

# the guardian

October 8, 2016

## Black Panthers 50 years on: Art show reclaims movement by telling 'real story'

by Maria L La Ganga



Rodney Barnette, who opened the Black Panthers' Compton office, poses for a photo in front of an art exhibit about the group created by his daughter. Photograph: Josh Edelson for the Guardian

The Panthers' golden anniversary plays out against a backdrop of Black Lives Matter activism and an unending stream of questionable police shootings

The end of an official letter, much enlarged, frames Sadie Barnette's profile. "Very truly yours," it reads, "J Edgar Hoover." Behind the 32-year-old artist is a wall covered in pink glitter. A single drawing hangs in its center, a black man's mugshot rendered in pencil.

The images form the heart of Barnette's latest work, an installation at the Oakland Museum of California. They come from a Black Panther's FBI file – hundreds of pages recounting years of covert surveillance in search of something, anything, to pin on the activist.

To the government, the young black man was a dangerous extremist. To Compton, his southern California home, he was a community organizer. At the museum, he is part of a new exhibition commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Black Panther party.

To Barnette, he is a rich subject to tap for making art. He is also Dad.

Rodney E Barnette, now a soft-spoken 72-year-old, opened the Black Panthers' Compton office. He lived with Angela Davis during her trial on murder, kidnapping and conspiracy charges. Although the FBI investigation came up empty, it cost him his job as a letter carrier for the US Postal Service.

What is left of the federal investigation is more than 500 pages that Sadie Barnette has turned into raw material. The documents include a veritable family tree, listing relatives' names, birthdays and military awards. There are interviews with her father's employers, his high school teachers, his childhood neighbors. FBI agents from at least eight cities were involved; their names punctuate the file and Sadie Barnette's work.

"In a way, it feels like family history that someone might write in a family Bible," she said. "But it's coming from this very aggressive, violent place of trying to dismantle what my dad was working on. The redactions, the time stamps, the hand-written notes, it makes me realize how lucky my dad is to be alive, honestly.

"Because so many members are listed in the documents," she continued. "There's one page where it lists a bunch of different former Panther members and in parentheses [after each one] it says,



Former Black Panther Rodney Barnette with his daughter Sadie Barnette in front of an art exhibit she created in honor of him at the Oakland Museum. Photograph: Josh Edelson for the Guardian



Sadie Barnette's drawing of her father's mugshot.  
Photograph: Courtesy of Sadie Barnette

Most of the document pages can be easily deciphered. On one, there is a single sentence, recommending that Rodney Barnette be placed on a list of people who were considered an immediate threat to national security.

"My first thought is, wow, all the time and energy they wasted," the elder Barnette said as his eyes scanned the file pages. The government "went to my neighbors where I was born ... They went to my jobs. The main thing is they tried to get me fired from the job I had at the post office.

"And they did, based on my living with a woman that I was cohabiting with I wasn't married to," he continued. "Conduct unbecoming of a government employee ... I'm sure nobody had done that before, living with a woman they weren't married to."

Rodney Barnette joined the Black Panthers straight out of the army as a response, he said, to police actions in the US. He had been wounded in Vietnam, was awarded a Purple Heart, "witnessed horrors over there, people died in my arms". But black men were dying in the US, too, he said, some of them in his own Los Angeles neighborhood.

"It was wrong the way the community was being treated," said the retired labor organizer. The police "were conducting military operations in a black community. Somebody robbed a bank, allegedly black, and they were on a search-and-destroy mission. That's what we did in Vietnam, except that they dropped us off in helicopters in Vietnam, and we had to jump out.

"I didn't know how popular the Panthers were at the time," he continued, "but I decided I would join. Thousands of people were members, and they were doing a lot of good things. It felt really good that I had joined. I didn't know it would be under such assault by the government, but that's what happened."

Rene de Guzman, who curated All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50, said the exhibit is a way to reclaim and explain a movement that is often viewed as simply "black men with guns. What we're offering is a more complete picture."

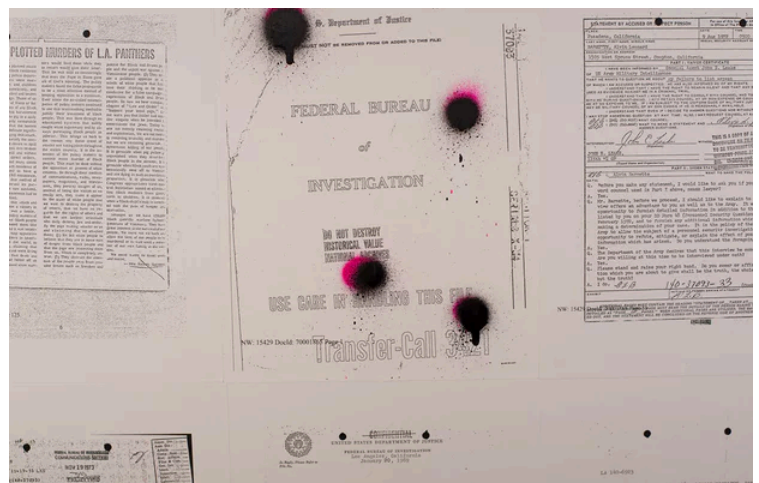
'deceased', 'deceased', 'deceased'. Except for my dad's name. Which really made me realize that he was very much targeted."

The Panthers' golden anniversary is more than just a historic milestone. It plays out against a backdrop of Black Lives Matter activism and an unending stream of questionable police shootings, usually of young African American and Latino men, many unarmed, against reports of ongoing police surveillance of protesters and of technology that can intrude on private lives with just a keystroke.

It is a Monday afternoon in late September, and the former Black Panther is viewing his daughter's work for the first time.

Spread across two full walls, the work includes 198 life-sized replicas of FBI documents. Some have big gaps where the government excised blocks of information. Others have been embellished by Sadie Barnette herself with splotches of black that resemble bullet holes or a fine mist of pink spray paint.

There's a polaroid of Rodney Barnette – 13 and smiling, surrounded by family members – and Sadie Barnette's re-creation of her father's mugshot.



Splotches that resemble bullet holes are featured on some replicas of FBI documents.  
Photograph: Josh Edelson for the Guardian



“

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Sadie Barnette

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Sadie Barnette's work is also a kind of restoration, a way to take her father's story back from the government and embrace it in her own fashion. Hence the glitter wall.

“It's bringing in the element of girdom and both trying to reclaim some power and making this mine again and ours again,” she said as she escorted her father through the installation. “It's similar to how I've spray-painted on some of the pages.

“It's my way of putting my mark on the files and trying to reclaim it. Now we're telling the story and using the information to tell the real story.”