

# SFGATE

Sadie Barnette: "Oakland artist re-creates San Francisco's first Black-owned gay bar inside SFMOMA"

By Dan Gentile

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The New Eagle Creek Saloon exhibit by Oakland artist Sadie Barnette.

On a recent Thursday night, SFMOMA buzzed with people huddling around a glittering purple horseshoe-shaped bar, sipping tequila Negronis as Barbara Tucker's mid-1990s house anthem "Beautiful People" played in the background.

The party was one of the many events that have been taking place over the past month at an installation called *The New Eagle Creek Saloon*, located in a cavernous room on the fourth floor of the museum. Envisioned by 39-year-old Oakland artist Sadie Barnette, the exhibit is a creative re-creation of the first Black gay bar in San Francisco, which was opened by her father, Rodney Barnette, at 1884 Market St., in a building that now houses a medical clinic. In addition to running

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New Eagle Creek from 1990 to 1993, Barnette was a section leader in the Black Panther party and a close associate of Angela Davis.



Sadie Barnette and her father Rodney Barnette at the The Lab on Saturday, May 11, 2019, in San Francisco.  
The San Francisco Chronicle via Getty Images

"I always knew that I wanted to pay some type of homage to my father's bar," said Barnette, whose previous work has incorporated the FBI's file on her father's political activism. "I felt that in order to do that properly, I couldn't make an art exhibition that existed on the walls and in frames that told the story of the bar. I had to create something interactive that would literally be the bar and transport you through time."

Since the exhibit's opening, it has hosted programming ranging from panel discussions to Warriors watch parties and DJ nights that pay homage to the bar's original slogan: "A friendly place, with a funky bass, for every race."

While perched around the bar, which offers batched cocktails and beer during event hours, visitors can browse through a zine that tells the history of the saloon through archival photos and scans of old newspapers. Some of the highlights include an ad for an innovative arcade game at the saloon, which taught safe sex, as well as an op-ed from Rodney Barnette about an article in the Bay Area Reporter that he considered racist.

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Although she was too young to remember many specific details, Barnette did visit the bar herself once, sipping a Shirley Temple while the bar's regulars prepared a float for the 1992 Pride parade.

"I must have been 6 or 7 years old, and I was kind of dressed like this little Victorian princess. Who knows how much I understood about what was going on, but I definitely left with an impression of seeing the community of people really being themselves and expressing themselves," she said.



Photos of Rodney Barnette, owner of the New Eagle Creek Saloon and father of artist Sadie Barnette.  
Courtesy of SFMOMA

Rather than build a direct reproduction of the saloon, Barnette decided to create her own interpretation of the space.

"I don't remember too much, which I think is why the artwork took the shape of this very dream-like mirage, or memory, as opposed to trying to literally re-create any of the physical elements of the bar," Barnette said.

She has already displayed the exhibit in several other spaces, including The Lab in San Francisco, The Kitchen in New York City and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. But when asked whether she'd ever consider making the space permanent, she expounded on how the museum context is part of what makes the exhibit such a fun experience.

"My favorite thing so far at SFMOMA is when people say, 'I can't believe I'm at a museum.' The best part of the artwork is when people forget that they're in the artwork."

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