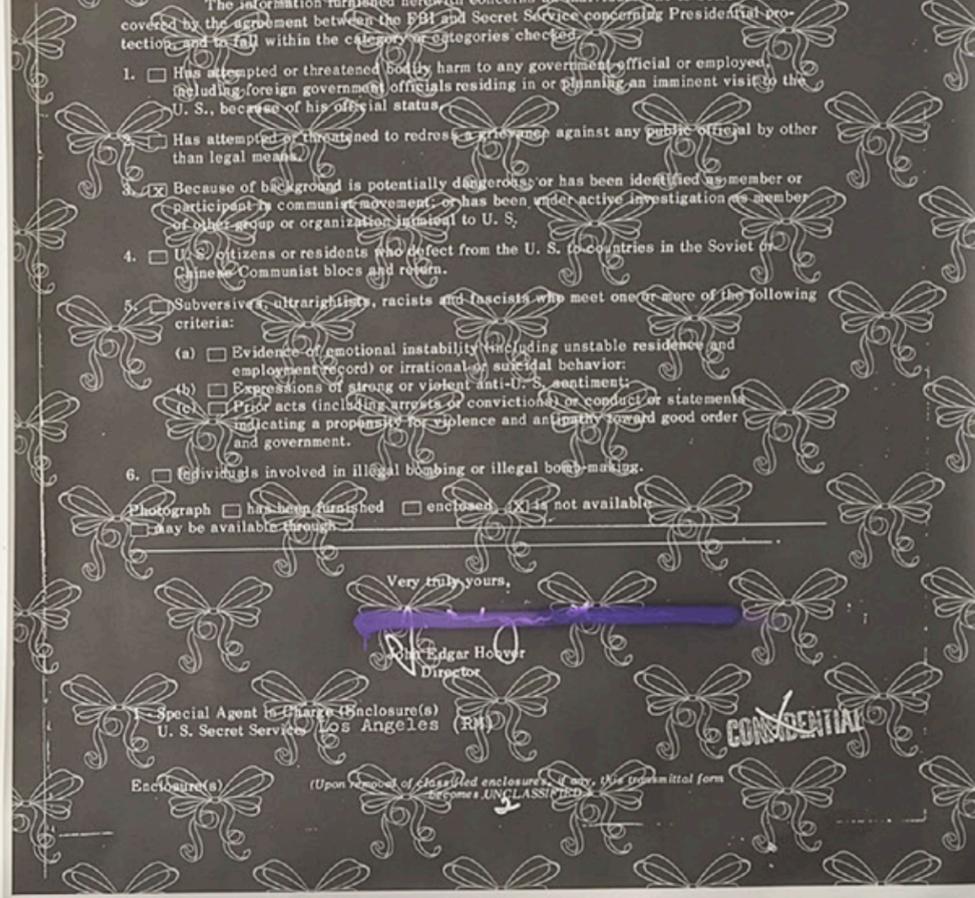




Sadie Barnette

The Lexicon of

Interview by Shaquille Heath Portrait by Chanell Stone



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Very truly yours,

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Sadie Barnette sees the world in fuchsia but not through the rose-colored glasses of old – this is a distinguished viewpoint, synthesized by a language of her own acute creation. It is influenced by familial spaces and legacies marked on faded Polaroids. The inventive vernacular of E-40 and the harmonious rhythms of classic jazz. A plastic couch everlasting through drink spills and cigarette ashes. Rings stacked so tall you can't bend your fingers on the table to tap nails in moments of annoyance. It's sparkly and shimmering, imbued with finest gold. The reflection of rhinestones and the glistening of Swarovski reflecting against a disco ball, when the music is the only thing keeping you from collapsing on the floor. It is the humming of a VCR and the static of a boombox, sounds you can hear upon sight. Hues of pink that beam across the galaxy. Sweet like candy paint and sour like an old glittered beer can. It is vibing like Oakland. And cultured like Oakland. And resilient like Oakland. And Black like Oakland. And Oakland like Oakland. (Did I mention, she's

from Oakland?) It is her history, and your history, and our history, framed and embossed on gallery walls. This is the lexicon of Sadie Barnette—an independent investigation, an official amendment to the formal record.

Shaquille Heath: Let's do a mental check-in. How are you taking care of yourself? And where are you finding joy?

