

"The Family Saga of Sadie Barnette"

By David M. Roth

April 5, 2023



Installation view: *Family Business* at San José Museum of Art.
Courtesy of the artist and San José Museum of Art. Photo: Glen Cheriton/Impart Photography.

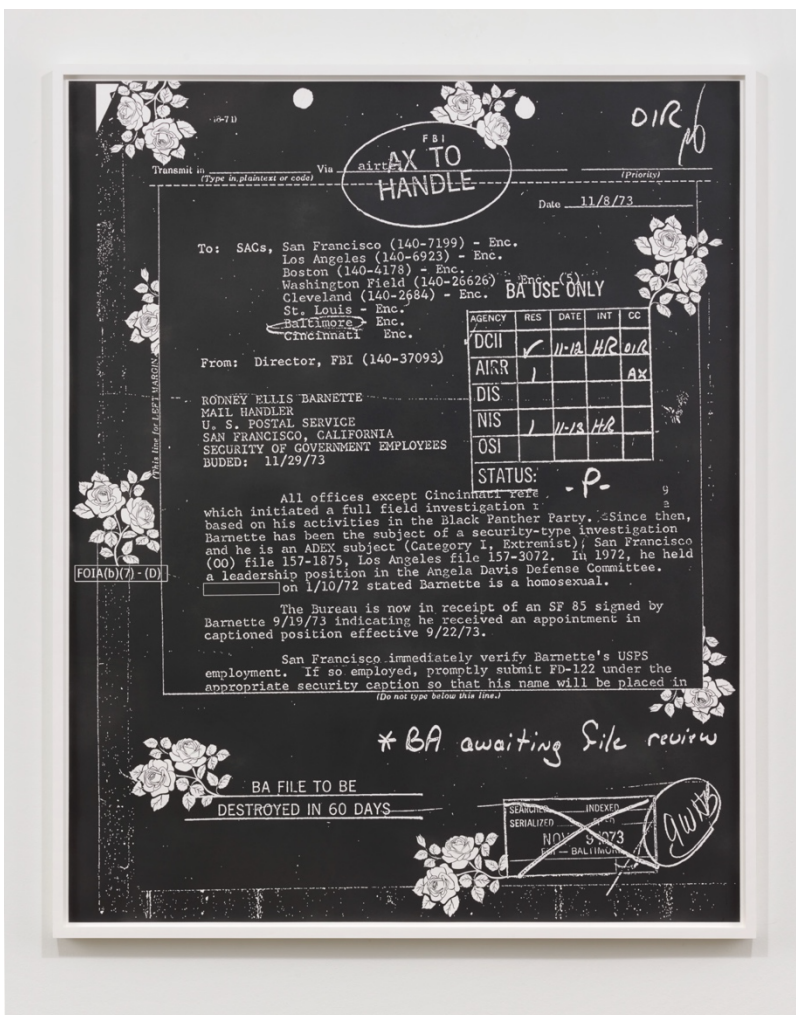
Anyone who's ever unearthed a trove of family pictures and memorabilia knows what a wormhole the experience can be – reliving distant events, resurrecting the dead, and discovering things you never knew or suspected. The multi-media Oakland artist Sadie Barnette has spent much of her career analyzing and recontextualizing such documents to understand the past. Toward that end, she's placed her imprimatur on snapshots, home movies and, most impressively, a 500-page dossier the FBI amassed on her father, Rodney Barnette, who, in 1968, founded the Compton chapter of the Black Panther Party.

The fruits of her efforts are now the subject of *Family Business*, an exhibition divided between the San Jose Museum of Art, where the artist installed a mock living room filled with photographs, furniture and a video montage, and the Institute of the Arts and Sciences at UC Santa Cruz,

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where eight large-scale (60 x 48-inch) drawings based on the dossier hang as a testament to state-sponsored racial persecution.



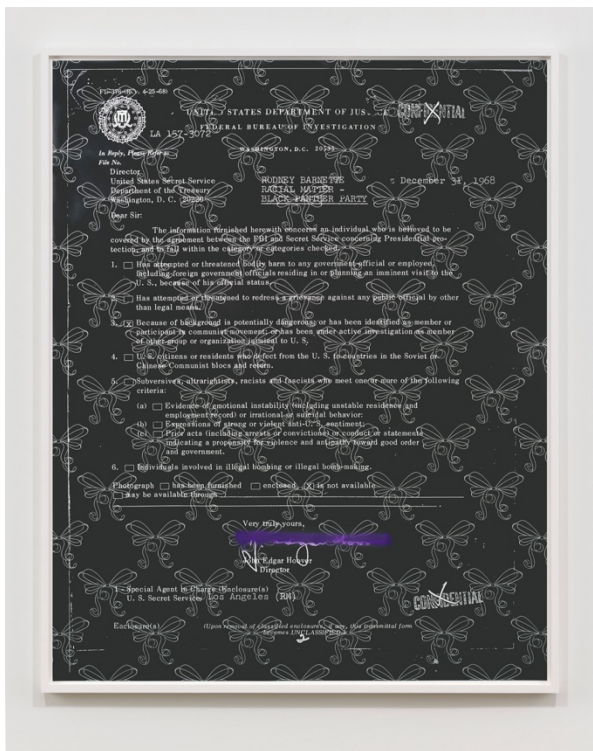
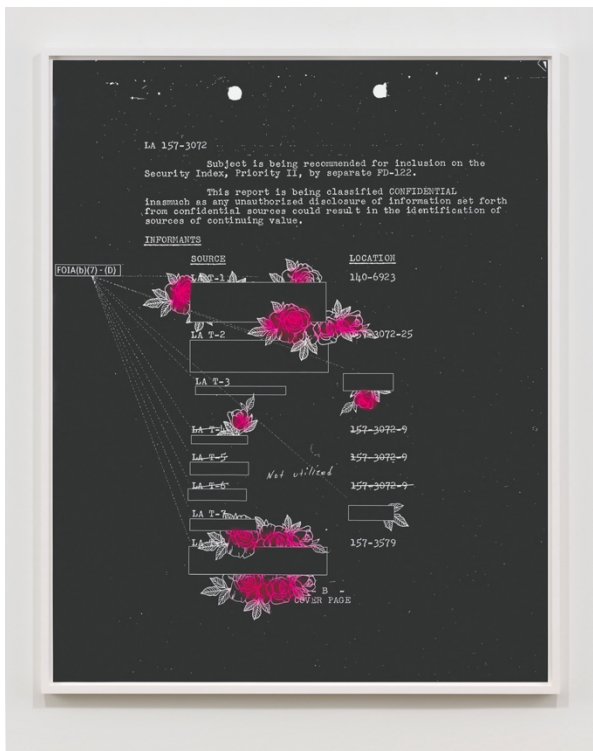
Sadie Barnette, *FBI Drawings: AX To Handle*, 2020.
 Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. Photo: John Wilson White.

