

# STUDIO INTERNATIONAL

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## ALVARO BARRINGTON – INTERVIEW: WHEN YOU LOOK AT MY PAINTINGS, YOU’RE ENCOUNTERING PARTS OF MY IDENTITY

by Joe Lloyd



Installation view, Artists I Steal From, curated by Alvaro Barrington and Julia Peyton-Jones, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, 5th June-9th August 2019

When the curator Julia Peyton-Jones approached the New York-based artist Alvaro Barrington (b1983) about doing an exhibition, the two came up with a bold conceit. Artists I Steal From, now on at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in London, is exactly as it sounds. Barrington has assembled 48 artists whose inventiveness he has imported into his own practice. Taking in modern masters and contemporary luminaries, largely painters, but also sculptors and performance artists, it is a remarkable demonstration of the breadth and depth of Barrington’s interests, and the correspondences between diverse artworks. Among these riches, Barrington has inserted a single piece of his own.

Barrington’s multipronged experience – he was born in Caracas, but spent his childhood living with his grandmother in Grenada, before moving to Brooklyn at the age of eight – informs his practice, which often takes the form of large, ecstatic paintings that layer motifs from the Caribbean of his youth. In recent years, he has integrated the sewing practices of the women in his family to create works integrating yarn, and made canvases from the burlap used in cacao importation. His practice to date has dealt with memory and nostalgia, with travel and with cultural exchange, embodied through figures such as the Pan-Africanist activist Marcus Garvey and including moments such as the Harlem Renaissance. In addition to painting, he is engaged with performance and opening art out to non-hierarchical forms of expression.

Based in Hackney until October – a return to London after studying for his MA at the Slade in 2015 – Barrington is engaged in a flurry of making. He is designing a float for August’s Notting Hill Carnival, the first artist invited to do so, and bringing musicians from the Caribbean to join the celebration. The same month, a collaborative exhibition with his friend Teresa Farrell opens at Emalin in Shoreditch,

east London, with a programme of performance. Later this year, he has a solo show at Sadie Coles HQ, Davies Street and, in 2020, he will present a yarn-based show at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac's branch in Paris's Marais.

**Joe Lloyd: How did Artists I Steal From come about?**

**Alvaro Barrington:** Last year Julia [Peyton-Jones], who is Ropac's global director, suggested we do a project together. About 10 years ago, when I decided to focus on becoming a painter as opposed to just doing creative things, I would go to museums – I'm sort of a nerd, a real student – and look at a painting and ask myself: "What is that painting doing?" Eventually, through looking and sketching, I would begin to see the ways in which the artist was thinking, and also the long history that they were working through. So I showed Julia my notes, and said this was something I'd been thinking about, that these were some of the artists I steal from when I'm thinking about a painting. She said: "Why don't we do an exhibition of artists that you steal from?" I'm pretty shy, so I tried to run away from that title and idea for a while, but I trusted her. So that's how the exhibition came about.

**JL: The exhibition features one work of your own and 48 by other artists. How did you choose your single piece, *Unc You the Plug* (2019)?**

**AB:** I didn't want the exhibition to be about me: I wanted it to be about the folks I was seeing. There were a lot of works in my studio that could have fitted in to different sections, but I chose that particular selection because of a show I am exhibiting next year, at Ropac Paris Marais, which is purely yarn-based.

**JL: Yarn is an unconventional material to use in painting. Why did you decide to adopt it?**

**AB:** I couldn't paint black faces. Well, technically, I could, but I could not find an inventive way of making a face. There was a sort of jet black, like Kerry James Marshall does; it's a sort of caricatured black face, a sort of gestural black face. I felt like it was covered, and I didn't really know how to be inventive in depicting something that I live with every day: my own face!

Then I remembered Chris Ofili talking about why he started using elephant dung, because he knew that, if he put it in, then he would have to resolve the painting, so you don't walk away and just go: "There's elephant dung in that painting." And I remembered my aunt's sewing, and I realised it was something that connected to my personal history, so I tried to use it as a material.

At first, I was simply putting it on to the painting, which I still do from time to time. But I wanted to resolve the paintings with yarn, so that you don't just go, "Oh, there's yarn" when you look at the whole thing. I don't want to be a painter who just uses a material because they want to be crazy, or whatever, and I think in every painting you need to feel intuitively why the decisions have been made about what is there. Then I decided I needed to make paintings that have no paint, so I took the paint out of the equation.

**JL: When focusing so intently on the works of others, do you ever worry about the anxiety of influence?**

**AB:** I love the idea of finding things within other artists that I can bring back into the studio, so I never really concern myself too much with influence. If I'm working on a painting and don't know how to resolve it, sometimes going to museums and looking at art books will let me find something interesting to bring back to the work, or bring in an element that was already there but I hadn't noticed. I love the idea of looking at others to figure out what's happening with me.

**JL: Would you say there is a commonality tying together all your selections?**

**AB:** The only thing is that I look at them! In this show, we tried to organise it based on certain elements of their work.

**JL: Such as line, colour and the south ...**

**AB:** Yes, the south as an area. In Europe, you had the Italian arte povera, which talked about a certain economy of making. That didn't really happen in the UK, because the UK had a different cultural climate and an idea of space. A movement such as arte povera could only come out of Italy. Similarly, in the American south, there's an energy that brings about a certain way of making.