Sadie Barnette: Love that. Yeah, I'm doing well. I feel like I'm seeing all the end-of-the-year memes of everybody being like, "I'm out of the office! Don't email me!" And I'm like hmmm...I'm not there yet. So maybe that's a goal for next year. To plan the wind down. And make a little more room for rest and relaxation. But this year, it's just been very go, go, go. If there's something to be made with a deadline, I just have to attack it. So it's been a *little* busy.

As far as what is bringing me joy... you know, the simple things. Walking around Lake Merritt (in Oakland.) Driving my truck. Drinking organic wine. It's just simple things.

The simple things are the best things. Yeah, I mean, you have had this really crazy year. Just looking at your Instagram you're constantly traveling, or going to openings, or celebrating new work that's on view. How's it felt to have this really jam packed year?

I've definitely tried to keep the lessons from 2020 and 2021—about what I want to do, and what I like to do, and what feeds me. And what is taxing or emotionally expensive. For me, it is a bit taxing and expensive to do the extrovert time. At the beginning of the shutdown I was so grateful to just have studio time, and my studio really became a refuge. Even as things are picking up, I'm trying to still balance that out. I'm definitely doing less traveling than I was before, just because I've gotta save some energy for the studio.

You currently have this larger-than-life installation, *SPACE/TIME*, that's on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, part of their Bay Area Walls series. What was your approach to the installation?

It's kind of a literal flattening of a bunch of things

that are different, but equally a part of me, and how I see the world. This lexicon of symbols, memories, and iconography that I've synthesized into being an art practice. It's really just the way I see and think about things.

And why I say it's a flattening is because literally, all of these different images are printed on one photo wallpaper. Something about just putting things on the same plane and the same material kind of equalizes them. So whether it's a historic family photo of my dad in a Panther uniform, or a random snapshot at a wedding, or a heat sensitive Polaroid of myself in third grade—all these things become equally important ways of trying to understand the world. Or remember the world. Or imagine the world. And no one piece of them is gonna do it. But together, it starts to paint this picture. For example, the Polaroid of myself in third grade, it looks like a science project of some sort, when they take your photo just using heat sensitivity. And to me, I'm just blown away that this is the actual heat bouncing off of my eight year old skull, in a portrait that a teacher wrote my name on, and that I must have brought home to my mom and said like, "Here's what I learned today!"

So yeah, it's about photography and capturing these moments, to build these languages. There's also text

based pencil drawings on top of the installation. There's a pink window tint, that's also a text piece, that really changes with the light. I'm sure we'll probably touch on some of those elements.

So, let's parse those a bit. I really gravitate to artists who use family photographs, particularly in the Polaroid era. Especially when it comes to Black people and being able to document ourselves in our own safe spaces. I'm wondering when you find these family photographs, if you had someone in your family who was the go-to photographer? Or do they come a little bit from everybody?

A little bit from everybody. I think my uncle Alvin, who was the husband of my dad's oldest sister Margaret... My dad is one of 11 children, and he's the baby of the family of that generation. And because he's the youngest, all of his siblings have actually passed away, which is, you know, really hard. But at the same time, he feels so lucky to be seeing the next generations. Three or four generations that are continuing on these legacies.

So my uncle Alvin was really into the newest technology and gadgets. He always had Polaroid and eight millimeter cameras. I think he was just really excited about the technology. Also, his

daughter Sharon, who I call my "auntie-cousin," took a lot of the photos as a teenager—I think that lens itself is really important to have. Like, *Oh! Look at my cool older Uncle in his army uniform! And in his Panther regalia!* And so I feel there's a bit of "looking up to someone" in some of the photographs. In general, some of them are amazing, perfect compositions. And some of them are...not. But together it all paints this real family archive.

