

Alta

"The Language of Sadie Barnette"

By Charles Desmarais

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You'd think any artist would jump at the offer of a profile in a respected magazine. But Sadie Barnette was cautious.

Would she have an opportunity to see the piece before publication? No. What if I wrote something that contradicted how she might describe her work? We are two different people who may see things differently, but trust me to do no harm.

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Eventually convinced, a few weeks later she meets me at Berkeley's Paulson Fontaine Press, where she has been invited to make a new series of prints. "I was thinking about that," she says. "I felt like you walked away and you thought maybe I was afraid of a negative review. But honestly, if you did write a negative review, then it would be very clear that it was your opinion and not my opinion. And that would be fine, but what's worse is if you write something...that's nice but doesn't feel true to me.

"So much of my work is about the distance between words and communication.... Something like 'feelings.' It's this little word for the biggest thing in the world. And how could you possibly really convey feelings or talk about feelings?"



© Sadie Barnette/Photo by Adam Reich

Above: The New Eagle Creek Saloon (2019–ongoing). Below: People (2025).

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© Sadie Barnette/Photo by Phillip Maisel

Barnette has been wrestling with such deeply enigmatic questions all her adult life. The Oakland-born artist, who is 41, has in recent years hit her stride in spectacular fashion. Her works are now regularly acquired by museums and private collectors across the United States; a two-year, lobby-filling installation is on view at the California African American Museum (CAAM), in Los

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Angeles; and work on a permanent mural at LAX is underway. She has a new show with her gallerist, Jessica Silverman, in San Francisco this fall.

Whether in single, intimate photographs and drawings or in expansive, brightly colored installations, Barnette calls attention to the complexity of meaning available in a room packed with nominally worthless pop culture detritus or in a single phrase ("We all we got"; "Rich Man"; "Good People"). In each of these mediums, the originality of her approach doesn't rely on merely depicting the subject, which may be a common word or a plastic fake gemstone. It lies in her treatment of it. The mad excess of color, gilt, and glitter in a room-size installation is not cacophony but a precisely measured spectrum, a carefully orchestrated crescendo. Or that framed image of a word, on close inspection, may reveal itself to be a graphite drawing, hand-blackened over many hours of obsessive mark making—the isolated word, like the gem, a multifaceted object that can be scrupulously turned, tumbled, and examined.

Lately, Barnette has added to her repertoire word sculptures—one or two words cast in resin or concrete or milled from solid blocks of hardwood or aluminum—that elevate the tossed-off, the jotted, to something approaching permanence. Silverman suggests that they may be prototypes for larger sculptures to come.

There's a long tradition of art about language, of word as subject, beginning (if we conveniently discount examples in illuminated manuscripts and drugstore comics) in the 1960s and '70s in the work of Joseph Kosuth, Barbara Kruger, Bruce Nauman, Kay Rosen, Ed Ruscha, and perhaps a hundred others.

Barnette is, of course, aware of such antecedents, and also of the myriad image appropriators who have come before her. Her contribution to the lineage is in her culturally precise focus. Art writers often use the term "interrogate" lazily, but here it fits: She turns a spotlight as harsh as any film noir detective's onto popular speech and image.

All this comes together in one of the most ambitious projects she has undertaken thus far, the exhibition in the lobby of CAAM. Commissioned as part of the museum's 50th-anniversary celebrations, Sadie Barnette: How to Fly runs through October 3, 2027.

A 3,300-square-foot mural, How to Fly comprises images extracted from the artist's deep collection of studio photographs and snapshots depicting family events, earlier art projects, flashy cars and shiny tire rims, costume jewelry, toys, and all manner of glittery, glitzy pop culture souvenirs. The organizational structure is a gradation of color, as images and background are proportioned from left to right, red to violet, through the hues of the rainbow.

"Her work is quite nuanced," says artist Josephine Halvorson, a former teacher who continues to be a trusted adviser. "The sparkle and bling in her aesthetics, particularly in her installation or sculptural work, maybe belies some interest in the past.... I mean, she's an archivist who really plays with the aesthetics of what an archive looks like."

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In addition to its inherent value as art, says Cameron Shaw, CAAM's executive director and the exhibition's curator, Barnette's *How to Fly* also serves the museum's purpose of "liberat[ing] the Black archive."

"Black archival materials tend to live at two opposite ends of the spectrum," Shaw tells me. "They can be well preserved in universities and institutions where they are perhaps available to scholars and researchers but not to a larger public, or they're in our basements, attics, and, you know, garages."

Barnette's work celebrates what Shaw calls "girlhood and girlhood aesthetics." "Teenage girls drive culture," she says. "They drive capitalism. Yet we don't take their aesthetic preferences that seriously as a culture, right? But I think Sadie does. And that is beautiful in the same way that she takes different aspects of Black culture very seriously: as aesthetic drivers of culture."



Elon Schoenholz

Sadie Barnette: How to Fly is on display at Los Angeles's California African American Museum until October 3, 2027.

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AN FBI DOSSIER

Barnette grew up “an arty kid” but an indifferent student, she says. When she nearly dropped out of Berkeley High School, her mother enrolled her in an independent study program that introduced her to photography.

Spending hours each day in the darkroom printing her photographs of Oakland protests and “friends doing hip-hoppy things” led to an undergraduate slot at the passionately avant-garde California Institute of the Arts, in Valencia. “That was when I really learned contemporary art,” Barnette says. “That you could use whatever medium you wanted. That artists could be living people.”