The latter series, begun in 2016, has garnered much attention, and for good reason: The FBI's infiltration and surveillance of the group stands as one of the most egregious violations of civil rights in U.S. history, one that destroyed a mass movement through a combination of intimidation, incarceration and murder, undertaken in the utterly mistaken belief that the Panthers were a terrorist organization bent on overthrowing the government. In truth, the Panthers' goals were peaceful, best summarized in a [10-point program](#) whose aims strongly echo those of Bernie Sanders. Unbeknownst to most white Americans, who got their news from network television and news magazines, the group devoted the bulk of its energies and resources to providing essential services (food, education, medical care) and protecting Black communities against police violence. But the militant stance of its beret-wearing, black leather-clad leaders generated sensational media coverage, leading FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to launch a coordinated

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crackdown aimed at eradicating the group. The history of its demise has been well-documented. The "evidence" his agency amassed to justify the takedown? Not so much. Barnette obtained her father's dossier through a Freedom of Information Act request. Her family filed it in 2011. Five years later, it arrived, and its contents revealed the agency's mindset. The first examples I saw were at the Oakland Museum, which, in 2016, filled an entire wall filled with partially redacted pages in an exhibition called *All Power to the People: The Black Panthers at 50*. The most shocking aspect is the presumption of guilt expressed by the writers of these memos; they imbue the elder Barnette's every act (including a successful effort to defend Angela Davis) with sinister intent, painting a "portrait" whose sheer lack of substance would be laughable if it weren't tragic. (Barnette, as it happened, wasn't among those murdered or wrongly incarcerated, but he did lose his job at the Postal Service after the FBI revealed to his superiors that he was living with a woman not his wife – an act that, believe it or not, got a lot of people fired in those days.) Sadie Barnette, in an attempt to manufacture a counternarrative, enlarged the pages of the dossier to near-life size, rendered them in powdered graphite (with white type on black backgrounds), and festooned them with pink paint, hand-drawn flowers and kitten heads. Beneath the ornamentation lies the terse bureaucratic language of law enforcement. It's chilling. December 31, 1968: Rodney Barnette "has been identified as a member in the communist movement." February 20, 1969: "Will attempt to contact former teachers...at Medford High." May 25, 1972: "CHARACTER: EXTREMIST MATTERS – BLACK PANTHER PARTY." November 8, 1973: "Barnette is a homosexual." From an undated memo: "On March 15, 1972 SF T-4 advises that on March 13, 1972 RODNEY BARNETTE, representing the San Jose ADDC, instructed a member of the East Palo Alto ADDC to make contact with a group of persons from an ad hoc committee to pursue action relative to the killing of a 15-year-old Negro boy by a San Mateo County Deputy Sheriff."



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(Left): Sadie Barnette, *FBI Drawings: Informants*, 2021. (Right): Sadie Barnette, *FBI Drawings: Very Truly Yours (New Year's Eve 1968)*, 2021. Photos: John Wilson White. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco.

Some decorative motifs in the dossier drawings – particularly pink paint – carry over into the San Jose Museum installation. It's viewable at the entrance through a rose-tinted window covered with security bars and flanked on the opposite side by a stack of metal flake-painted loudspeakers. Inside, similarly decorated family photos (of meals, weddings, cars, houses) occupy a wall, as does a montage of video clips titled *Almond Street*. They show kids and adults dining and dancing to a drum solo reminiscent of the [one Max Roach made to accompany Martin Luther King's I Have a Dream speech](#), one of the most potent acts of artistic resistance ever created. Connect all these metaphorical dots, and you get a composite picture of what such a dream might look like. If the utter normalcy of it strikes you, well, that is precisely the point; it links the installation to what the Panthers were trying to do, which was giving Black communities food, education, medical care, adequate housing and freedom from harassment and violence. Was that too much to ask? Apparently, it was.



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As Barnette told an interviewer: "J. Edgar Hoover said the most dangerous threat about the Black Panthers was their free breakfast program because that was capturing the hearts and minds of the people and making an actual difference in people's lives. This sense of autonomy in the Black community, that was what was dangerous."

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Sadie Barnette: "Family Business" @ [San Jose Museum of Art](#) through October 15, 2023,
and [Institute of the Arts and Sciences](#), UC Santa Cruz to September 3, 2023.

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