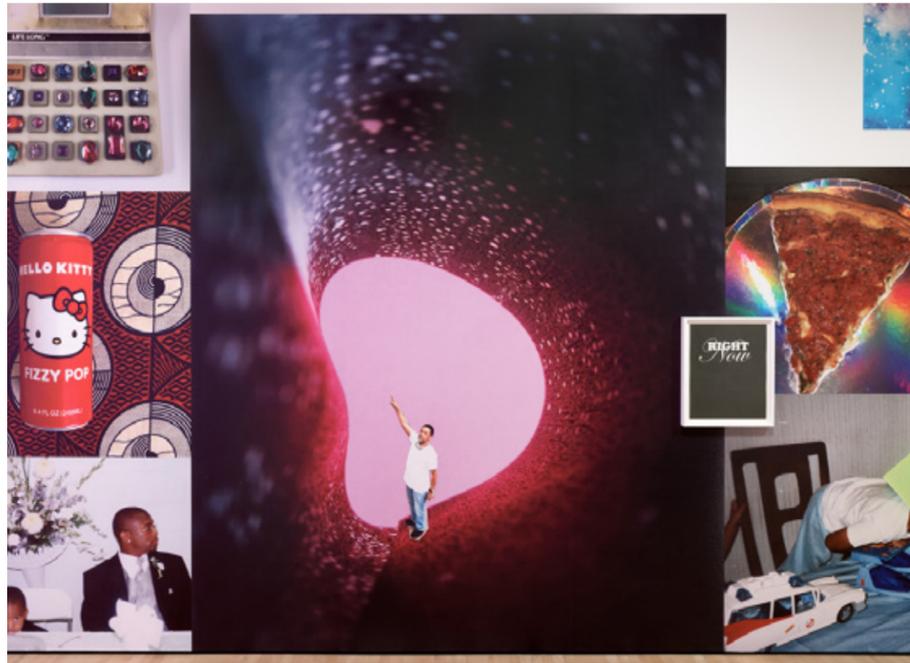
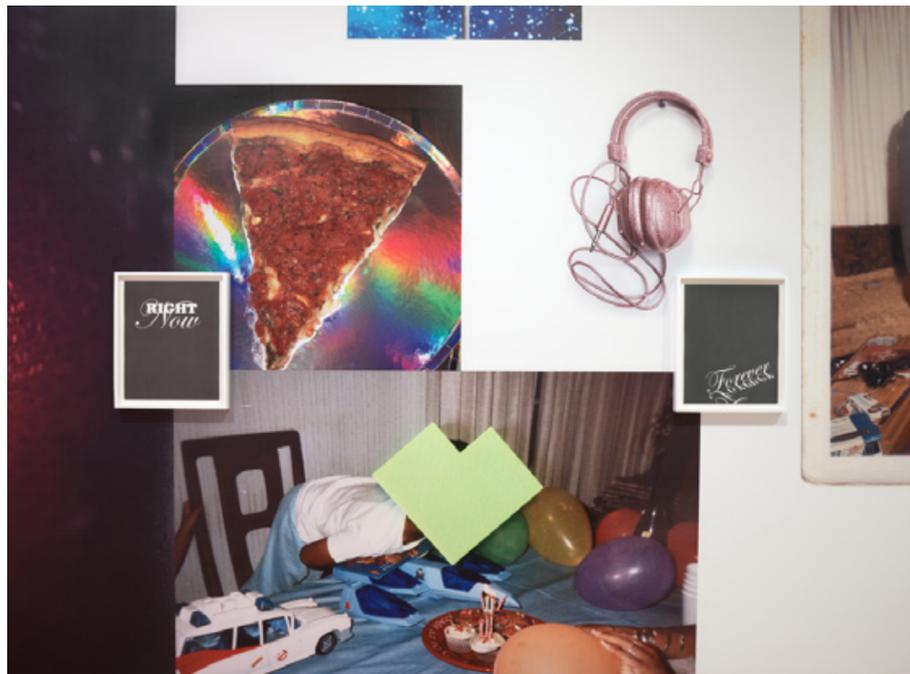
I also have big generational gaps in my family, so I like the term "auntie-cousin". I might have to steal that from you! But I didn't realize that she was the one who took the iconic photo of your father?! This is a family business!

Absolutely! Yeah she took both of them. Technically, she's my cousin. But like, she took care of me when I was little. She took me on camping trips, and fed me... It's like, that's my auntie! ...But she's my auntie cousin. And yeah, she has come to a bunch of different museums where the pieces have been on display. So it's very much a family business. Which is the name of my next show.

Oooh, tell me more!

It's going to be at the San Jose Museum of Art in March. I guess one thing that kind of relates to what we're talking about is that I recently had digitized some eight millimeter film that my uncle





shot and I just got it back. I'm really excited to go through it and see if there's the beginnings of a moving image project for me. I imagine it will be kind of a long process of figuring out exactly what that medium means for me. But it feels like it makes so much sense. I want to find a way to let these films speak again. So that is the new element that I'm working on for that exhibition.

Do you find when you're looking through these old photographs, that you're more captivated

with a particular period of time over others? Or is there certain imagery that you're more likely to gravitate towards?

