

ALVARO BARRINGTON

Press pack

Alvaro Barrington

Curator *Hannah Marsh* speaks to the artist about his forthcoming commission at Tate Britain, a project shaped by place, carnival and a sense of belonging

HANNAH MARSH *You've lived in many different places, and this is referenced in your work. How has where you've lived shaped who you've become?*

ALVARO BARRINGTON I grew up in Flatbush, Brooklyn, and my family is from Grenada. But I was born in Venezuela. I took art classes in school, but it was only in Venezuela that I decided to become an artist. I went back there for the first time when I was 27.

HM *What was that like?*



Alvaro Barrington in his studio in Bethnal Green

Alvaro Barrington
Wet Fete, Bathers, by Myself (detail) 2023
Oil, acrylic, flashe and enamel paint on burlap in corrugated steel and reclaimed wood frame
254 x 292 x 16.5 cm

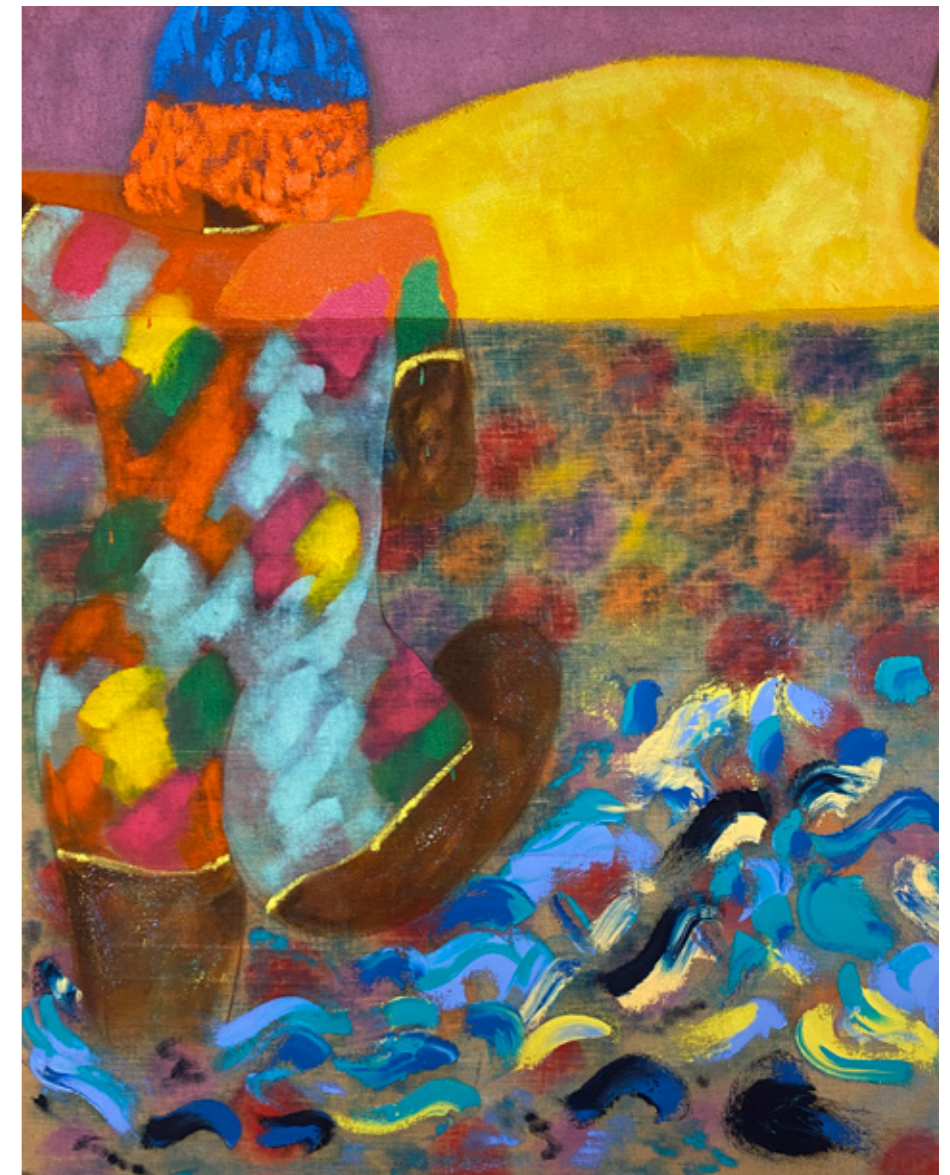
AB I couldn't say that I chose to become a painter. It was always something that was encouraged. But in Venezuela, I found I was choosing art myself. I didn't know anybody there, and for some reason I started hanging out with artists. I was removed from the arbitrary structural reasons as to why you become friends with people, and the community I gravitated towards was creative. I went on the Orinoco River for some time. It was a moment of quiet. And something kind of dawned on me. It was like a second birth.

HM *Carnival is integral to your work, and so beautifully woven into your practice. Why is that?*

AB I grew up going to carnival in New York and went to Notting Hill Carnival my first year in London. It was so much fun – it had so much life, and a history that I understood. So when I started painting, it felt like the painting itself was immediately steeped in that history. There were ideas or motifs I borrowed, like the 'wet fete' figure. At carnival in the Caribbean, during a wet fete where partygoers are sometimes sprayed with firehoses, you'd see a girl dancing in her underwear, and you'd know that this space was for *her*, not for you. And I thought, as an art historical nerd, that I've been conditioned in that way – to know that this space was for her – and that it was interesting to see the difference between a Gauguin bather, or a Lisa Brice bather, in terms of how the artists look at women. I wondered if I, as a Caribbean American, could paint women in a way that made the viewer realise that it's *her* space.

HM *I think there's something else in your work – bringing the carnival to people, wherever they are, especially if they are unable to go. Which is so lovely, and so powerful. I've enjoyed showing my elderly Saint Lucian gran your carnival paintings, for example. And I*

'I went on the Orinoco River for some time and something kind of dawned on me.'



guess that's why you make art – because you want people to have that experience.

AB Yeah, exactly. My stepdad was a very stern guy. I once painted him a hibiscus flower, and he started getting into all these stories about his time in St Kitts, stories he'd never really shared with the family. It was interesting to think about that – what this random painting of a flower meant to him.

HM *Let's talk about your forthcoming commission. You've spoken about Tate Britain's proximity to the river, and wanting to transform the gallery into something that is welcoming, and safe.*

AB I was interested in the idea of a commission that would open up and

connect different parts of the building. There are all these histories to see in different parts of Tate Britain, and the work is a way to bring them together.

HM *Your family's home in Grenada is also a key part of the commission. Could you talk about what Grenada means to you?*

AB I went to a very middle-class school in New York, and there was this idea that the Caribbean, Grenada, was poor. The idea of a place where you take things slow – where you can hang out with your family or friends for hours – doesn't make sense in the kind of working, bustling mentality of New York. But that perception of poverty didn't connect to my experience. Grenada was the safest place I ever knew; it was the most fun place I ever knew. I

thought it would be an interesting point to start the exhibition from. It's part of my material, and how I've worked in the past – going back to a memory I have of lying with my grandmother in her house, hearing the rain hitting the corrugated tin roof. Feeling safe, feeling happy.

HM *What can people expect from your exhibition?*

AB Home.

●
TATE BRITAIN
Tate Britain Commission: Alvaro Barrington, 29 May – 10 November.

Alvaro Barrington is an artist who lives in London. He talked to Hannah Marsh, Assistant Curator, Contemporary British Art, Tate Britain.

(Alvaro Barrington)

The art of making art

by
Seb Emina
(story)
Robbie Lawrence
(photography)
Stuart Williamson
(styling)
with clothes by
Bottega Veneta

(Fantastic Man)

Fantastic Man, May 2024



(Alvaro)



Alvaro wears two cotton tank tops, one woven and one not, with brown wool trousers. The red wool hat, seen here and throughout, is his own. In the opening image he is wearing a linen intrecciato hand-knit jumper, and on page 118 he has added sesame-coloured nylon trousers and silver Orbit sneakers.

FIFTEEN TAKES
ON ALVARO BARRINGTON

1. INTRODUCTORY

Subjects the artist Alvaro Barrington feels comfortable talking about include 1990s hip-hop, the art of Jeff Koons, the novel ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s’, the concept of community, the TV series ‘Sex and the City’, the Harlem Renaissance, the European Renaissance, the sport of basketball, Hieronymus Bosch, and the notion of the Baroque. Alvaro considers himself a painter and much of his work does indeed involve the application of paint, but quite often it also involves materials like yarn, concrete, steel chains, brooms, tyres, and patterned leather. Nor is it limited to flat rectangular spaces: he will sometimes create entire environments that are at once settings for and part of the work. From the end of May a newly commissioned work by Alvaro will inhabit the vast Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain. What will he do? He’s not willing to say yet, though he does observe that “this is the first year that I’m starting to really think about work that is about the future” and he says he is thinking a lot about “the idea of duality.” Alvaro declared not that long ago that “every exhibition is autobiographical,” and it’s true that his projects tend to represent his life in many ways, but they are also densely packed with references of both an art-historical and a pop-cultural nature, smashing them together with a Cern-like zeal. Whatever he does at the Tate will surely only amplify his status as one of the world’s most talked-about artists.

