

# FRIEZE

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### ALVARO BARRINGTON'S NEXT MOVE

by Andrew Durbin



*They have They Cant*, 2021, hessian on aluminium frame, yarn, spray paint, concrete on cardboard, bandanas, 229 × 245 × 56 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris; photograph: Charles Duprat

In London, Alvaro Barrington wakes to the sight of commuter trains passing by his bedroom window. When I visit his flat in Shoreditch one spring morning, we sit on his balcony and talk as the carriages screech by at a regular clip. Gliding along the curve of the overground track that connects the East End to south London, they pass the numerous new skyscrapers that line Bishopsgate. 'When I came here,' Barrington says, nodding absently at the ever-rising towers, some girdled in construction netting and cranes, 'I was a student. I kept thinking about this place from a working-class perspective. Building structures, building cities, building spaces.' Sunlight – rare this March – refracts from the city towards us. With the COVID-19 vaccine rollout underway in the UK and lockdown restrictions easing, the artist is now thinking about his next move.

When we meet at his flat, Barrington has recently returned from Paris, also in lockdown, where he mounted his latest exhibition, 'You don't do it for the man, men never notice. You just do it for yourself, you're the fucking coldest', at Thaddaeus Ropac. (The title is taken from the lyrics to Drake's 2010 song 'Fancy'.) The paintings, which I can only view online, are gentle and smooth, despite their heavy-looking, concrete frames. Some depict the outlines of female figures lounging against coloured carpet backgrounds – a nod to Henri Matisse's cut-outs of the 1940s, the title credits of 1960s-era *James Bond* films and iPod ads of the early 2000s, the artist says in a promotional video shot by the gallery. *Em reclining sofa bed w/ Burberry pillow* (2021) shows a woman in blue, her bare arm propping up her head. As with the other paintings at Ropac, the purple carpet, which evokes the soft dens of 1970s suburban 'key parties', blushes with a touch of the voluptuous. (Think also of Drake's sultry video for 'Hotline Bling', 2015, where women dance

in a James Turrell-inspired light installation.) Even on my MacBook screen, these paintings seduce. I ask about the audience for the works and he laughs. 'Women.'

Since I first encountered Barrington's work a few years ago, I've most admired the breadth and range of his flirtations – the way he glides, in painting, sculpture and performance, between the intimacies of daily life and historic memory. Last year, at Corvi-Mora in London, Barrington's 'Garvey 2 – They eyes were watching god' scaled these registers by looking closely at links between the US, Europe and the Caribbean, where Barrington was born and partly raised. It's one of a series of exhibitions he's developed around the life of Marcus Garvey, the writer, publisher and Pan-African activist who pioneered Black separatism in the early 20th century. Though primarily a painter, Barrington here installed *A Different World* (2017–ongoing), a series of beams that stretched from floor to ceiling, chiming with the gallery's sloped roof. From each protrudes an antique postcard, their paper surfaces embroidered with various shapes in yarn. By obscuring landmarks, beachside towns and golf courses, Barrington recasts the recessive photographic background as an ambiguous foreground, drawing your attention to what isn't there – in a way that tourism, with its careful emphasis on hotels and monuments dissociated from ordinary local life, seldom does. 'It's all about backdrops,' he tells me. 'How do you translate that? What are the backdrops against which art is formed?' His own, which began in Venezuela and Grenada and continued to New York, interweaves the influences of hip-hop, Biggie Smalls, Master P; Garvey and Audre Lorde (especially her 1985 book, *Poetry Is not a Luxury*); his late mother and the 'aunties' who raised him in Brooklyn after she passed away when Barrington was just ten; the *Spider-Man* and *Batman* comics from whose pages he taught himself to draw.

Barrington was born in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1983. He spent much of his childhood on the island of Grenada, then moved to Brooklyn with his mother in 1990. After she died in 1993, Barrington felt alone, he tells me, though a large community of his mother's friends stepped in to nurture him. 'That's when I'd start drawing,' he says, 'Just hours of me drawing comic books until I fell asleep. Mostly to keep my mind occupied.' One of his first works was a flipbook of Nintendo's Kirby – a squishy pink alien from the planet Popstar who assumes the attributes of everything he eats. The character was an apt first choice for Barrington: his own multifaceted, highly referential art has a similarly canny knack for absorbing influence.

After more than a decade of studying literature, history, photography and fine art at New York's Long Island University, Barrington enrolled in the art school at Hunter College, where he learned to paint by cribbing from artists such as Josef Albers, Philip Guston and Giorgio Morandi, whom he had begun to establish as his lineage. One of his advisors, art historian Katy Siegel, encouraged him to apply to programmes in Europe once he graduated in 2015. Visiting artists Nari Ward and Chris Ofili agreed that time away from the US would help Barrington further develop his practice. Specifically, Ward felt that Barrington, as a Black man who had graduated from community college – 'where some of the most brilliant people attend', Barrington stresses – would be dismissed by the Ivy League-educated students in Yale's or Columbia's MFA programmes. 'You'll have to fight harder to have your ideas heard,' Ward warned him. 'Do you want to jump over that?' As an outsider, Barrington would face different challenges – and opportunities – in Europe than in the US. Ofili recommended London – a crossroads, just like New York. Barrington was accepted to the Slade School of Fine Art in 2015.

