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“GOOD ART ALWAYS GIVES”: ALVARO BARRINGTON’S GENEROUS FIRST SOLO AT PS1

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Installation view of *Alvaro Barrington*. On view at MoMA PS1 in New York from October 22 to December 31, 2017.

Alvaro's painting, *Garvey loves flowers too* is the header image for his first (ever) solo show, at MoMA PS1 in New York, which opened October 22 and runs through December 31. The painting is large and arresting, made on burlap and partially woven with brown yarn using techniques orally passed on to him by his Grenadian aunts. The series represents the progression of Garvey's life. Alvaro described the process to me:

I used really high quality paint, Old Holland, in [*Garvey loves flowers too*] so the colors are vibrant; the last painting will be made of cheap quality house paint that will lose color and vibrancy quickly. It will be [*Garvey*] at the end of his life, confronting himself and where he might have went wrong.

After a studio visit, Klaus Biesenbach invited Alvaro to show his work at PS1 shortly after he graduated. The intention of the exhibition is to reproduce the same energy of that visit and capture Alvaro's approach to painting, one that is more process-oriented and less product-based. Alvaro decided to include two works he did not make that are important to him: *Transaction in the sky*, a painting by Brooklyn-based artist Teresa Farrell and *A clock with no hands*, a porcelain sculpture I made. I was curious about his decision to include Teresa's and my work but mostly wanted to discuss his own. As the resulting conversation shifted back and forth between our practices it became clear how much we influence each other's work, and also how much the very act of dialogue and exchange are paramount to Alvaro's practice.

Alvaro Barrington: As a way of making, everything comes from a personal place. All my material choices are things that were part of past experiences. The imagery's usually taken from something, then I push it. For example, I am making this

dick painting based on Chris Ofili's Pimping ain't easy. I thought maybe I could do something with it, 'cause I got where Chris was coming from but didn't feel the same way. So I took the graphic structure, which is just a black dick that goes from the top to the bottom of the canvas, and as I was sewing it, I remembered my grandmother used to hang clothes outside to dry and I thought maybe I needed to bring some clothespins into the painting. But also before I got the idea to make a dick painting, I had bleached burlap thinking about Helen Frankenthaler and her staining, and my grandmother bleaching clothes to remove stains so I thought it would be cool to make a painting that starts with my grandmother, goes into a dick, then ends with my grandmother.

I started sewing 'cause I remember my aunt had made me a tablecloth when I was like 15, which at the time I didn't really appreciate but kept using it for months 'cause I knew she would appreciate that I used it. The memory of her color choices always stuck with me and now I realize she was actually a quite brilliant artist.

Cristine Brache: It's interesting how you weave canonical works in with your personal history. It feels like you start with a purpose when making work but the purpose functions more as a point of departure, allowing the subconscious to consciously creep in.

AB: The studio is really the place that I process my own subconscious thinking, like, what images I pay attention to. Then I spend a year or two working through that particular image till it becomes something and in turn, my ideas change in the process too.

CB: I can relate to that.

AB: I remember you being very slow in your making. There is something important about your speed. I always think about your work in relationship to time, which is why I asked if I could put A clock without hands in the show.

CB: I've never considered the actual time I've spent making work in relation to its conceptual framework. Time, or more specifically, lost time, really resonates with me because it comes with feelings of erasure or non-being, yearning, and memory loss.

The way you use material maternal figures in your life did also speaks to time and the preservation of being, almost as a way to canonize your family and give them space to be seen. Your decision to accentuate the presence of time in your paintings is what I chose to make absent with A clock without hands. Its inclusion in your show is poignant and poetic.

AB: Art is always about visibility and being seen. It's what makes hip hop so powerful, it's the voice of people that society may not see. I was raised by mostly women and incorporating the materials they use is my way of trying to see them. It's like taking that journey with them and listening or being ready to listen cause I have a hint of what they went through.

CB: How do you think about time in relation to your own work?

AB: Time more recently is something that sits in an abstract place for me because

I have the privilege of choosing how I exist in it. When I was working shitty jobs—getting paid \$5.15 an hour—it was deeply tied to the idea of time as having a monetary value because it dictated so many aspects of my life. In the studio though, it's not so much about time but about what the work needs and sometimes it needs a quick gesture. Other times it needs a slow working that can take months.

The cultural history in my work is very romanticized because I left Grenada when I was 8 and it's no longer the Grenada that I knew. But I make paintings that reflect that my early childhood was formed there. I'm a lot of cultures blended together 'cause I think that reflects the immigrant experience. Cultures become a tool for me to use, to pick up and drop off, to think about my experiences. I guess because paintings get preserved, it's automatically a preservation of that.

Maybe somewhat like you being Puerto Rican but not quite being Puerto Rican. I remember years ago us talking about what some would call code switching, but I think when you talked about it—about existing in these different cultural spaces in Florida, then China—it felt like you were talking about you and not the label of an action. It was like you were talking about things that can be labelled but really it was about you, not the label.

