

48hills

Sadie Barnette: "Resting Our Eyes" taps the power of Black women in repose"

By Emily Wilson

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Sadie Barnette, "Easy in the Den" (2019). Archival pigment print photograph overlaid with rhinestones.
Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco

Sadie Barnette, Mickalene Thomas, Carrie Mae Weems, Lava Thomas, more pay homage to beauty and respite

"[Resting Our Eyes](#)" at San Francisco's Institute of Contemporary Art, curated by Tahirah Rasheed and Autumn Breon (through Sun/25), centers Black women's rest and adornment as a way of liberation. Oakland artist Sadie Barnette sees her featured photograph "Easy in the Den" (2019) as a representation of just such repose.

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"It's my Auntie Viv at her home in Cleveland. She was a very talented seamstress and designer who made the cushions on the couch and probably some elements of her outfit," Barnette says. "She's relaxing in an environment she's created with her skills and attention to beauty."

Barnette's works revolves around the documentation of beloved and dynamic family members. Her installation and performance series "The New Eagle Creek Salon" reimagines the first Black-owned gay bar in San Francisco, which her father opened, was recently at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and is now at Washington DC's Stable Arts. Her show "[Family Business](#)" is at the San José Museum of Art and the University of Santa Cruz Institute of the Arts and Sciences. Barnette admits that she herself has a hard time taking a break.

"I've been thinking about it in the context of the exhibition and the work of Tricia Hershey, and [The Nap Ministry](#), and reclaiming the right to rest—but I freely acknowledge I'm not that good at it," she told 48hills. "I'm still a bit brainwashed by capitalism and an obsessive tendency to always be producing."



Sadie Barnette, courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Damien Maloney

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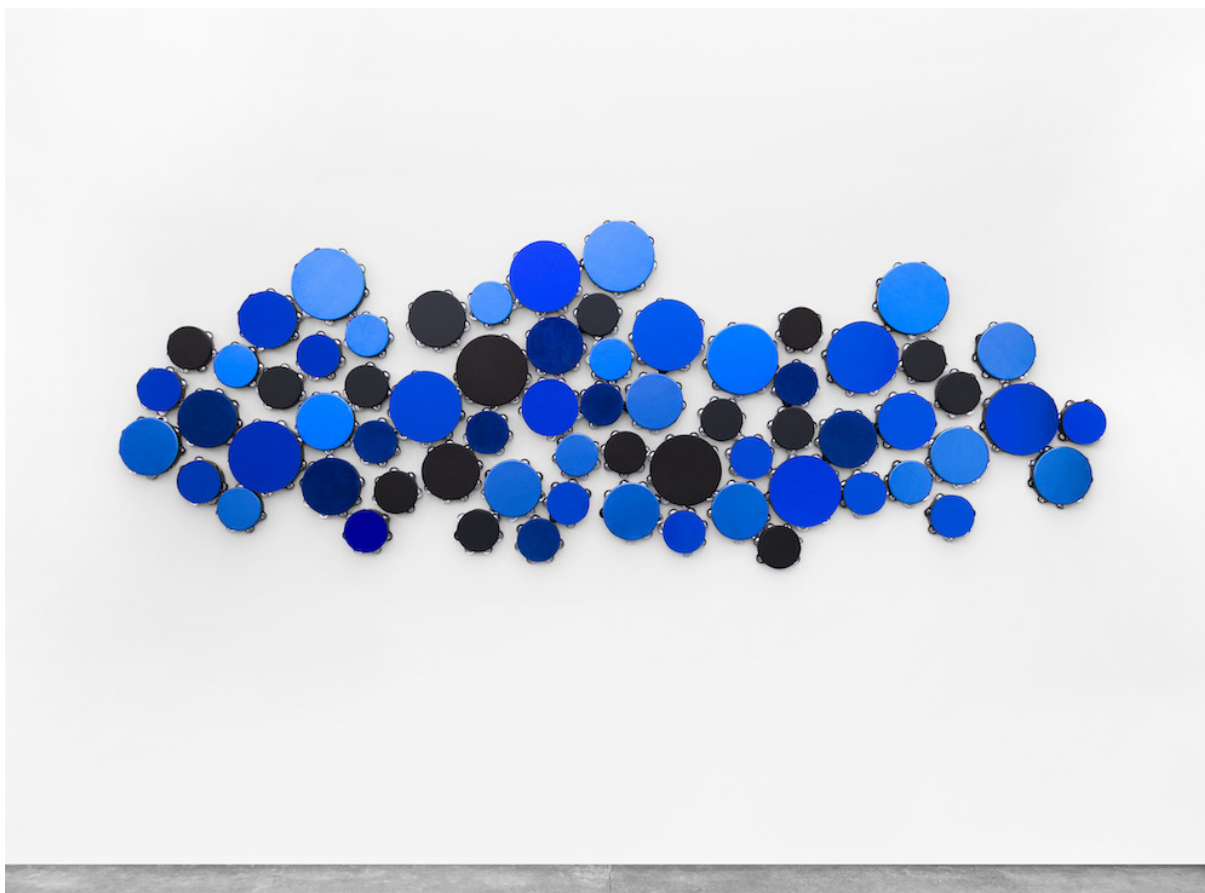
Other artists in the exhibition include Simone Leigh, Mickalene Thomas, and Carrie Mae Weems, plus local artists [Leila Weefur](#), [Traci Bartlow](#), and [Lava Thomas](#). Alison Gass, the director of the ICA—which opened last fall—lauded Rasheed and Breon’s curational acumen.

“We could not be more honored and thrilled with the sort of gifts and brilliance that they brought to the ICA with this exhibition,” Gass said.

Thomas highlighted the show’s importance. “The battle to protect our freedom from this relentless assault is urgent and ongoing,” she said. “But without respite, the struggle is unsustainable.”

In Thomas’ exhibited “Clouds of Joy” (2021) blue tambourines hang on the wall, the center pair inscribed, “I sing because I’m happy, I sing because I’m free,” lyrics from the artist’s grandmother’s favorite hymn.

Thomas said being able to rest and daydream lets her imagine what’s possible, so she can make her work. Her grandmother owned a beauty shop, her uncle was a clothing manufacturer, and adornment has always been important to her.



Lava Thomas, “Clouds of Joy” (2021). Tambourines, leather, suede, Acrylic mirror, blue acrylic discs, ribbon. All rights the artist, Courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery

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"I'm particularly interested in aspects of Black women's beauty and style," she said. "In the Black church, every Sunday was like a fashion show. Women of my family adorn themselves and take great care in their physical appearance."

Adornment also figures largely in Barnette's work. A few years ago, she started [making art out of her father's 500-page FBI file](#) assembled during the period that he worked with the Black Panthers in Compton. Barnette augments the documents with rhinestones, glitter, and pink spray paint. She said she finds decorating the pages in this manner more powerful than burning or ripping them up.

For her other piece in the show "Home Goods: Speaker Stack V" (2021), Barnette painted speakers with candy paint, a metallic automotive finish, showing how a little shine can transform standard items.

"Take an ordinary car, not fancy or expensive, and you can create something that boldly proclaims who you are with big rims or a sound system," Barnette said. "It's a way you let people know you're in the world."

RESTING OUR EYES runs through Sun/25. Institute of Contemporary Art, SF. More information [here](#).

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