2. THE ARTIST’S AGE

Alvaro is 41. He was born in Caracas, Venezuela, on 1 February 1983 to parents from the Caribbean. Popular songs released that month include ‘Little Red Corvette’ by Prince and ‘Total Eclipse of the Heart’ by Bonnie Tyler. Millions of people born in the 19th century were still alive that year; none are now. Several of Alvaro’s artistic heroes, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Louise Bourgeois and Tupac Shakur, were alive then. Alvaro grew up between Grenada and New York City and graduated from the Slade School of Fine Art, London, in 2017.

3. WHERE IS HE?

Alvaro is wearing a grey-green sweatshirt and has a black beanie quite high on his head. He is in his studio in Hackney, London. Shortly after our video call begins, he apologises and leaves to deal with a delivery. I examine the room in his absence. Alvaro’s

empty seat has a slightly curved backrest made from dark wood, quite similar in colour to a cabinet and bookshelf elsewhere in the room. In conjunction with the blueness of the carpet, the plain whiteness of the wall and the beadedness of the plastic cord that opens the window blind, it makes this room (which is clearly part of a larger complex) seem less like an artist’s studio than an office in a university or museum.

What it doesn’t resemble is the studio which the artist recreated in a ground-floor room at MoMA PS1 gallery in Queens, New York, for ‘Alvaro Barrington’, his first solo exhibition after graduating. As well as the paintings of hibiscus flowers that would become a signature motif, the show included Alvaro’s work desk and a number of handwritten notes containing various prompts-to-self such as “What is the next obvious but unexpected move?”

One of the books in the room I’m observing is called ‘Jamaica Vibes’. I look it up: a glorious large-format volume by Lisa Lovatt-Smith and Novia McDonald-Whyte, published last year. More books and papers are stacked on the flat surface below the shelf. At the other side of the room is a single kick drum. When Alvaro comes back, I ask him about it and he explains that, having used the drum as the basis for a sculpture, he’s been finding it useful in other ways. “You grow up with the drums as a symbol for so many things, and so I’m just keeping it around me, just helping me figure some stuff out,” he says. Alvaro is thoughtful and doesn’t take much shit. He will often think for a while in response to a question before setting off on a circuitous monologue that at some point nails the point from an unexpected direction.

4. BIO-POEM

In lieu of an official biography, Alvaro often provides an extensive text, the status of which — Poem? Song? Ready-made? — remains ambiguous. This is an excerpt:

You’re the most insecure person I know and it’s disgusting/
We have to be gentle with each other’s hearts
I Like America and America likes me
For the CULTURE/
If you were them, You would be them/
LISTEN/
“You’ve got to give them something special, you got to give them you, what you do, what you represent”
New women, old ways, Gotta Keep a Balance/
I look cooler than I am/
I don’t want my work to be some fucking free zone associations/
Build the margins/

5. POLYCULE

Alvaro places himself outside the conventional system where an artist is represented by a very small group of commercial galleries on an exclusive basis. Instead, he has developed what’s been called a non-monogamous arrangement, meaning any of the below should be able to field an enquiry on his work.

Anton Kern Gallery
16 East 55th Street
New York, NY 10022
United States of America
+1 212 367 9663

BLUM Gallery
2727 South La Cienega Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90034
United States of America
+1 310 836 2062

Corvi-Mora
1a Kempsford Road (off Wincott Street)
London SE11 4NU
United Kingdom
+44 20 7840 9111

Emalin
The Lazarus Building, 1 Holywell Lane
London EC2A 3ET
United Kingdom
+44 20 3976 5340

Karma
22 East 2nd Street
New York, NY 10003
United States of America
+1 212 390 8290

Mendes Wood DM
Rua Barra Funda 216
01152 - 000 São Paulo
Brazil
+55 11 3081 1735

Nicola Vassell
138 Tenth Avenue
New York, NY 10011
United States of America
+1 212 463 5160

Sadie Coles HQ
62 Kingly Street
London W1B 5QN
United Kingdom
+44 20 7493 8611

Thaddaeus Ropac
Mirabellplatz 2
A-5020 Salzburg
Austria
+43 662 881393 0

6. THE ARTIST’S MOTHER

Emelda, Alvaro’s mother, was from Grenada. She died from cancer in 1993. She was a teenager when Alvaro was born, and then moved to New York. Alvaro lived with his grandmother for a time, only moving to Brooklyn to join his mother two years before her death. As well as naming his Notting Hill Carnival stage after her (more on that next), he is working on turning a building in White-chapel into a hybrid art space called Emelda’s. His beguiling website, a hybrid of portfolio and e-shop — as well as displaying his work, it offers aromatherapy products from the London brand Cremate — is located at the URL emeldaart.net. “I only knew her as the person she knew I needed, and so in a way, she’s only the person that I need,” he says. “When I chose to be an artist, she was the reason. She’s just someone that I project my needs on. I allow myself to go down that road with a joy knowing that that is my safety.”

7. CARNIVAL

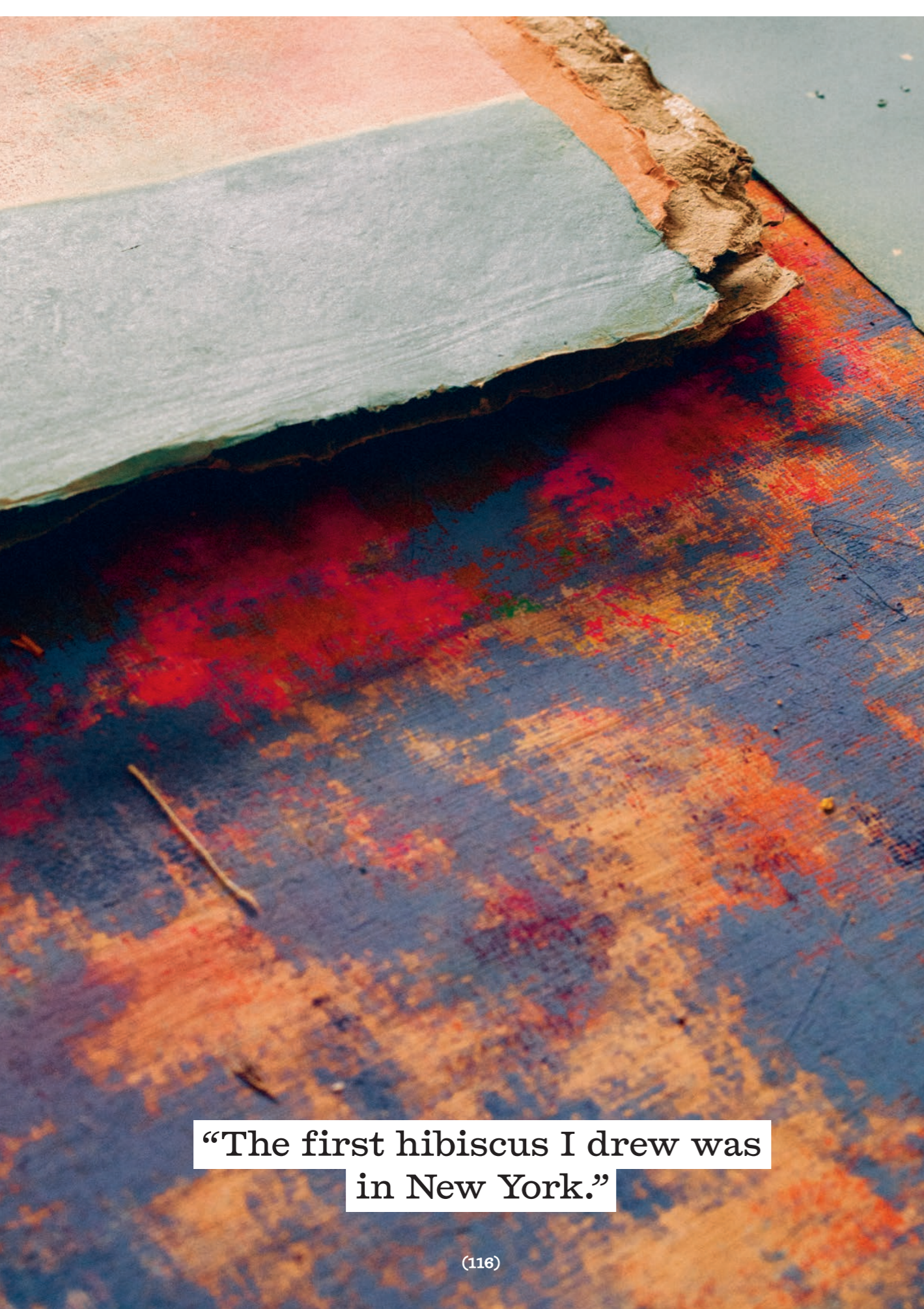
When he was a young child, Alvaro’s cousins took him to J’ouvert, the day of festivities that serves as an unofficial start to carnival in the Caribbean. He climbed on top of a sound system and promptly fell asleep. In 2022, the experience inspired a pavilion at the Notting Hill Carnival, created by Alvaro and the architect Sumayya Vally, where people were invited to take some downtime from the action elsewhere. The following year he created a stage for the carnival called Emelda’s Junction, which was in Powis Square. He held an exhibition to coincide with it, which was at 62 Kingly Street, an address you probably remember from section 5 (Polycule) above.

