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The watchers at the gate

Exhibit shines light on nearly three decades of police surveillance on Portland activists

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The 1960s, '70s and '80s were a heady time in Portland, both politically and socially. Women and minorities organized for their rights. Activists campaigned against nuclear energy and U.S. involvement in conflicts in Latin America and Asia. Almost every national or international problem had the attention of politically involved people and organizations in Portland.

And they had the attention of the Portland police, who watched and documented it all in creepy detail.

Portland police took surveillance photos of activists, collected publications and fliers from activist groups, compiled files on groups and their leaders, took accounts from informants, and generally treated anyone who was exercising their constitutional rights to work for political and social change with deep suspicion.

In 1981, Oregon made it illegal for law enforcement to conduct surveillance on organizations that weren't linked to criminal investigations, and all the files the police had amassed on activists were slated to be destroyed. But a Portland detective, Winfield Falk, who oversaw the spying, stole 36 boxes of documents and kept them in a barn. They were recovered after his death and eventually acquired by the city archives. The documents, although illegal and intrusive, provide a rich window into nearly three decades of Portland activism and political life.

Police kept tabs on 300 politically active organizations during this time period, ranging from well-known groups, such as the Black Panthers, to small and obscure ones that aren't a footnote in history. Law enforcement also spied on other seemingly harmless organization such as the

community radio station KBOO and Mom's Garage, which sought to train women for careers as mechanics.

Now, two Portland artists, Garrick Imatani and Kaia Sand, are offering a new look at this part of the city's history. Earlier this year, the Regional Arts & Culture Council commissioned Garrick and Imatani for an artist-in-residence project with the Portland Archives and Records Center, which houses the surveillance documents.

During their residency, the files quickly caught the attention of Imatani and Sand and became the basis for the "The Watcher Files Project." For the project, Imatani, a visual artist, and Sand, a poet, are seeking to examine the institutional record kept during this time period and "talk back" to it through a series of artistic and literary pieces that represent the voices of those who were spied upon.

"The ways the narratives are told, my brain just starts to spin," says Sand. "The police reports are so compelling."

Imatani and Sand want the project to annotate and challenge the institutional narrative of what activists were up to during this period, which both artists say was often incomplete or distorted. In working on the project, Imatani and Sand spoke to individuals monitored by the police, giving them the opportunity to respond to accounts of their activities kept by law enforcement.

One of the activists Imatani and Sand spoke to was Lloyd Marbet, who was monitored for his anti-nuclear activism during the 1960s and 70s. At the time, Marbet drove a beat up truck that he often took to the mountains. Police surveillance reports suggest that old wine bottles, greasy rags used to fix the vehicle and a can of gas he kept in the back of the truck were ingredients for a Molotov cocktail. His mutt

of a dog was also described as a German Shepard in police accounts. Through the project Marbet was to challenge what he described as misleading narrative.

The project won't be fully complete until summer of next year, but an exhibition of the project is available for viewing through November in the City of Portland Archives & Records Center at 1800 SW Sixth Ave., during its normal hours.

Jake Thomas: *In the description of the project, you say that it seeks to talk back to and annotate the official record. What did you hope to add to the official record?*

Kaia Sand: With archival material, you're not given any context, and no one is interpreting it for you. I'm really interested in looking at the fields with a critical poetic eye, so I can look at what's there and think about what kind of formal gestures that can reveal things about the files. I'm also interested in what's not there. I'm interested in the fact that you get one story and we know that there are other stories out there and we know that a lot of the people are still alive, so we thought it was a great opportunity to talk to people and get their alternative stories.

Garrick Imatani: Some of the people we've contacted don't really want to be involved in the project. There is fear of certain blowback about being associated with the files, so they still have a certain power.

J.T.: *The people you have spoken with, what kind of things do they say to you when they see these old records? Are the accounts in these official records wildly off?*

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The Silhouettes of Kaia Sand and Garrick Imatani stand in front of a snapshot of old police records that are now part of The Watcher Files, documenting police surveillance on 300 Portland-area activists.