

SF MO MA

Sadie Barnette: "Libations and Spirits for The New Eagle Creek Saloon"

By Jamal Batts

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Visitors at Sadie Barnette's *The New Eagle Creek Saloon*, 2019 (installation view, SFMOMA, 2023) © Sadie Barnette; photo: Roderick Jackson.

From April 22–May 11, 2023, Sadie Barnette's [The New Eagle Creek Saloon](#) was on view in the Gina and Stuart Peterson White Box at SFMOMA, where it was activated by performances, conversations, and gatherings led by special guests commissioned by Barnette.

Sadie Barnette's *The New Eagle Creek Saloon* (2019) is a bar—a time traveling spectacle constructed for queer revelry—that just so happens to, every so often, land in the art world. Its mighty real function as an art object is disrupted by its potential for conviviality, its ability to attract an audience, and its invitation to sit at its stools, relax your arms on its bar top, and grab a drink. There is much to admire about its meticulously rounded construction. The ways its slick silver curves offer comfort, its bold florescent pink neon sign beckons the passerby, and its hologram paper calls for an eternal birthday party that starts at childhood and carries us forth into this burning yet possible present. *The New Eagle Creek Saloon* provides all of this, but like any good bar it requires you, the crowd on its proverbial dance floor, to turn it on. It is a potentially insurgent playground, offering the opportunity to let the Black, queer, and radical histories embedded within it to touch.

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Speakers Rodney Barnette, Sadie Barnette,, Stephen Dorsey, and BLACK at the event "A Friendly Place: The History of The New Eagle Creek Saloon" at SFMOMA on April 22, 2023, within Sadie Barnette's *The New Eagle Creek Saloon*, 2019 (installation view, SFMOMA, 2023); © Sadie Barnette; photo: Roderick Jackson

The installation is an homage to the San Francisco's first Black-owned gay bar of the same name, opened by the artist's father Rodney Barnette in 1990. Sadie Barnette's projects regularly invoke the speculative and cosmic potential of infusing family archives and histories with a bright and sparkling disco ball luster. Photographs and drawings of her father, a founder of the Compton California Chapter of The Black Panthers, in black beret, are regularly featured. This same freedom fighter would go on to found "A friendly place, with a funky bass, for every race," where Black heroes, milestones, and diasporic lineages were honored in festivities and Gay Pride parades—and where an extended chosen family didn't have to worry about being asked for three forms of identification at the door. The bar's radical potential circles around its conception, a Venn diagram where Black queer sociality, the power of queer eroticism, and the militancy of Black Power overlap. It's recent glowing revival in the Bay Area, amidst heightened displacement and the attendant steady closing of queer spaces, suggests an alternative to our present condition; one in which (as abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore might put it) everything must change.

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Sadie Barnette, *The New Eagle Creek Saloon*, 2019 (installation view, SFMOMA, 2023); © Sadie Barnette; photo: Don Ross.

The original New Eagle Creek Saloon was open from 1990 to 1993, during a time of pervasive cultural silence about the AIDS crisis and its disproportionate impact on Black communities; a silence that extended from the White House to kitchen tables and back again. Part of the bar's legacy is its attempts to bring awareness to the crisis through street vigils and safe sex video games. This connects the Eagle Creek to the first Black gay and lesbian artist-activists, who in the 1980s rang the alarm about the deadly impact of silence surrounding AIDS and the need to mount a political and aesthetic response. Some of these artist-activists include Marlon Riggs and Essex Hemphill, whose visions and voices suffuse [Libations and Spirits](#), a film screening and performance that The Black Aesthetic (a curatorial collective of which I am a member) formed in order to contextualize the histories encased in the bar. During the evening we (re)introduced the audience to Sylvester in heavy sequins performing a cabaret set at his own birthday party, James Baldwin drawing our attention to "the San Francisco Americans pretend does not exist," and Riggs mapping a lineage of chosen queer ancestors that links African diasporic cultures to Black trans revolutionary Marsha P. Johnson. These are moving images because the work of our ancestors is far from done. They are restless spirits, much like Black queers searching for a new, vital, and ephemeral place to party. We gift performances at this bar/altar to the members of our Black queer genealogies, those gone and living on, who provide the groundwork for our futures.

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