8. SADIE COLES DESCRIBES A SHOW

Affable gallerist Sadie Coles was instrumental in the Young British Artists movement of the ’80s and ’90s. Her gallery represents 52 artists, including Matthew Barney, Ugo Rondinone and Martine Syms. She would normally never work with someone right after graduation, but with Alvaro it was different. “He was such a standout,” she says. “Alvaro’s use of materials is so very particular.” In a late-afternoon call she describes his show that evolved from Emelda’s Junction: “The exhibition was called ‘Grandma’s Land’. The paintings that we showed in the gallery were the stage flats for the sound stage, at Powis Square. They were literally on stage and then at the end of the carnival they were rolled up and came into the gallery and were put into frames. So there was a very, very strong connection to his Caribbean ancestry.



Alvaro is wearing a cotton shirt, a denim jacket and denim trousers, a leather tie and black leather shoes, all by Bottega Veneta.



“The first hibiscus I drew was
in New York.”

(116)



(117)



“My friends don’t necessarily go to galleries.”



(118)

Fantastic Man, May 2024

The show had three structures in it, and they were referencing his grandma’s house, his uncle’s house, and his auntie’s house. So it felt like a village situation. Each of the structures had a painting on the side of the building, and his works were on the outside of them. On the inside of the structures, he was hosting another artist, which is typical of Alvaro’s inclusive generosity. He’s often doing projects where he brings other people into them. And we were lucky enough that we had Sonia Gomes in the grandma’s house, we had Paul Anthony Smith in the auntie’s house, and Akinola Davies Jr. had a film of the carnival that we were also showing, so it really felt like Alvaro was hosting other artists within his show, which was very nice.” This year’s Notting Hill Carnival will take place 25–26 August in west London.

9. THREE AMERICAN CHAIN STORES

— Bob’s Discount Furniture. Co-founded in 1991 by Bob Kaufman (now owned by a private investment firm).

— Circuit City. “Where the streets are paved with bargains,” went the slogan for this consumer electronics chain until its bankruptcy.

— P.C. Richard & Son. Televisions, appliances, mattresses. Distinctive jingle.

“My friends don’t necessarily go to galleries,” says Alvaro, who spent time on the payrolls of all of the above, back when he was living in New York and had yet to achieve the success that awaited him in London. “When I worked retail, more of my friends would come to visit me, because everybody bought a TV. Everybody wanted to have a TV. So now it’s just, ‘How do I make my art world into a place, like, where everybody comes to buy a TV?’”

10. TUPAC

For a recent Paris exhibition, ‘They Got Time: YOU BELONG TO THE CITY’, Alvaro mined memories of New York via a three-part installation. Staged at the Thaddaeus Ropac gallery’s space in the suburb of Pantin were a series of imitation shop fronts (a reference was Walter Benjamin’s unfinished book ‘The Arcades Project’, a sprawling work of cultural criticism largely concerned with the shopping arcades of 19th-century Paris). Alongside Alvaro’s retail-based interventions were works featuring figures such as Andy Warhol, Mary J. Blige and Tupac Shakur, the latter re-enacting a 1996 photograph by David LaChapelle in which the rapper (who would be killed in a drive-by shooting later that year) is

lying in a bathtub covered in gold jewellery. Alvaro has described Tupac as the most significant artist of his lifetime, and his 2021 painting ‘They have They Cant’ pays tribute accordingly. Lyrics from the song ‘Keep Ya Head Up’ are stitched in yarn across a canvas of spray-painted concrete. Draped below it, bunting-like, are patterned bandanas, each a different colour.

11. AUDRE LORDE

“The quality of light by which we scrutinise our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives,” writes self-described “black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, mother, warrior, poet” Audre Lorde in the essay ‘Poetry Is Not a Luxury’. Alvaro has cited it as a formative inspiration. “It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realised. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless — about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.”

12. BASKETBALL

The Tate’s collection includes Alvaro’s piece ‘Street Dreams are Made of Basketball’, in which a basketball sits on a block of concrete, which is in a milk crate, which is itself on top of a wooden frame stretched with hessian, which in turn has been laced with plastic ropes. These ropes adhere to an orange, yellow and lilac colour scheme inspired by Josef Albers, a favourite artist of Alvaro’s.

Basketball is a frequent motif in Alvaro’s work. In 2022 he created a functional court in Bethnal Green, east London, in collaboration with organisations including the Serpentine Gallery, Tower Hamlets Council and the basketball team London Lions (by far the winners of the 2022–23 British Basketball League season, with 64 points to the second-placed Leicester Riders’ 50).

The blue, khaki and green court can be found at the north-eastern corner of Weavers Fields. Alvaro described it as being at once a working recreational facility and “a map that represents both migration and athleticism.” The free-throw circles, he said, double as suns setting in distinct lands, the triangles on the sidelines as mountains and valleys. The inspirations at play included the work of pop artist Bridget Riley, video artist Arthur Jafa, and the celebrated creations of the Gee’s Bend quilt movement.

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13. HIBISCUS

A conversation fragment in which Alvaro considers how—depending on the city in which he is painting—an identical object ends up being represented differently:

ALVARO—If I paint two hibiscus flowers, one in London and one in New York, it’s the same subject but it’s so different. I did a show at Nicola Vassell [2023’s ‘Island Life’, named after the Grace Jones album], and the flowers needed to be so much wider, but yet so much more radiant and bright and in your face. And it happened because I was dealing with New York.

SEB—How might the London hibiscus flower be by comparison?

A—Well, I did one series of flowers here. It was much thinner. It was much more intimate. It was much lighter. Whereas in New York, it had so much more saturation of colour. And I remember that after a couple washes and a couple of gestures, it felt finished a lot quicker, and in New York, it felt finished only after days of just pushing through it.

S—Then the hibiscus flower itself, it’s from the Caribbean, right? Is it associated with one of the other places you’ve lived in, aside from those two cities?

A—Yeah, although the first hibiscus I drew was in New York, because it was by the playground by my parents’ house, next to a mural of Marcus Garvey. I remember painting it and bringing it to my stepdad because they had these hibiscus flowers in their garden as well. And so even though I really first met it in the Caribbean, the first time I engaged with it in a real way was in New York.

14. BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY’S

As a kind of appendix to the Pantin show, Alvaro created a playlist of 45 songs which, thanks to the underrated magic of QR codes, was available to listen to as visitors pondered the work in situ or as they reflected on it afterwards. Various hip-hop artists are present in the playlist, which includes two tracks by DMX (‘How’s it Goin’ Down’ and ‘Slippin’’) and ‘Jesus Walks’ from Kanye West’s 2004 album ‘The College Dropout’, for example.

Perhaps most characteristically, it begins with three separate interpretations of the same pop-cultural artefact, namely ‘Moon River’, a song whose overfamiliarity never seems to nullify its impact of making the listener temporarily imagine themselves as the star of a movie. There’s the sparkling original by Audrey Hepburn from the soundtrack to the film ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s’; there’s Frank

Sinatra’s crooned one; and there’s Frank Ocean’s rendition, released as a single on Valentine’s Day 2018, turning an otherwise wistful and nostalgic number into something more asser-tive and forward-looking.

It’s the Hepburn, says Alvaro, that really moves him, and indeed the show took its inspiration from Truman Capote’s novel: “One day I picked up ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s’ at Strand Book Store in Union Square and I realised the NYC I was experiencing in the ’90/2000s was what Truman Capote wrote about in ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s’.”