I'm definitely partial to a living room scene or a food scene. I'm always looking at it with my formal eye, to be honest. That part of it never goes away, in terms of like, "Oh, these colors are amazing!" That's just who I am and how I see things. I love the 60s. I love the "imagining" of the future. Whether it's 60s modernism or 80s sci-fi, there's something about looking back in time, at

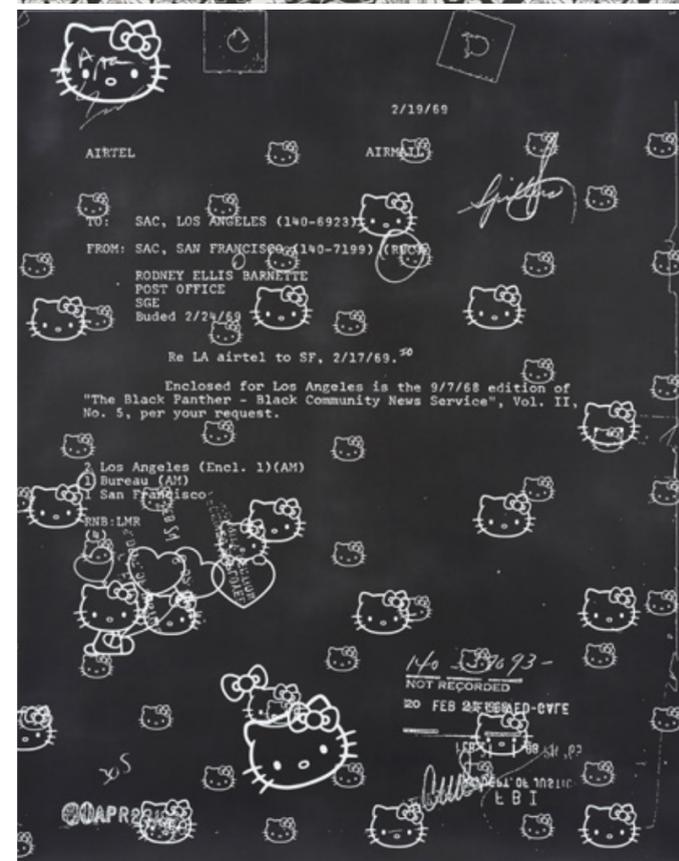
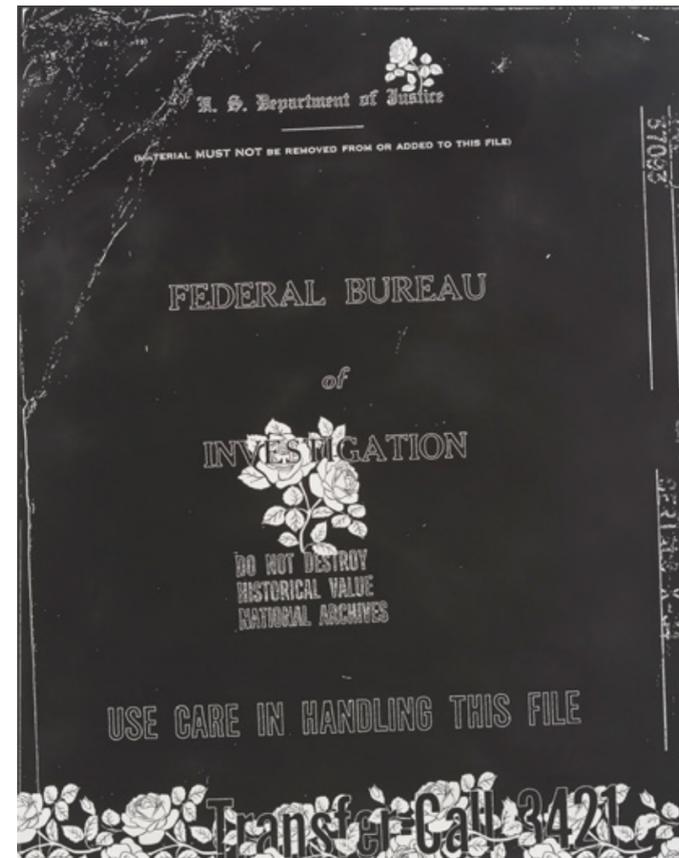
a moment that's looking to the future, that just makes it all feel less linear.

