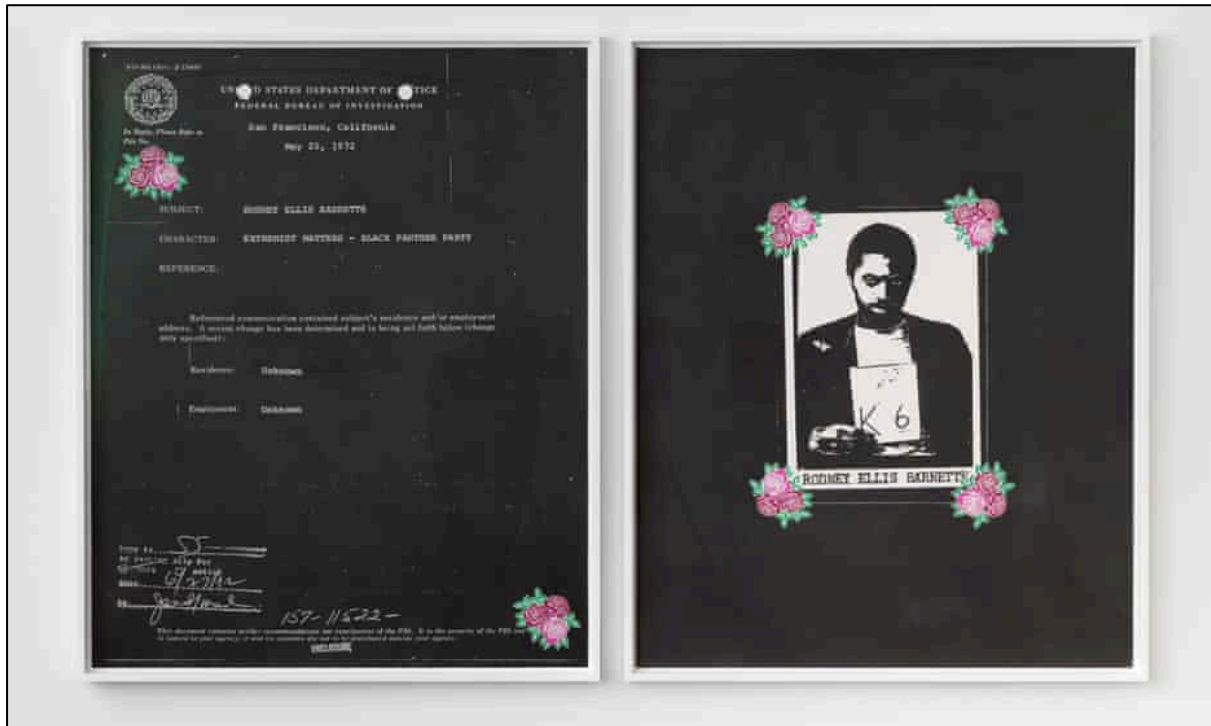


‘Brave people stepped up to the plate’: remembering the Black Panthers through art

A new group exhibition adds a contemporary lens to the work of the Black Panther party in the era of Black Lives Matter



*‘I think of my father very much as a kind of collaborator and co-conspirator of this project’ ... Sadie Barnette, *FBI Drawings Unknown*, 2021.*

David Smith in *Washington*
Thu 17 Feb 2022

Sadie Barnette’s work honours her father’s time in the Black Panther party, a political organisation founded in the tumultuous 1960s that tried to combine socialism, Black nationalism and armed defence against police brutality.

In particular, she takes as raw material a 500-page surveillance file on Rodney Barnette, compiled by J Edgar Hoover’s FBI, which described the Black Panthers as the “most dangerous and violence prone of all extremist groups” in America.

The latest in the series, a diptych using powdered graphite and coloured pencil on paper, is on display in *This Tender, Fragile Thing*, a group exhibition at the Jack Shainman Gallery in upstate New York that offers a fresh look at the Black Panthers in the era of Black Lives Matter.

“I think of my father very much as a kind of collaborator and co-conspirator of this project,” says Sadie, whose parents filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the FBI file in 2011. “Eventually we received this document and were totally blown away by how invasive and intrusive and terrifying and extensive it was.”

Now 77, Rodney grew up Medford, Massachusetts, one of 11 siblings, another of whom worked closely with Malcolm X in Boston. In 1966 he was drafted into the army and sent to Vietnam, where he was wounded and earned a Purple Heart. He returned to the US and went to Compton, Los Angeles, to bury his nephew, who had been killed in the war.