That’s from a statement Alvaro released with the exhibition. Can he elaborate? “It was mostly about what I thought of as an end of a New York that I think of as being between ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s’ and ‘Sex and the City’. It’s a very particular New York. How do you go from being a gay guy in the middle of Pennsylvania who’s deeply religious, socially awkward at best, and imagine yourself to be Andy Warhol? Or your Notorious B.I.G. or your Jay-Z? There was a New York that was about how—no matter where you started—you could get to this impossible thing that was only limited by your imagination.”

15. DUVEEN GALLERIES

The Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain are 300 feet long. Over a million people pass through them each year. The most recent commission to fill the galleries was by Hew Locke and was called ‘The Procession’, back in 2022. Alvaro Barrington’s project will run from 29 May until 10 November 2024.

CONTRIBUTION

— Seb Emina’s closest Paris Métro station is the celebratorily named Place des Fêtes. He’s the co-curator of Five Radio Stations, a series of online artworks funded by Lab’Bel, the artistic laboratory of the Bel Group, who create popular cheeses Babybel and La Vache qui rit.

(Photographic assistance by Andy Moores. Styling assistance by Helly Pringle. Production by Fiona Percival and Phoebe Clothier.)



Yes, that’s a hole in the top of Alvaro’s hat to allow an exit point for his hair. He is wearing a grey cashmere hoodie by Bottega Veneta.

Gravity and GRACE: The Colourful World of Alvaro Barrington's Tate Commission



Alvaro Barrington's East End studio, housed in the historic site of England's first free school, is something to behold. Spread across two buildings, the space showcases an unorthodox mix of his preferred mediums and tools: paint, concrete, yarn, hessian, glass, neon lights, milk crates, snare drums, and brooms. In his neo-Jacobean assembly hall, music fills the air; a series of half-finished paintings, characterised by bright block colours and painted on burlap, are on display. It's an unusual choice of canvas, but Barrington has never been an artist to play it safe.

Born in Venezuela to a Haitian father and a Grenadian mother, he grew up in the Caribbean and Brooklyn before settling in East London. Unlike many working-class immigrants who face hostility, Barrington tells me that he believes in 'the ability to be seen in a place, and that lets you know you belong there somehow. One of the narratives I have about myself is that I come from a

history of working-class immigrants, but I also have the privilege of growing up in a culture of hip-hop and reggae in New York City. That always meant that home became a couple of things to me.' It's this idea of home – lost, found, remembered, and reimagined – that remains a core focus of his work; it seems only fitting, then, that Barrington would be drawn to a Whitechapel, a historically immigrant neighbourhood, to set up his multi-purpose art space.

Walking around his studio, it became clear to me that intense commitment to painting means that personal and political questions are inseparable from his work. Barrington's fusion of different artistic styles and cultural references speaks to an artist grappling with the fundamental issues of identity, memory, and what art can convey. Drawing inspiration from figures as wide-ranging as Cy Twombly, Paul Klee, Louise Bourgeois and Robert Rauschenberg, he creates a vibrant, eclectic mix that reflects his broad interests and playful approach to art history. Silhouetted figures – people dancing, reclining, revelling – are rendered with a playful candour, combining tightly controlled compositions with exuberant candour.

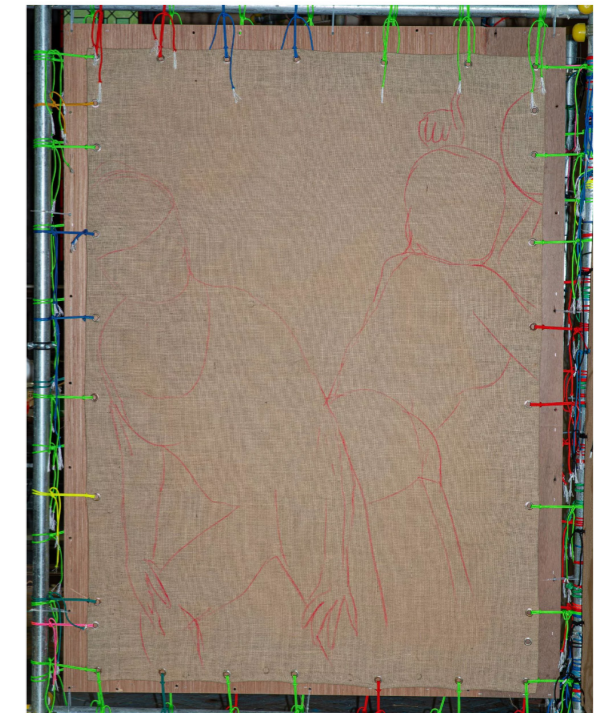
It's this kind of fervid sensibility that Barrington hopes to bring to his upcoming Tate Britain commission, GRACE, his largest presentation yet, debuting in the museum's Duveen Galleries. A deeply personal tribute to the women who shaped his life and artistic vision, the installation centres on three key figures: his grandmother Frederica, his close friend Samantha, and his mother Emelda. 'The first part is about my Grandma,' he shares with me. 'We lived in a small shack in Grenada, where the rain hitting the corrugated roof was like a soundtrack. It was always a place of safety and love. I wanted an installation that allowed you to feel the texture of my grandma's house.' For GRACE, Barrington recreates this in the South Duveen gallery with a suspended corrugated steel roof, rattan seats, plastic quilts containing embroidered postcards, and the sound of rain mixed with newly commissioned tracks.

Music, a cornerstone of his creative process, energises his work with exultant colour and movement – even after only a quick glance at his vast body of work, it's hard to deny the totemic influence that artists like Wu Tang Clan



and Biggie Smalls have had on Barrington's practice. 'I try to capture the essence of music within my painting because it's a kind of blueprint for me of what makes good art. Tupac is probably the greatest artist in my imagination. They're North Stars for me,' he explains. 'As a painter, Western culture has contributed incredible amounts of innovation to painting, like pointillism and Cubism. But equally, the same could be true for music and black culture – think about jazz, hip-hop, disco, funk. Innovation in Black music has been immense.' Central to GRACE is Barrington's considered exploration of care, community, and Black culture – namely those from his childhood in Grenada and Brooklyn with the fervent energy of the carnival culture. The central space features a 3-metre tall aluminium sculpture of a carnival dancer, inspired by and made with Samantha. Adorned with pretty mas jewellery by L'ENCHANTEUR, a costume by Jawara Alleyne, and nails by Mica Hendriks, the figure emboldens that sense of Caribbean vibrancy. Paintings of old mas characters and carnival revellers stretch across scaffold structures, with sunrise and sunset paintings above, redolent of the J'ouvert tradition.

Profoundly influenced by the matriarchal West Indian community he grew up in, Barrington's art is also a homage to the underappreciated labour of Black women. 'Although most of my work is about my mom or my grandma, who



passed away, but also the network of women who took me in after her passing,' he notes. In GRACE's final space, a stained-glass window casts light onto a boarded-up corner kiosk in reference to the police brutality faced by Black communities in the US. But it's as much a celebration of kinship too, and the unwavering love felt by Black mothers for their children. Here, church pews covered in plastic recall the protective gestures of Barrington's grandmother. As he explains, explains, 'My mom got pregnant at 17, and my grandma took us in without judgement. Covering furniture in plastic was her way of saying, "Every time you come back, you have a home."'

Near the end of our interview, I ask Barrington about how he manages to balance personal narrative with broader social and political commentary in his work. He's a lucid talker, deftly moving between his childhood and broader cultural issues with the kind of ease that makes clear his art's potential as a site for personal catharsis as well as its engagement with collective memory and social critique. However, how Barrington manages to distil all these ideas into one installation — or even a single canvas in some cases — remained a mystery.

After I finish talking, Barrington asks if he can read me some lyrics from Tupac's 'Keep Ya Head Up'. 'Sure,' I say, and laugh. He takes a deep breath and begins, 'I



wonder why we take from our women. Why we rape our women, do we hate our women? I think it's time to kill for our women. Time to heal our women, be real to our women. And if we don't we'll have a race of babies, that will hate the ladies that make the babies. And since a man can't make one, he has no right to tell a woman when and where to create one. So will the real men get up?'

Then, after a brief moment of silence, Barrington says, 'And that's a whole world there. In the lyrics, you could talk about reproductive rights. You could talk about police brutality. You could talk about all these systemic issues, but he's just talking to the community and it's from a personal place, you know? I have lyrics tattooed on my body because of it. I think for me, art is always about the personal. I never start from a political perspective. I've never liked it when I feel like artists were just preaching to me. Art is supposed to be the honest reality of a person's life. For me, the deepest art has always been just about being political. All art I love is political. All art I love is personal, from the American AbEx painters to the Jewish immigrants, trying to figure out how to survive and how to be seen as human beings. It's all very, very personal.'