CB: I think it's hard to feel rooted anywhere when my parents moved to the U.S. to raise me. Miami is particular in that it's a microcosm of Latin America. So almost everyone I grew up with was a first generation American, taking on both Latino and American cultural characteristics. My identity is very specific to Miami but it changes when I go to Puerto Rico or when I'm in places outside of Miami in the U.S., or like China and Europe. In China people often didn't believe I was American because I don't have blonde hair or blue eyes, in Europe people were surprised when I told them I was Puerto Rican because they thought Puerto Ricans were all black. In other parts of the U.S. I was often put in the position to defend my identity often hearing "Where are you really from?" when I'd first say I was from Miami. It's a burden and a gift.

AB: It always leaves me at a place of comfort and discomfort 'cause I like the mobility aspect of my identity and as an artist I get to play with it. But I imagine it's very different when your identity is grounded. Like, I see my two youngest brothers who were born in Brooklyn, and it's amazing to see how very secure in their narrative they are. I look back at when I was 20 and I felt so lost.

But I'm curious about how you end up with your material choices and also your reduction of specific objects, like Beware of Dog. It feels like they hint at things that you don't give away... I'm glad we are having this conversation 'cause I never really want to ask you about your work. I think your work is the thing that people need to look at, not your personal history.

CB: I think about material so much. It's very important to me that the material contradicts the objects it occupies, pointing to a space between (English) words. I think about what weight certain objects carry, associations that people typically project onto them and then think about how I can heighten that mood by making the object using an equally thought out material.

Most successful work tends to open up and poke at emotional coordinates within psyches without being too explicit or arriving at any categorical statements. It also

gives the viewer an opportunity to take a step into the grey area people often have so much trouble sitting still in. It's great to talk about methodologies and process but it's important that the conversation doesn't make the work. Ultimately, the work needs to complete itself.

I felt that sense of completion the first time I saw your work. You have such a firm grasp on the formal qualities of painting, its history, and use of color and composition. When you add how carefully considered your subject matter and choice of material are, like the burlap and yarn, I am left with a strong feeling of closure with regards to the inner motions that occur in viewing it. It feels like an ardent trip that is very big and present yet doesn't dominate me. I think the way you handle abstraction and figuration helps navigate this process for the viewer.

AB: Giving is really important in art in that it's the artist's personal experience of making it, but someone who is experiencing it feels like they have space in there. I think that's what holds me to your work 'cause it actually situates itself far less personally than my work does. I'm always screaming for attention.

CB: [laughs] But you manage the demands for attention well. The big presence, both visually and emotionally don't dominate or try to control me.

AB: I think that's the presence part 'cause as I was an orphan, I never felt quite seen after my mom died. But I also want to be someone who can move without responsibility to stay. Control is tied to responsibility for me.

CB: Your install at PS1 is a very immersive feat.

AB: It was meant for folks to question their own experiences so that it has to go back to the viewer. A lot of young artists make the mistake of thinking art means doing what they want to do and you look at the work and it takes from you emotionally 'cause it's not very giving. The artist is very selfish, but good art always gives. So when you say you're thinking about the materials in terms of how folks understand it, you're having a conversation with people about possibilities in their life.

I always make so that I don't have to explain to my brother too much. So that he gets it from his own experiences or can just look and get enough of it. The intention with the work and the installation was for him and the community I grew up in could be in PS1 and feel like there is a space there for them. One of my cousins who never goes to museums or galleries said he felt comfortable in the room and that meant everything to me.

CB: Yeah I think I remember a conversation we had about that, I remember saying something along the lines of "if my grandma can take something away in the viewing of the work then I've succeeded." Art became a language through its history and context, hence its study. It is so niche it winds up alienating a lot of people who haven't learned its language and history when the work is solely operating on a conceptual level. I really don't like to make people feel stupid, which is why I think layers are important. They allow the work to be accessible to different kinds of viewers. It's confusing because art is often considered universal, though, contemporary art rarely is. It's a parallax that needs to be accounted for depending on the level of connectivity you're after.

AB: Art always happens in a community and that history has told the wrong story. It often isolates artists, especially black artists. You and Teresa [Farrell, also in the PS1 show] along with a lot of other folks are in my community. Your ideas and how you make helps push me. Like you and Teresa work opposite of each other in that she is a maximalist like Hieronymus Bosch and anything can end up in her work, including gum or a guy she had a relationship with, a TV show she saw, music she listens to. It can all end up in a single painting. And you're a minimalist in that you reduce things through a very considered deliberation. I like working between the two of you.

I don't arrive at my ideas out of nowhere. It comes from our conversations about life and art, the same with my community and ways of seeing. The show is really about looking.