**JL: How would you define this southern approach?**

**AB:** When you think about the north-eastern artists, especially in light of Greenbergian formalism, there's this idea of flatness: it's about getting as close to the wall as possible. Whereas, in the south, there are back yards and front yards and side yards, and the sky has stars. Looking at someone such as Robert Rauschenberg – who was born in Texas, got his education at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and then made most of his work in Florida – you see that his work is always coming off the canvas. I think that's a big part of what happens when you have the space and you have the access to materials. You do have access to materials in New York, but it's very different. And in New York, in London, in Paris, we have a very different emotional connection to space, just because of how we manoeuvre the physicality of being in a cityscape.

**JL: Going back to the start, what led you to choose painting as your main medium?**

**AB:** It was kind of logical! I was always a kid who drew a lot – I consider myself a drawer – but painting just felt like it allowed me to encompass more ideas than drawing. It became a logical step when I wanted to expand.

**JL: At your 2017 exhibition in MoMA PS1, you exhibited drawings and notebooks besides paintings. Is process a significant part of how you conceive your practice?**

**AB:** It is a major part of how I conceive my art, yes. I think the Post-it notes and the writings are all parts of it. The first show I did at Ropac was with Joseph Beuys, and in this show we have a Beuys chalkboard, which is from his lecture series. I was really inspired by those artists who consider art as a living process, not only as a painting that appears on the wall. One of the early American philosophers was John Dewey, who talks about art as lived experience. As much as possible, I'm someone who processes my lived experiences through making, or writing, or listening.

**JL: So, would you say your work is a distillation of your lived experience?**

**AB:** It goes hand and hand. I'm looking at yarn, at glue, a piece of corn, which are drawn from my experience. But it's not solely diaristic; it's not: "This is what I ate this morning." I think my goal is for a work to show a complete month or a complete year. And your year is never surrounded by just one thing, your day is never just one thing that happened. It's always a long series and many different things: whether the train was grounded, or the food you ate was good, or you had a crazy thought, all of those things are part of the day. I guess I get to have time to think about all of those things and, hopefully I can bring many of them to a painting.

**JL: A lot of your work to date draws on motifs – hibiscus, yams, Caribbean vegetation – from your childhood in Grenada, but you have lived in cities for much of your life since. Do you plan to introduce urban imagery to your work?**

**AB:** There's a painting I made of my friend's suicide, and that's all about his migration and his mental health illness, and his journey in New York to figure that out. The hibiscus was a way of starting from the beginning. When I was thinking about what to paint, I realised that you could start from so many places, so many weird places. So, I thought I would start from the beginning. The hibiscus is also an organic way to blend in the history of painting flowers, as Alex Katz does today. So, it was a good place to start.

I think that when you look at a lot of my paintings, you're encountering many parts of my identity. So, even though I think of myself as a New Yorker – I've lived there for about 30 years ago – I spent several years in Grenada, which was very influential. And when I moved to New York it was to a Caribbean-African neighbourhood in Brooklyn, and I studied in Manhattan and in London. If you're going to spend a day with me, you're going to notice all these elements of my personal experiences, and with my paintings I'm always hoping you'll notice many of these elements.

**JL: You are making a float for the Notting Hill Carnival this year, the first artist to do so, with the carnival arts organisation United Colours of Mas (UCOM). What is the story behind this?**

**AB:** I'm working in Notting Hill on an entire float, with costume designers and performers. One of the things I found challenging when I decided to become a painter was that I was usually the only black person in a room. I realised over time that it didn't mean that black people weren't participating in art because I grew up in art, I grew up in carnivals. It wasn't necessarily "fine art", which I don't actually think is a real category. To bring it back to Beuys, I grew up in that culture where it was really about erasing hierarchies, where we're all participating in cultural production.

I wanted to figure out a way to make sure that the art I was doing felt relevant to as many people as possible. If you look at Andy Warhol, he's designing an Aretha Franklin album cover; Warhol was really about trying to reach people within his language of painting, he was bridging it. That felt like a great place to be. As I'm from the Caribbean, I asked if I could design a float, and if I could bring musicians over. And [UCOM] was very excited about it, because they do it with limited means, and we were able to open up the budget a little more.

**JL: So, you want to bring art from beyond the confines of the gallery?**

**AB:** Yeah! One of the first places where I experienced painting was in a church. When you go to a church, especially when you go to a black church, it's full of gospel music, it's full of life, it's full of energy. Art has always existed within a context. Later, people separated it and put it into a gallery. But the truth is that, for most of its long, long history, art was always in the context of people's lived lives, whether on cave walls or in a church.

**JL: There is this Linnaean sense that the world needs to be divided to be made comprehensible, whereas I think if you divide it down into parts, you lose so much.**

**AB:** We're always trying to figure out how we can separate things into alphabets, which I think is a human trait, because we all experience things within a lot of different contexts, and the contexts give meaning to it. But I think when you're always trying to isolate something, it ends up losing its meaning, its power and its value, because you have separated that thing and created a false narrative.