Barrington takes another pause, smiles, and tells me, 'It's the only way I know how to make art.'

– Katie Tobin

'Biggie, Tupac, Ghostface – those guys saved my life': Alvaro Barrington on hip-hop, carnival and his Tate show



A Tate Britain press release tantalisingly trails the forthcoming Duveen installation as “a major new work addressing themes of place and belonging”. It is taking shape in the school's former gymnasium, but Barrington is unable to discuss details before the official opening. Instead, we repair to a quiet attic room and talk about everything else under the sun, from the importance of community to the lineage of New York hip-hop.

Born in Caracas, Venezuela, to a Grenadian mother and Haitian father, Barrington was raised in Grenada by his grandmother, before moving to Brooklyn when he was eight years old. His work is loaded with memories of his Caribbean childhood landscape – blood-red hibiscus flowers are a recurring motif – as well as references to pop culture and art history. His conversation, too, is free-ranging and peppered with names that don't often appear in the same sentence – Willem de Kooning and Tupac Shakur, Joseph Beuys and Marcus Garvey, Claude Monet and Miles Davis – but add up to a kind of cultural map of his myriad influences.

“Alvaro exists and draws on several different communities that do not often converge in the art world,” says Coles, “There's his extended Caribbean community, the New York hip-hop community he immersed himself in in Brooklyn, but also his sense of himself belonging to an art community, whether that be the likes of Louise Bourgeois or his young friends who are also artists.”

Although Barrington defines himself as a painter, his materials speak of a similarly diverse approach to image-making, from the yarn he stretches sometimes over his

canvases as a kind of homage to his grandmother's sewing skills to the concrete on which he inscribes fragmented lyrics from the rich oral history of hip-hop culture. He describes his approach as a kind of visual “creolisation”.

Having self-funded himself through college in New York, Barrington arrived in London in 2017 as a relative unknown, but his Slade graduation show changed all that. “There was a shared feeling that this was a very powerful and dynamic new voice,” says Coles. “The fact that he was older than most of the other students meant his work had a very developed autobiographical content as well as a unique formal signature that reflected that.”

Soon after, he was given his first solo show at MoMA PS1 in New York. “It was offered to me through a DM on Instagram,” he tells me, still sounding surprised. He responded by recreating his London studio in its entirety in the New York gallery. His iconoclastic approach to exhibiting continued with a 2019 show at Thaddaeus Ropac in London. Provocatively titled *Artists I Steal From*, it featured a single painting by him nestling among a constellation of his influences, including work by Philip Guston, Agnes Martin and Robert Rauschenberg.

“That was probably the most important show of my life,” he says. “It was really about contextualising me in terms of all these other artists. One of the things I'm interested in is how, in the long history of painting, artists struggle to make painting make sense. By studying their work, maybe I can borrow some of their solutions and transform them.”

Ahead of his major Tate commission, one of the stars of modern art discusses his diverse cultural influences and why his new work will explore his Caribbean and American roots

Before we sit down to talk, Alvaro Barrington gives me a guided tour of his expansive studio in Whitechapel, east London. It stands on the site of one of the country's first free schools for the poor, which was founded in 1860. As we climb the steps to the upper floor of an ornate two-storey neo-Jacobean building that was once an assembly hall and gymnasium, he talks animatedly about the waves of immigrant workers who settled and transformed the area, from French Huguenots in the 17th century to the Jewish, Irish and Bengali communities that followed in their wake.

“I think of myself essentially as a working-class immigrant and Whitechapel chimes with that,” he says. “The long history of this planet is one of migration and exchange. That is what has given me the most freedom in terms of conceptualising myself and my journey, so I kind of feel at home here.”

Aged 41, Barrington's own experience of migration and exchange is embedded in his vividly expressive paintings, which have made him one of the stars of the modern art scene. In a few weeks, having first grabbed the attention of the London art cognoscenti with his MFA graduate show at the Slade school of art in 2017, he will present what may well be his most important exhibition to date. Having been awarded the Tate Britain Commission, he follows in the footsteps of established artists such as Mike Nelson (2019) and Hew Locke (2022).

“It's a huge deal for any artist,” says the London gallerist Sadie Coles, who has hosted four solo exhibitions of Barrington's work since 2019. “No gallery show will ever have that kind of exposure or critical attention that a mega platform like the Tate provides.”

In a paint-flecked sweatshirt, baggy shorts, white socks and sandals, Barrington emits a sense of easygoing calm that is in stark contrast to the buzz of activity around him. Across several floors in a building adjacent to the old school house, there are rooms filled with paintings-in-progress, art materials and stacks of multicoloured fabrics, while a small army of youthful studio assistants flit about with purposeful intensity.



Since graduating, Barrington has walked to his own rhythm, creating elaborate floats and stages for the Notting Hill carnival, as well as funding community projects connected to it. “Carnival is inclusive,” he says. “It’s a celebration of community. I put my paintings on a float and a million people get to see them.” He has plans to turn the old school house into a hub for emerging artists as well as a place where the local community can feel welcome and included.

More intriguingly, Barrington has also redefined the usually monogamous relationship between artist and gallerist to an audacious degree. Currently, he has nine galleries representing him worldwide, including three in London and three in New York. “His approach is aimed towards maximising every opportunity available to him,” says Coles, “but there is also a strategy at work, wherein each gallery deals with a different aspect of his work. I’ve had his hibiscus and carnival paintings, while Blum in Los Angeles is very much about his urban, hip-hop influenced content.”

Hip-hop, Barrington tells me, was the soundtrack to his young life and remains his single most important formative influence. For his debut show at Blum, he had one of his heroes, Ghostface Killah from the Wu-Tang Clan, perform on a pop-up stage. The title of Ghostface’s song All That I Got Is You is tattooed on his left hand.

“Growing up in Brooklyn, hip-hop let me know that what I was experiencing, others were also experiencing,” Barrington says, growing visibly animated. “Biggie, Tupac, Ghostface – those guys saved my life. They are my north stars and there is a part of the Tate Britain show where I acknowledge that. That’s all I can say about it.” He pauses for a moment, as if lost in recollection. “I remember when I was a kid hearing Children’s Story by Slick Rick and I can truthfully say there would be no Tate Britain show if he hadn’t made that record.”

When I ask Barrington how he felt when he landed the Tate commission, his answer is characteristically thoughtful. “I felt honoured, but I saw it more as an opportunity than an accolade. And with every opportunity, there is also the bigger question, what does this mean?”

So what does it mean to him? He pauses for a long moment. “Well, I’ve lived in London for nearly a decade, but I think of myself as an American. Then there’s the fact that I grew up in Grenada, which is a part of the Commonwealth of the United Kingdom. I can remember seeing the Queen’s face on a bill for the first time when I was five years old. So, the first question is, what is my relationship to all of this and how do I explore it? The Tate show is a great opportunity to think through all of that. That’s the exciting part.”

– Sean O’Hagan



Alvaro Barrington: the artist bringing carnival and the Caribbean to Tate Britain's Duveen Galleries

With his new London commission, the Venezuela-born painter is exploring the UK's impact around the globe with a sweeping installation partly inspired by his grandmother's plastic sofa coverings



At the 2022 Notting Hill Carnival, Alvaro Barrington collaborated in a number of projects, including hosting and designing a stage with Emalin gallery
Photo: Timothy Spurr; © Alvaro Barrington; courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ

The rise of Alvaro Barrington has been a rapid one: in the same year that he graduated from London's Slade School of Art in 2017, he had his first institutional show at MoMA PS1 in New York. Since then, he has had a widely acclaimed solo show at the South London Gallery in 2021 and has worked with some of the world's leading commercial galleries, where he has rewritten the artist representation rulebook by having ongoing and amicably fluid relationships with around eight different establishments worldwide.

Born in 1983 in Venezuela to a Haitian father and a Grenadian mother, Barrington was raised in the Caribbean and New York, and is now based in London. A commitment to community underpins his multifarious practice with artistic collaborations ranging across exhibitions, performances, concerts, carnivals and fashion projects. Although

he is predominantly known as a painter, Barrington's materials are also infinitely various, encompassing concrete, yarn, carpet, burlap, found postcards, metal security shutters and musical instruments. These are also often used in combination to form entire environments.

Barrington is the latest artist to undertake Tate Britain's prestigious Duveen Galleries commission where he is showing *Grace*, an all-encompassing multimedia installation that includes paintings, sculpture, furniture and a soundscape, with a title that pays tribute to *Amazing Grace*, a 1993 work by his former teacher and mentor Nari Ward.

The Art Newspaper: How did you consider tackling the extensive Neo-Classical Duveen Galleries that run down the centre of Tate Britain?