Sadie recalls via Zoom: “He says he felt like he was still at war because of the police presence in the Black neighbourhoods in Compton and the military-style raids that they were doing.”



Rodney Barnette and Sadie Barnette.

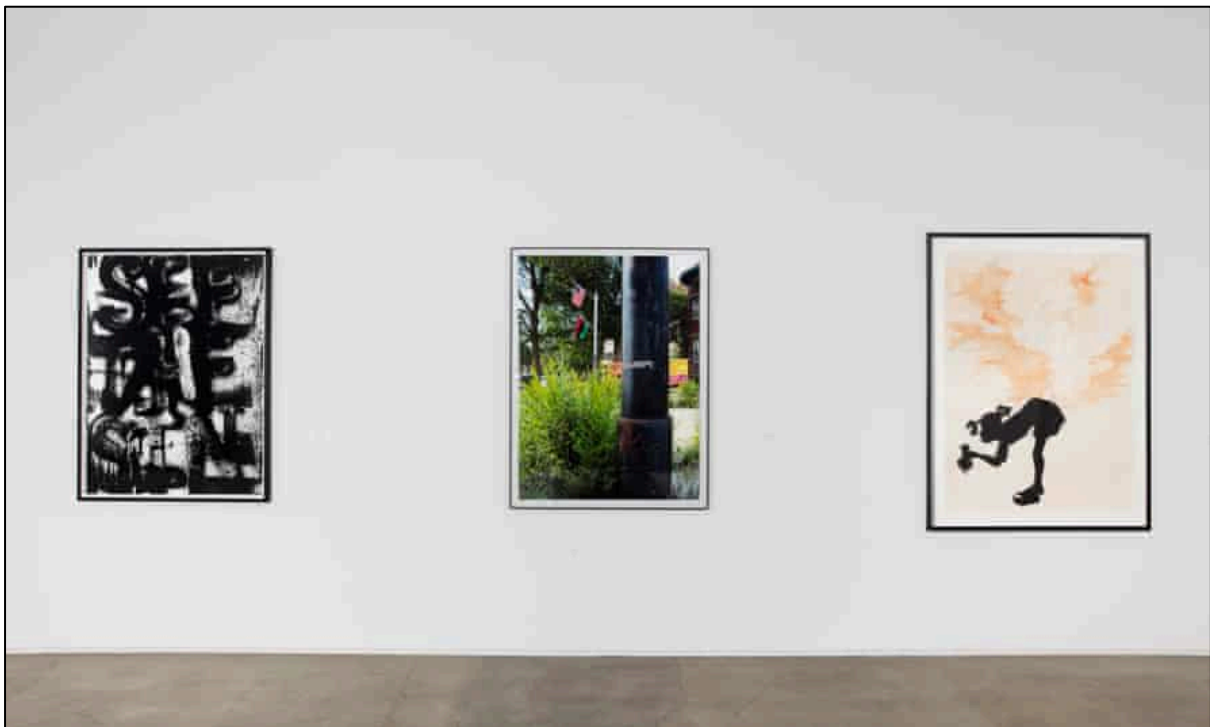
Rodney felt that he had to act and saw the Black Panthers as a positive option in the community. Sadie continues: “I’m always fascinated that what we see after almost every war in the history of our country is that a generation of Black and brown men (at that time, mostly men) come home from a war and haven’t earned any more rights or status or dignity in this country than before, and so you’ll often see this upsurge of political activism or organising.”

Rodney opened the Black Panther chapter in Compton before moving to the San Francisco Bay Area and joining activist efforts to defend leading activist Angela Davis, whom he lived with during her trial on murder, kidnapping and conspiracy charges. “He says one of his most important tasks was getting her to court on time every day.” She was acquitted 50 years ago this June.

When Rodney finally obtained his FBI file, after haggling that took nearly five years, it was startling in its breadth and depth. There were his family members with their birthdates and other details, interviews with his old school teachers and a list of Black Panthers with “deceased” ominously written in parentheses after each name.

The file showed that the Black Panther chapter in Compton had been infiltrated by informants and agent provocateurs, hastening Rodney’s departure. It also made clear that the FBI had been responsible for getting him fired from his job at the post office for the supposedly unbecoming conduct of cohabiting with a woman to whom was not married.

Sadie, 37, says: “It was infuriating and chilling and we both felt he was very lucky to be alive. There are so many people who are still incarcerated as political prisoners, even as it’s become somewhat fashionable to celebrate these moments. But people are still incarcerated. Families still haven’t received any type of reparation or compensation for lost loved ones. So my father felt lucky that he lived to tell and I felt lucky that I was born.”