I feel like, if you know the artist Sadie Barnette, you're familiar with the documents of your father's FBI COINTELPRO files when he was a Black panther and working with Angela Davis. My father was also in the military, and was very messed up from that experience, personally. And so reading through the documents, and seeing what you did with them, I just felt very moved. It seems like you just have this very special relationship with him, and I wonder how the both of you worked together to decide what to share and how to share it?

I appreciate you sharing that you can see your family in the work. That's one of the reasons I make it so specific and so personal to me, because I feel like that actually opens it up for other people to see their own family. That intimacy and also, those challenges and traumas... like, that's what people can relate to in their own family. And there's moments where, you know, my father in that army uniform, about to be drafted and sent to Vietnam... So many people replace that with their family members. And that's important to me.

But, as far as the element of telling your family stories and collaborating with family members on what they're comfortable with—if that's something you want to balance as an artist—I think, in some ways, I got pretty lucky that I felt aligned with my father in what to share. It's interesting, because for most of my life growing up, this history wasn't really something that he talked about. He never would talk about his experiences in Vietnam. He didn't really talk that much about the Panthers... I think part of it is that he's a humble guy. It was just something that he did in a time that made sense to do—as far as the Panthers. The war, there was less choice. But I think when we finally filed the FOIA request for the files, and when we finally received them—which took almost five years of going back and forth with the FBI—it was coming around to the 50th anniversary of a lot of these moments. 2016 was the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Black Panther Party in 1966. So, I think, because so much time had passed in this way, it was no longer just his personal pain. It was historically significant and there was a generation of young people who were so curious to learn from that time and that politic, I think he just decided it was time to share.

And so when I said that I was going to try to figure out the material interventions to make this an artwork, he was on board and was just kind of surprised to see how I would make that leap from a document to an installation, or something that people could engage with. But since that's *my* language, and what I do, that part felt like the most "me" way to connect and contribute to this history.





Absolutely. And for those who may not be familiar, you take these documents and you embellish them with prints and glitter and sparkles. There are these rich pinks and fuchsias. How did you decide to make this a part of your language?

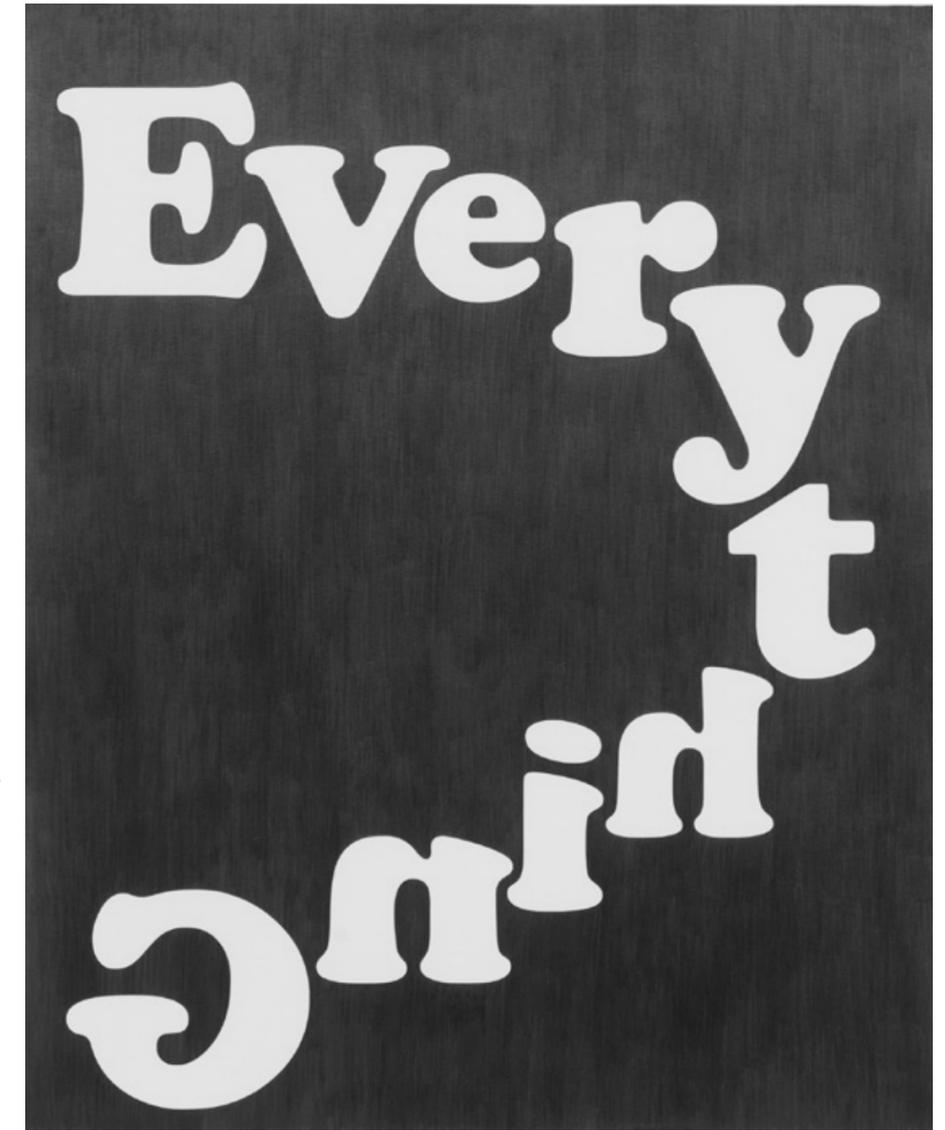
I've always gravitated towards finding the importance or significance of things that people often find frivolous or unimportant, and letting those things take up space. So whether it's over the top manicures, or the way that we adorn ourselves in jewelry—these things that seem unnecessary, I think are actually vitally important to the way that we conceptualize who we are and find each other. And so I've always loved glitter and rhinestones, candy paint cars, and all of that.