Alvaro Barrington: As someone who's not British, but the consequence of British history and who now lives here, I thought it was a great opportunity to think through what that meant for me and how I experienced it, and to put it in the spaces at Tate Britain. I think that was the most honest thing I could do. The history that is playing out in front of you is a result of that—good and bad. So there's carnival culture, one of the greatest things that I think happened, but there's also parts that deal with the migration part; a lot of people in the Windrush generation and after had to leave their family back home. And their family had to imagine what had happened when they came back. All of those are consequences of Britain's reach around the world. And I am a product of that.

Your response is intensely personal: nearly half of the space is taken up by an installation and soundscape that evokes your early childhood in Grenada.

We've covered a third of the South Duveens with this tin roof, and we're creating a soundscape that's basically from this memory I have of living with my grandma in Grenada. My mom got pregnant when she was 17 and my grandma, like many other women in my community, took me in. We lived in this really small shack in the countryside, and it was the happiest and the safest I've ever felt. I have this memory of the rain coming and me and my cousins, we'd run into the house to play and the rain would be hitting the tin roof. So we have the sound of rain dropping and some people are also creating music: Andrew Hale, the Mangrove Steelband, Dev Hynes [who is] also known as Blood Orange. And we are streaming [Hackney-based] NTS Radio at random times. On four structures are yarn paintings that are a mix between Kandinsky and Sonia Delaunay, so it's like looking outside into the garden as the rain blends into the sound and colour. Then you sit on these ten couches that I've designed, which have these blankets that you can wrap around you, and these have a different narrative meaning held within them. You can look at my story and my mom's story all becoming one story.

The couch and blankets are covered in clear plastic. Why?

In my grandma's living room there were these sofas that had this plastic protection. My mother was forced to migrate for many reasons and grandma was protecting this

furniture for when my mother finally returned to Grenada. I decided to use the plastic as the form of my grandma's body, holding everything in. So you are being held by my grandma.

It seems to be very much about nurture.

My first show with Sadie [Coles HQ in 2019] was called *Garvey: Sex Love Nurturing Famalay*. And now for this work I want to look at my grandma and the invisible labour that she was doing for me. Her labour meant that my mom got to be a teenager. She got to be a kid herself, as opposed to being a kid in Brooklyn raising another kid. My grandma also protected my ability to become an artist; it was never what she imagined, but by doing the early labour, she gave me a possible future. I want to embody her labour as opposed to depicting it. I want people to feel protected, to feel like they were me in this house.

The rest of the Duveens commission is devoted to the carnival.

I love carnival culture and the second part is like being thrown into carnival. I've made 55 paintings of all these different carnival people—Jab Jab, Moko Jumbie on his stilts, Blue Devil—in a crowd which you are forced to walk through and around. In the Duveens rotunda there's a 3m-high sculpture of Samantha, my sister of 30 years, dancing in Bikini Mas. Carnival is one of the only public places where you could see a woman dancing in a bikini; everyone knows this is her space and you can't go up and dance with her. She's dancing for herself. It's a wonderful thing that the community has done to create a public space for a woman—and a man sometimes—and so I asked Samantha if I could borrow her likeness. We had a discussion about what it represents and how we make it happen. It was important to get the narrative right, and for a time it slowed me down. But I talked to Samantha and the community, and it's not about a naked woman made by a male; it's about carnival and how the community has created a space for her. My community's truth is our truth; it's a whole different perspective.

It is as if Samantha is the queen of the carnival, emerging out of a steel drum.

You're 2m away because she's standing right in the middle of a steel drum; and I've invited [the US drummer] Marcus Gilmore to come over and perform a panorama. The designer Jawara Alleyne is designing the bikini and the twins Soull and Dynasty Ogun are going to create a headpiece. I'm going to paint her like Phyllida Barlow painted her work; it's as if she's come out of J'ouvert morning carnival straight into Bikini Mas.

Is this the first figurative sculpture you've made?

Yes, she's like my version of Botticelli's Venus. One of the things I was thinking about was Venus's backstory, which was that she was Aphrodite in Greece, but before that, in the Middle East, in areas like Iraq, she was Ishtar, the mother warrior figure. And I thought there was something really interesting about the black bodies that are taken from their mothers in Africa, and how they became daughters of whiteness. But I grew up in an era where Blackness is not a daughter of whiteness. We're our own mother; we've created so much culture. Hip hop culture, reggae culture, fashion—we were the originators and creators of all these things. Blackness is its own thing. Growing up, we were having the best time; we were the coolest kids on the fucking block!

I've always thought of you as an art-historical omnivore. I've seen you getting excited in front of Tintoretto and Monet, and in your 2019 show, Artists I Steal From at Thaddaeus Ropac, among the 48 artists of all backgrounds and generations that you included were Louise Bourgeois, Willem de Kooning, Howard Hodgkin, Andy Warhol, Denzil Forrester, Lisa Brice and your old teacher at Hunter College, Nari Ward.

I never looked at art as white history; I just looked at it as communities exchanging. Each time Matisse went to New York, he went to the jazz clubs in Harlem. Mondrian loved jazz. Picasso's from the south of Spain that was once colonised by the Arabs, and when you look at a lot of his colour choices, those are Arabic. The Japanese printers allowed these European Modernists to make a certain type of work; it was a communal exchange. Obviously, the dynamic of power and who got credited for it changes. And then maybe it gets erased in terms of the women's or other cultures' labour in the mix. But that

really wasn't the truth of what was happening at the time.

You've always described yourself as a painter, even though in the Duveens and beyond your paintings are accompanied by sculpture, installation, textiles, found objects and sound.

I see myself as a painter. But I also think that the painting has to be a part of the wholeness of the project. People want paintings to feel real to them, and how this has been done through digital technology has been really cheap. I believe in the painting as a physical object, I believe in the physical space, I believe in the community of the physical space. Most of the cultural narrative isn't how painting is interesting in our lives. It's usually the spectacle of what it's sold for. So maybe I have to try to help push painting to become a bit more participatory again. And that's everything from putting my work on a carnival float or a music stage, as well as in a gallery or an institution or a pop up somewhere on the beach, wherever. It has to be able to fit in the spaces.

Your belief in community seems to extend to working with a number of different galleries—eight at the last count. Why so many?

I'm an orphan. I had many women raise me and their kids became my cousins, and I loved that I was able to travel to different neighbourhoods and be welcomed there, because my mom's friends said: "You're my son now." At that time New York was a bit like that movie The Warriors (1979); going from one neighbourhood to another meant you often got beaten up. But having all these family members who adopted me gave me a passport to move through the city in a way that other people didn't. The wonderful thing about the galleries is that they are each a passport for me to understand the artists that they love, and the collectors and institutions that are important to them. Why would I say no to that?

You are also opening up part of the Whitechapel building that houses your studio to the wider art community, offering spaces for informal performances, exhibitions and gatherings. What are your plans?

Everyone has an emotional tribe and mine is immigrant



Barrington's Sound of the Islands, Disya (2022) references the Disya Jeneration sound system, long associated with the Notting Hill carnival
Photo: Stephen James; © Alvaro Barrington; courtesy the artist and Emalin

working class folks, so Whitechapel where you've had the Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews, the Bengalis, and which has had to take on the form of its community is a place where I can bring the world to me. There are a lot of structural challenges for the arts and I want this to be the place that fights for art. [I want it to be a place that] invites artists to feel safe and to try and do something in a place where they feel like their work is going to be really seen and be met with the same amount of rigour that they put into it. This might be people coming to London to have a show who just need somewhere to make two more paintings. Or if someone is putting out an album who might want to come and play some music or do some listening sessions. We are going to organise

sessions where people can bring their work for crits. During the day the pre-school next door are using the garden but it will be open for people to hang out in later. There's also going to be a café on the street entrance and a kitchen for people to eat when there's an event. We're still figuring it out.

And you're calling it Emelda's after your late mother.

Yes, she worked from my possible future—and this is now my possible future. So I have to give her that.

– Louisa Buck

Alvaro Barrington: Grace review – church pews, chains and a carnival queen



A soundtrack of rain sizzles on a tin roof, interspersed with snatches of music and radio voices struggling against the storm. The shiny tin slung overhead and the bare neoclassical walls compound the echoing reverb of the Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain. I want to sink to one of the rattan sofas grouped about the floor, close my eyes and drift to the noise of the sweltering hurricane season in the Caribbean. It's enervating. I think of sweat glueing my body to the protective clear plastic cover of the sofa. Maybe they should turn the heating up, to complete the experience.