Among the most vital artists at CalArts were two who became mentors and models, both of whom later hired Barnette to work in their studios. Charles Gaines, a celebrated conceptual artist and author of critical and historical texts with a focus on Black artists, exposed the young student to postcolonial theory. And there are connections visible between Barnette’s work and Andrea Bowers’s language-based practice and unabashed embrace of decorative flourishes.

After graduating in 2006, Barnette began to receive considerable attention for such a young artist. Her work was included in group and solo exhibitions at increasingly high-level galleries and museums, including regular exposure in shows at Charlie James Gallery in L.A. and Jenkins-Johnson Gallery in San Francisco. An MFA from UC San Diego, completed in 2012, was quickly followed by grants and residencies across the United States, including a fellowship at UC Berkeley’s Black Studies Collaboratory.

In an odd twist, it was the Federal Bureau of Investigation that provided fodder for the work that would vault Barnette to prominence. Her father, Rodney Barnette, has led a full life. He served in the army and was wounded in Vietnam. He worked for the U.S. Postal Service. He also, starting in the late 1960s, was engaged in the Black liberation movement, cofounding the Compton chapter of the Black Panthers and protecting Angela Davis during her high-profile trial.

He knew he had been investigated by the FBI. He’d been fired by the Post Office, harassed and endangered, and he suspected it was all of a piece. Many years later, he, Sadie, and her mom filed a Freedom of Information Act request to determine the extent of the agency’s involvement in his life.

It took four years, but in 2015, while Sadie was in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the FBI finally complied. Sadie and her family members were stunned by what they learned. The file the FBI released, running to some 500 pages, “is at once chilling, emotional, disturbing and violent,” Sadie told the New York Times Style Magazine. “Surveillance sometimes sounds like an innocuous information-collecting process, but it’s often harassment, intimidation and agent provocateurs.”

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The dossier became a font of inspiration, resulting in a large series of works the artist has called a project of "reclamation and repair." The first of these, an installation of copied pages embellished with pink spray paint, glitter, and rhinestones, made its debut in the Oakland Museum of California exhibition All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50 in 2016.

Another iteration, My Father's FBI File; Government Employees Installation (2017), was acquired by the Guggenheim Museum. Curator Ashley James says the spray paint markings "reclaimed [Barnette's] father's history, intervened upon the sterileness and the bureaucracy that these documents represent. And also the oppression that they represent."

In 2021, FBI Drawings: Unknown, a four-by-five-foot diptych based on a photograph in the files, was featured in the Times. "I was thinking about how mug shots instantly criminalize and dehumanize someone," Barnette told the newspaper, "how they turn them into a number. I imagined this photo on hundreds of F.B.I. desks, and how, to its agents, my father was an expendable person, an 'extremist.' My experiment was: If I draw this image by hand, through some alchemy of love and labor, can I turn it into something else? Can I turn it into a portrait of a father daring to imagine a new world?"



© SADIE BARNETTE; PHOTO FROM SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

A detail from My Father's FBI File; Government Employees Installation (2017). The piece was inspired by the 500-page dossier that the FBI had compiled on the artist's father, Rodney Barnette, a cofounder of the Black Panthers' Compton chapter.

HAPPY HOURS

Another wellspring of family history and creative inspiration also began with the life experience of her father. In 1990, Rodney opened the New Eagle Creek Saloon (slogan: "A friendly place, with a funky bass, for every race") on San Francisco's Market Street as the city's first Black-owned gay bar.

Seeking to pay tribute to that history, the artist reimagined the gallery space at the Lab, in San Francisco, as something more: a site of resurrection, a dream come alive (the original bar closed

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in 1993). "Somewhere between a monument and an altar," says Barnette. Glittered-vinyl stools and couches are arrayed throughout a room. A neon-pink bar glows at its center. The New Eagle Creek Saloon, dated "2019-ongoing," is not a sculpture to be admired from beyond arm's length—not an object—but a place and an event, more akin to theater in ways.

"My bar is not quiet as it honors," Barnette says on her website. "It is permission to dance and dream, to call the names of those lost, and to see one another as we are in the glow of our own small moments of freedom."

The work has also been presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Kitchen and the Studio Museum in Harlem; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, as well as in the artist's garage ("which have been some of the better parties!" she says).

Barnette made two sculptural, facsimile "bars" that also serve as elaborate frames for vintage images. The Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased one, Photo Bar (2022). It has a place in the collection, curator of photographs Lisa Sutcliffe said in an email, because the artist "uses photography and vernacular design to bring hidden histories into view."

Barnette's work consists in part of objects, like the Met acquisition, that stand at a remove, an almost anthropological distance—to view them is like looking at a snowflake under a microscope, stripped of its temperature, its associations with holidays or sport or alpine danger.

With works like The New Eagle Creek Saloon and How to Fly, however, she requires something more of her art and of her audience.

In an Instagram post last year, she told her followers about a new work: "It might just be about going for a walk. Have you ever been on a little walk?! It's proof of life. Existence!!! Photosynthesis! the molecular structure of chlorophyll! Are you freaking kidding me?"

To see her trying to satisfy that urgency is immensely appealing, and it's where things really start to get good. For all her skill with words, her ability to translate the deeply intimate into something we might all feel along with her, the distrust of language abides.

"No one really knows how to Talk about my work," she wrote on Instagram last fall. "Not even Me. That's why I Keep making it."

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