When it came to thinking about how to intervene with these FBI files, I just felt like, rather than ripping up the documents, or burning the documents, or scribbling on them... the most powerful kind of alchemy that I could perform would be pink and glitter. I felt like that would really be a kryptonite to the ghost of J. Edgar Hoover. And also would be this kind of love spell. Waging a fierce love, and retroactively, trying to protect these young people who were doing this amazing organizing, and really trying to bring in a new world. Not just through protest, but through actually taking care of the community and organizing. Free ambulance services, grocery shopping for elders, and free breakfast programs for kids.

Then I guess another way, when things shut down in 2020, I was able to really spend time making the drawings bigger and more intricate. So the FBI pages started to become like six feet tall, and rendered in powdered graphite, in this really slow, laborious way of working with the files that felt like giving them even more space, and even more presence, and allowing the formal element to expand to meet the weight of the documents. Since 2020, the FBI documents have mostly been in that format.

Can we go back to the “love” part? The restoration of love and using love as the weapon. I imagine that this was very emotional artwork to create? Or was it more like soothing and healing?

I think it's both. I mean, I think the times when I'm the most emotional are the times when I don't know what to do. But by the time I've decided to make something, I'm already feeling a little bit more hopeful. Or at least making this thing is something to do with my hands, and my heart and my mind. There's a kind of faith in, maybe through making this, something's gonna happen. Or at least, not nothing is gonna happen. So I think by the time I'm making something I've worked through any despair. And then will find it again and have to like, restart. And give up. I'm always giving up. I'm



always quitting. I'm like, *That's it! I'm done! I'm not making anything else!* And then, you know, the sun rises, you get up again, you go to work and you figure it out.

I think there's something about waging this love through this practice that is sometimes abstract or slippery. I get to say, "I think there has to be a better way for people to interact and to be together"... but I don't know what the answer is. And I'm not a community organizer, or a politician who's proposing a platform. I'm just hoping that we can be imagining something else. It isn't prescriptive in a way of saying, "This is what we need!" Like, I don't know what we need! I don't even know if we can be better. But it seems like a worthwhile way to move through the world. At least on most days, and with most of the actions that you take, do it in a way that assumes that

maybe humanity is not totally a trash fire... all the time. It's a 50/50 chance.

Haha! You're speaking to me! I'm fully functioning with the fact that I think the world's gonna end tomorrow.

I think that is why there is also, like, pizza in the work. And Hello Kitty and balloons. Because we have to just live our lives. And you know, I never saw anyone in my family waiting for the perfect world in order to enjoy themselves. And be fly, and be in love, and just, live life. So hopefully that's in there, too. ■

Sadie Barnette's SPACE/TIME is on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through June 2023.

Sadie Barnette: Family Business will be on view at the San Jose Museum of Art on March 10 through October 15, 2023.