This is the opening that greets visitors to Alvaro Barrington's *Grace*, his three-part Tate Britain commission. The length of the Duveen and its division into three sections invites a narrative approach, a journey in time as well as space. For now, we are in Grenada, in a kind of symbolic, schematic recreation of Barrington's childhood home, living with his grandmother.

At the rear of this first space, two L-shaped sections of white-painted wall, like the corners of a room, create a division. Glazed windows are closed against the imaginary

weather. The details start to snag you: the woven abstract curtains, the embroidery decorating the old postcards trapped under the plastic sofa covers, along with numbers of drawings, but they're hard to see properly. Maybe knowing they are there is enough, reminders of childhood activity on days when you can't play outdoors. All these works are by one of Barrington's collaborators, Teresa Farrell.

The central rotunda space in the Duveen recreates the atmosphere of carnival, with numerous paintings by Barrington stretched with twine between tall scaffoldings of metal bars, around the edges of the space. Loosely painted figures and faces – bird-men and bodies drenched in blue pigment, masked carnival figures in fanciful costumes, a figure that reminds me of one of Goya's folkloric buffoons, loom from unprimed burlap canvases. Among this motley parade are a few abstract tachiste manoeuvres. Like carnival itself, everything feels loose and improvised and assured, a clamour of touches, moods and modes.



The whole space is commanded by a sculpture of a lone dancer, surrounded by a battery of steel drums, ready to be played (as I'm sure they will be when the commission is open to the public). Like a Caribbean Botticelli Venus, she floats mid-move, lost in a music only she can hear, fabulous in designer jewellery and an OTT costume that has a kind of superhero hauteur. She's had her nails done by Mica Hendricks and she knows she's fabulous. It's a look-at-me but don't-fuck-with me air, regal and resplendent. Again, Barrington has worked with collaborators in her production.

High above it all, if you can drag your eyes upwards, paintings of tropic dawns and sunsets fill the arches in the Duveen's cupola. These have a Viennese secessionist, Gustav Klimt-like feel. The whole arrangement makes you want to ditch any sort of critical distance.

The last section of the Duveen has an entirely darker feel. Encircled by a high cage of metal crowd-control barriers stands a small building. A corner bodega perhaps, a garage or a lock-up. It is the same size as an American prison cell, but brightly spotlit from above, casting menacing shadows on the gallery walls. A cell-within-a-cell, then. There are industrial shutters at either end of the building, operated by machine. As soon as one shutter rises, the other falls. There's nothing inside but chains glinting against the walls. It's a metaphor, an open and shut case. This is life on the corner, and a reminder of what Barrington found when he moved to Brooklyn with his mother, who had been living in Venezuela, aged eight. "The lack of hope and economic opportunity, and the availability of drugs like cocaine, meant that many people in the community self-medicated ... Politicians responded with mass incarceration and the

'war on drugs'.... even a trip to the local corner store could lead one of us falling victim to this incredible assortment of violence", the artist writes in his wall notes on *Grace*.

Barrington's wall texts are a model. They don't tell you what to think or feel. They're pointers, detailing his own story and indicating how *Grace* came about. Right at the end, we come to three rows of church pews. Sitting there, and looking back beyond the cell, the pleasures of carnival and the distant sounds of childhood are framed by the Duveen's columns. Up above them is a stained-glass window he has made to fit the final archway high up towards the roof. Church was a bulwark against all the violence on the street, the randomness and isolation. It meant community, and some sort of hope of grace. Hence the title.

Barrington's commission evokes his origins and his journey to be here now. It is full of life. For descendants of slavery, people to whom the apocalypse had already happened generations ago, the occupation of an institution built on the proceeds of the Tate sugar trade and colonialism, Barrington's *Grace* has a particular resonance. I think Barrington wants to turn the Duveen into a lively, open experience, and one that acknowledges the space it occupies.

- Adrian Searle

CROWD PLEASER

Alvaro Barrington's exuberant art, informed by hip hop culture as much as the contemporary canon, displays its influences proudly. Above all, he says, he wants to make work that fosters community

By Michael Delgado

Alvaro Barrington hasn't slept much. His gallery assistant, Natalia Grabowska, warns me of this as she's showing me around his studio. 'He's a bit sleep-deprived today,' she says. 'He goes into beast mode, where he likes to sleep here and work for hours and hours – it's never-ending.' When, half an hour later, Barrington welcomes me into his office at the top of his studio building, I see what Grabowska means. He's wearing a sweatshirt, jogging bottoms and rubber loafers in the shape of frogs. 'The past week I've been here and that has been my bed,' he tells me, pointing to the brown leather sofa behind me, which is piled high with unidentified fabrics. He sits on an office chair next to his computer, a window behind him looking out on the studio garden and a work in progress leaning against the wall: a canvas of about a metre square, covered in little patches of brown and green yarn that he says is inspired by the colours in his garden. I ask him why he's been sleeping in his studio when he lives just down the road. 'If I could be in my studio 24/7 I would,' he says. He looks deadly serious.

By the end of the interview I feel that, if I were given a proper bed, I too wouldn't mind spending most of my time here. Barrington is a gracious host – intelligent, polite, intense at times but funny too – and his studio, a sprawling affair that takes up two buildings of a decommissioned school on Whitechapel Road, is an awe-inspiring place, full of vitality and chaos. I count eight people in total while I'm there, including three in his woodwork studio, affixing corrugated iron sheets and sawn milk crates to wooden slabs to create the cobbled-together frames he uses in his works, and three helpers ironing fabric in his sewing studio, where endless scrolls of yarn and hessian are filed away like manuscripts on wall-to-ceiling shelves. I walk into his painting studio and am greeted not by a human but by a life-sized painted cardboard figure of the late, great basketball player Kobe Bryant. It's all thrillingly

hectic and feels like a suitable place of origin for Barrington's artworks, which range from vibrant paintings to Rauschenberg-esque assemblages of traditional and unorthodox materials – paint, concrete, yarn, hessian, glass, neon lights, milk crates, snare drums, brooms – and are inspired by everyone from Cy Twombly to Tupac.

Barrington's upcoming commission for Tate Britain, which opens at the end of May, marks the latest step in what has been a remarkable and rapid rise to art-world stardom. Born in Venezuela in 1983 to Haitian and Grenadian parents, and raised by relatives between Grenada and New York, Barrington says that he always knew, on some level, that he wanted to be an artist. 'I never considered art in the way that we think of it in the art world until much later, but 30 years ago I was a kid in my neighbourhood customising people's clothes [...] people would come to me because they got a pair of sneakers and they wanted them to look different [...] I think that was art.' The first point in his formal artistic education came at Hunter College in Manhattan, a 'gladiator-style' art school, he remarks, where professors such as Nari Ward and Daniel Bozhkov would posit their 'extremely strong opinions about what art is, and I got to listen to all these different voices and pick and choose what I would go along with'.

After Hunter, Barrington moved to London and enrolled at the Slade, from which he graduated in 2017 – the year he had his first solo exhibition in New York, at MoMA PS1. At the Slade, the lack of class structure suited him: he spent time using what little money he had to book coach trips around European cities to see exhibitions. 'I went to everything, everywhere' and 'If an artist spoke about it, if an artwork hinted at something else, I just thought, "Okay, let me go down this rabbit hole."' His voraciousness and ambition haven't faded; Barrington did six shows last year in preparation for the Tate exhibition, on top of designing floats for Notting Hill Carnival and Glastonbury. 'When I was offered the commission

1. Alvaro Barrington (b. 1983), photographed by Jeremiah Cumberbatch in New York in April 2024



Photo: Jeremiah Cumberbatch

I called up all the galleries and I said, “Can you schedule me in?” It let me get further with my ideas than I would have done had I just done the traditional two shows a year.’ It became ‘an addiction’, says Barrington. ‘I’m very nervous for the post-Tate crash.’

What exactly the exhibition will entail is still under wraps when we meet, but Barrington says that he went to Rome and Florence in preparation, visiting old churches and looking at Caravaggios to reconnect with the historicity and collaborative aspects of painting. He hints that painting will play a part in the show, too. ‘I feel like painting has dealt with a lot of the pressures of PDF culture,’ he says, ‘like music, which used to be an experiential thing [...] a ritual, and now it’s just a playlist.’ Not a revolutionary observation, perhaps, but the three-dimensionality of art, the idea that it needs to be seen in person, is borne out in Barrington’s work – most clearly in pieces such as *Street dreams are made of basketball* (2021; Fig. 2), in which a yarn-covered canvas is adorned with a basketball embedded in concrete, a plastic tray and hanging chain, and a concrete ledge jutting out towards the viewer. But it is also there to a more subtle degree in his paintings – 1953–2017 (2017), for example, in which a shock of black and white yarn hangs over an abstract canvas of black, pink and red oil strokes; it would be easy, looking at the work on a computer screen, to miss that twist of thread. Barrington describes himself as being ‘very attracted’ to the physicality of art, citing the feeling of going to see a work and finding it to be much bigger or smaller than you initially thought it was. The American painter Laura Owens has spoken about this in an interview that he says he has watched hundreds of times.