While at the Slade, Barrington studied the holdings of the capital's museums. 'Art school is self-education,' he tells me, and self-education is a motivating force behind his work – one he is at pains to make clear in how his paintings are received. In 2019, he co-curated 'Artists I Steal From' with Julia Peyton-Jones at Thaddaeus Ropac in London, which included works by Etel Adnan, Joseph Beuys, Guston, Jacob Lawrence, Henry Taylor, Issy Wood and 43 other artists, alongside his own. As he told Farah Nayeri of *The New York Times*: '[Copying] was my way of understanding what they were doing. It was a way of looking, learning, making in a sort of circle.'

Barrington's bet on London paid off. After graduating in 2017, he had his first solo show at New York's MoMA PS1, nestled in a small, ground-floor gallery alongside Carolee Schneemann's career retrospective. I remember crowding into Barrington's exhibition on its opening day, in late October, and encountering what appeared to be a re-creation of his studio – with a few paintings hung high or leaning on the floor. On one wall, Barrington posted sketches torn from his notebooks, photocopies of essays, hand-drawn diagrams, a gallery worklist and other slips of paper. Yarn-sewn postcards – like those that would later appear at Corvi-Mora – were arranged neatly on an old table. Barrington's transparency, a rare opening gambit, was fresh, vulnerable and self-assured, while never so conceited as to imagine itself as complete. In some of the notes on display, the artist stated his motivations: 'Painting that belong to Carnival Culture', he had written on one. Another simply read: 'Brown'. Still another offered a question he poses to himself often: 'What is the next obvious but unexpected move?' Barrington's show was a triumphant homecoming in New York, yet his post-graduate reception in London was staggering. Four European galleries (Sadie Coles HQ, Corvi Mora, Emalin and Thaddaeus Ropac) began to share representation – an unusual arrangement, especially for a young artist. (He also works with Blum & Poe, Karma, Mendes Wood DM and Nicola Vassell Gallery in the Americas.)

When we meet again in early April, at his studio, the promised spring has not yet arrived. It's a grey afternoon and we're both wearing heavy coats that we'd hoped were retired for the season. Yesterday, it snowed. Barrington shows me into the ground-floor garage space, where he is at work on large paintings. They are works-in-progress, mostly meant as material tests. Some will be shown later this year at Emalin and others at the South London Gallery. Concrete frames, some painted, inspire images of London's brutalist housing estates, though Barrington's work is lighter than it looks at first glance. (He lifts one to demonstrate.) He nods to a small, unfinished work that will include a sketch of Rihanna, rendered in pink on green carpet. She's smoking a blunt, he indicates with a laugh. The idea came to him when he was stoned, lying on a carpet, debating how he might impart that heavenly sensation to a painting. It succeeds. I have also lounged in a plush, smoke-filled room and felt enclosed in the drowsy softness of Rihanna singing 'Love on the Brain' (2016). You can lose yourself in that feeling. Other paintings are stacked beside it. On one canvas, a sign reads 'Market';

on another, I make out the word ‘Splash’.

Upstairs, in his office, a chalkboard lists a schedule of exhibitions, projects and shipments. Barrington opens a video on his computer. Taken by a real-estate agent, it shows a two-storey house on Beach 97 on the Rockaways, then drifts to a large, empty lot that was formerly an outdoor restaurant. Barrington has rented both properties for the summer, and his plan is to paint and throw parties by the beach. This trip will be his first significant stay in New York in years. I ask if he’s nervous that the city might have changed in his absence, whether he considers himself a Londoner now; secretly, I want to know if his ambition is to sweep New York like he swept the UK.

‘I don’t have a feel for London,’ he says. ‘I just exist here. It’s like what Paris meant to James Baldwin.’ He explains that the city has been generative: ‘You don’t have to worry about family distracting you from work.’ I think of Baldwin’s essay ‘The New Lost Generation’, written for *Esquire* in 1961, where he observes that living abroad offers room for an artist to develop ‘vision’: ‘A man is not a man until he’s able and willing to accept his own vision of the world, no matter how radically this vision departs from that of others.’ On the Rockaways, Barrington’s parties will be more relaxed and conversational than those he threw in his youth in Brooklyn. The emphasis will be on family and community. I’m reminded of the float he made, in collaboration with United Colours of Mas and Socaholic, for the 2019 Notting Hill Carnival – one of his grander artistic statements in the UK so far. In a text for Sadie Coles, where he opened the first of his Garvey shows shortly after the two-day festival, Barrington summarized his practice as ‘celebrating communities in the way that they celebrate themselves’. ‘One of the challenges’, he writes, ‘is that galleries often have mostly white viewers and I’m talking about a Black man and Black relationships, and I think there are responsible ways to share these ideas and stories.’ That celebration will continue, it seems, in a less concentrated form on the Rockaways, far from Mayfair.

Sitting in his office, Barrington develops an image of his coming summer. The North Atlantic is not gentle, nor especially warm, but it is edifying, especially on hot days. Evenings will be quieter: ‘My partner and I can dance. Once in a while, I’ll put music on and say: “OK, babe, let’s go.” There are constant reminders of your humanity, and the way you spend your time on earth, around you.’ Beach 97 will be one such reminder. Pointing to a chalkboard where he has written ‘What does TIME feel like now?’ Barrington says: ‘That’s what I’ve been thinking about.’ It’s a question on my mind, and probably yours, too. It leads to another, one the artist leaves unsaid: Has COVID-19 changed how we experience time? Of course, the post-pandemic world will not look the same as the one before it; yet, as Barrington replays the realtor’s footage, I sense in his plans for the beach a tentative hope for the revolutions upon which this new world might turn. They are coming regardless, and Barrington is ready.