The artist adds: “I felt a strong desire to use this material to do something other than it was intended to do, to make it live in my world and tell my father’s story, not in a sense that this is going to completely repair or fix something but just as a meditation on thinking about these issues. And of course connecting surveillance of the 60s in [the FBI programme] Cointelpro and surveillance now which, with all of the digital capabilities, is just even beyond.”

At first Rodney was surprised by the idea of turning his FBI file, a product of leaden bureaucracy with only one picture (his mug shot), into art. But when on one occasion someone asked him how it felt to see the pages blown up and displayed all over the walls; he replied that it made him feel free.

Sadie, who has been living with her father, mother and partner in Oakland, California, during the coronavirus pandemic, says: “If I can make my father feel free in this country, even for one moment, that really felt like a sort of mission accomplished as far as the possibilities of what art can do, even in a very particular context of the audience of one. For him to feel that way is really all I could ask for.”

Say Black Panthers to one generation and they might recall militants barking at Tom Hanks in the 1994 film *Forrest Gump* (he gets into a punch-up and says, “Sorry I had a fight in the middle of your Black Panther Party”). There have been more nuanced portrayals in movies such as Lee Daniels’ *The Butler* and *Judas and the Black Messiah*. Today fans of the Marvel superhero franchise might think instead of Black Panther starring the late Chadwick Boseman.

But the party’s revolutionary legacy is complicated and elusive. Its members epitomised radical chic when patrolling the streets with berets, sunglasses, black leather jackets, rollneck jumpers and guns. Its support network offered clothes, self-defence classes, ambulance services and protections from eviction. Its free breakfast programme for children was described by Hoover as “potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for”.



John Simmons, Free Huey, 1968.

The corruption of the party’s leadership, however, was noted in a *New York Times* article in 2016 that said: “Historians have detailed its mistreatment of female members, extortion, drug dealing, embezzlement and murder. At least 19 Panthers were killed in shootouts with one another, the authorities or other black revolutionaries.”

The way cultural perspectives shift over time is evident in *This Tender, Fragile Thing*, on view through 30 April, combining period materials relating to the Black Panthers with works by contemporary artists in a 30,000 square foot former high school in Kinderhook, New York.

The show includes photographs by Gordon Parks and John Simmons in the civil rights era, as well as by Devin Allen in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray in 2015, and by Ada Trillo at protests in Philadelphia that followed George Floyd's murder in 2020.

Theaster Gates's immense sculpture *Walking Prayer* is a vintage cast-steel Carnegie library shelving unit housing more than 2,000 books on the Black experience. Gates rebound each book in black, with single words or phrases embossed in gold, culled from its contents in lieu of titles.

Gallery owner Jack Shainman says via Zoom: "The last couple of years, sitting working from home in the pandemic while everybody is watching every night another unarmed Black man gets killed by police, was mind-boggling and so it seemed a time to do this show and re-examine. There's no answers. It just shows the struggle, the battle, and it really starts with slavery and all those injustices."

Why the title *This Tender, Fragile Thing*? Shainman explains: "We never learned about the Black Panther movement in school; we learned such a weird version of the history of this country. But the point of the matter is these very brave, very courageous people stepped up to the plate and had to do something; it wasn't like a choice.

"The Black Panther movement always got demonised by white people but it was an amazing thing where they were educating, teaching, feeding people, et cetera. So using that title was about it being such a fragile thing because it takes all those people believing and trying to do something to change it."

Jaci Auletto, associate director of the gallery, believes the Panthers have lessons for today, especially those made uncomfortable by Black Lives Matter's direct action. "I feel like the urgency when you're looking at the Panthers is so apparent and I don't know if it's because they did have this more aggressive way of dealing with things where they weren't really trying to sugarcoat things for everyone.

"It was a more matter-of-fact way of dealing with what their community and minority communities were dealing with and I think maybe that speaks to where we are today. There are so many things facing us that need urgency and we try and make it nice so that everyone wants to face it, and it doesn't necessarily always lead to as much action."



Barkley L Hendricks, Michael BPP (Black Panther Party), 1971 .

Towards the end of the exhibition, Arthur Jafa's film *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* brings together original and appropriated footage that juxtaposes police brutality with representations of Black pride and beauty. This and others works on display leave Shainman feeling pessimistic about the future.

But Auletto says the show makes her hopeful. "Yes, there is this history and these disturbing images and depictions of violence but at the same time it's all intermixed with these beautiful songs and moments of joy. The fact that people are starting to have a conversation and pay attention and want to learn more and see the complexities of it – that's encouraging.