This obsessiveness, the care and attention Barrington gives to looking at things, is central to his artistic vision. ‘I want to make sure the experience is honest,’ he says, ‘but it has to be meticulously studied. I respect practices enough to know that you have to give it scholarship and care.’ The assemblage-like quality of his works often feels remarkably spontaneous, yet that feeling comes only from hours of work and thought – like in a Basquiat painting, where there’s a ‘hurriedness’, but ‘if you study it [...] there are a million ideas.’ Barrington wants his art to ‘do something, but you don’t want to force it’. And he can tell, he says, when another artist has done just that. He tells me about going to see a Laura Owens show and finding ‘one painting that she overworked so much [...] I remember seeing her and saying, “Man, that was a weird painting, it gives me this weird feeling,” and she said, “Yeah, I just couldn’t stop. I thought about not putting it in the show.”’ That kind of struggle ‘can be interesting but it’s not sexy to me’.

Owens crops up repeatedly as we are talking, but hers is one name among many. All artists take inspiration from others, but Barrington is unusually, disarmingly upfront about it. In 2019 he co-curated an exhibition at Thaddaeus Ropac with the gallery’s senior global director, Julia Peyton-Jones, titled ‘Artists I Steal From’, a show which featured one piece by Barrington alongside the work of 40 artists whom he cited as direct influences. ‘I think it felt unusual because in contemporary culture artists are believed to be fully formed,’ he says, ‘and that wasn’t necessarily what I was.’ His own work, a mixed-media

canvas, *Unc you the plug* (2019), underscored the show’s title by incorporating into its frenetic central square of yarn strands an orange cable that Barrington plundered when he went to visit the Rauschenberg Estate in Captiva, Florida. The work was exhibited with a list of ‘who and what I’ve directly stolen from’ to make the work, which included Matisse’s cut-outs, Rashid Johnson’s series *Anxious Men* (2015) and 1990s hip-hop fashion. Among the works selected by Barrington for the exhibition were some Abstract Expressionist canvases by Willem de Kooning and Louise Fishman, a Basquiat self-portrait from 1983, a hanging sculpture by Louise Bourgeois, *Janus in Leather Jacket* (1968), and several paintings by his peers and friends, including Owens and the abstract painter Joe Bradley.

The Fishman work in particular epitomises the complexity of Barrington’s network of influence. It’s a gorgeous painting (though I feel I have failed Barrington by only ever having seen it on my computer screen): bold, frantic but somehow softer and more appealing – to me at least – than most de Koonings or Pollocks. It’s called *Mondrian’s Grave* (2018) and it shares a certain boxiness with Mondrian’s modest, squat headstone in Cypress Hills Cemetery, Brooklyn – a quality that is also present in some of the Dutchman’s most famous works, particularly the painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–43). Barrington repurposed the colours and shapes of the Mondrian in the stained-glass milk-crate frame for *The Garden of Dreams, 90s Bulls (L), Oct 2023* (2023; Fig. 4), a stunning assemblage that was exhibited in his show ‘They Got Time: You Belong to the City’ at Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris last year, the centrepiece of which is a concrete slab painted with a floral motif and two basketball players. He has referred to *Broadway Boogie Woogie* before and he brings it up with me, citing it as a work that ‘came from the city’. So, when Barrington talks about Fishman’s work, he’s also implicitly talking about Mondrian, New York City, Abstract Expressionism, Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (another direct influence on the work) and a whole personal canon of art and culture that, it seems, feels as natural to him as putting paint on a canvas. In an interview Barrington gave around the time of ‘Artists I Steal From’, he was asked about the anxiety of influence – a question he brushed away. The more time I spend with him, the more it becomes clear to me that not only does Barrington not suffer from that anxiety, but he is almost incapable of it, because he seems unmovably certain about the way he goes about making art. The assemblage-like quality of his work reflects his world view, in which everything – people, art, history – is collaborative and co-dependent.

Why does he think that is? ‘This is one of the lessons I got from hip hop,’ he tells me. ‘You have artists like Tupac influencing Dr Dre, who’s working with whoever on a song, and that song is sampling Marvin Gaye and so on, so I began thinking about paintings as legacies of other artists.’ It makes sense, but is there not a danger, with this approach, that everything, even plagiarism, becomes fair game? ‘I spent my undergrad copying every fucking artist, whether I hated them or loved them, but I knew ultimately that somehow it had to be *my version* of the art,’ he replies. When he was at art school, ‘a lot of

Photo: Stephen James; courtesy the artist and Emalin, London; © Alvaro Barrington

2. *Street dreams are made of basketball*, 2021, Alvaro Barrington, yarn and cables on hessian, basketball, concrete, plastic basket, steel chain and wood, 260 × 183 × 71cm



3. *Tupac Bather, Oct 2023* (detail), 2023, Alvaro Barrington, enamel, Flashe and pencil on concrete in gilded aluminium and carved wood frame, 91 x 91 x 7cm (overall)

kids were making nature paintings, but they grew up in the city [...] I think because Peter Doig was really big and people were making Doig paintings without saying so [...] and that didn't feel interesting to me.' For Barrington, art has to start from a place of authentic experience.

It was hip hop culture that taught him the importance of paying homage, acknowledging your sources and doing something new with them; those who didn't were looked down upon as 'biting' other rappers. Here, Barrington becomes more animated. 'When I was at art school, Joe Bradley was killing it in Canada, and all these artists started making Joe Bradley paintings, and every one of them pretended that they didn't go to Joe's show. They would just be like "Huh, I just made this"' (his voice ascends half an octave), 'And I was like, "I saw you at Joe's show!"' Now he is leaning forward, almost shouting. "I saw how you were painting on Monday, I saw you at Joe's show on Tuesday, and it's Friday, and your work has changed." But they would act like that wasn't even a thing [...] They copied this other artist and then felt like they invented and accomplished something [...] I thought it was very disingenuous, very ego-driven.'

Of all the influences that Barrington cites, there is one who towers above all. Tupac Shakur comes up repeatedly in Barrington's art – in the work *They have They Cant* (2021), which features stitched lyrics from the song 'Keep Ya Head Up' and a string of bandanas; and in *Tupac Bather, Oct 2023* (2023; Fig. 3), a painted interpretation of David LaChapelle's famous bird's-eye-view photograph of the rapper lying in an empty bath, clad in Y-fronts made from a jumble of gold chains. The video for 'Keep Ya Head Up' opens with a dedication to Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old Black girl who was shot dead by Soon Ja Du, a Korean-American convenience store owner, in Los Angeles in 1991. Barrington tells me

the whole story movingly, referring to the judge's comments at the trial – in which Du was convicted of voluntary manslaughter – about Du's actions being 'understandable'. 'It took art, it took Tupac, to make the community feel okay,' says Barrington. 'Art saved my life [...] and I know women who have Tupac tattoos on their breasts today because of "Keep Ya Head Up". I saw the reaction as a communal way of dealing with disadvantage.' He is highly aware of how his background feeds into his many different preoccupations, belonging as he does to a 'very academic tradition of art', as well growing up as a 'working-class immigrant' in the midst of 'carnival culture'. Barrington's dedication to community is apparent in his work with Notting Hill Carnival and Glastonbury, and in the children's basketball court he designed in Bethnal Green, just a stone's throw from his studio. His plans for the renovation of his studio include a community centre and kitchen in the back building. 'My art's got to be in the community, it's got to be a carnival, I'm there with you,' he says excitedly.

Many artists intone about community and social justice. Few do it while making art as well thought-out, original and seductive as he does. As things are drawing to a close, I ask him if he has a favourite work of his. 'Yeah, this one,' he smiles, pointing to the unfinished garden scene propped against the wall. 'It's always the work in front of me, or the next work.' I could be inclined to roll my eyes, but by this point I think I believe him. Barrington's casual, amicable manner belies his relentless ambition, his determination to become a 'great artist'. The run-up to a big show is, for him, 'where the high comes in'. I doubt it will be long before everyone else gets hooked too. **A**

Michael Delgado is assistant editor of Apollo.



4. *The Garden of Dreams, 90s Bulls (L), Oct 2023* (detail), 2023, Alvaro Barrington, mixed media on concrete and maple in frame made of milk crates, glass, brass and lights, 210 x 165 x 16cm

Both photos: Charles Duprat; courtesy Thaddeus Ropac gallery, London, Paris, Salzburg, Seoul; © Alvaro Barrington

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