

FINDING SEX, LOVE AND FAMALAY WITH ALVARO  
BARRINGTON AT SADIE COLES

by Rianna Jade Parker



Alvaro Barrington, 'GARVEY: SEX LOVE NURTURING FAMALAY', 2019, installation view.

Taking heed of Garvey's emphasis on self-publishing, Alvaro Barrington produced a full-colour 66-page magazine alongside his first solo exhibition at Sadie Coles at their Davies Street London location. The inaugural issue of *Garvey!:* SEX, LOVE, NURTURING, FAMALAY (2019) borrows its glossy paged, image-centric layout style from the now defunct African-American teen magazines *Word Up!* and *Right On*. In a similar editorial fashion, *Garvey!* features a letter from the editor quoting the rapper 2Pac, an interview with Lauren Du Graf and a bedroom-wall-ready, pull-out poster of his recent work. But in addition, there is political commentary on how two-party political systems affect families attempting to cross borders, Instagram screenshots of pop culture highlights, photo essays, sketches from his studio, recipes for a hibiscus cocktail and hazelnut butter – all penned by the family he has reaped around the world. Turning to the centrefold of *Garvey!* is Barrington's manifesto, best not to be read as a linear statement but rather a stream of consciousness, sharp utterances and things you would hesitate to repeat in mixed company: 'BURN BABYLON', 'IT'S MY FLESH THAT HOLDS ON TO THE TRUTH', 'NEW WOMEN, OLD WAYS, GOTTA KEEP A BALANCE' and 'I'M FROM THE FAR SIDE OF A SMALL ISLAND'.

Walking through the gallery, Barrington explains that this collection of work, 'Birth' (2019), is the first chapter in a story of Garvey and other Black figures with well-remembered lives in London and Harlem, New York, in the early 20th century. He posits: 'at the same time as Garvey was looking at Africa while studying here in London, Gauguin was visiting Martinique, Picasso was looking at African sculptures, Matisse was visiting Harlem to listen to Jazz.' In Western metropolises, artists were outstretching to other continents, looking for divine reasoning of themselves.

Barrington makes an interesting analogy between Garvey figuratively giving birth to the malleable principles of Black liberation and unity and the story of his own family, especially his mother's. He imagines his parents' romance through gestures and motifs, reawakening the conditions required to build his family. On the first floor, oversized and mostly square canvases, made of burlap instead of cotton, are embellished in green, red and black paint – the colours that make up the Pan-African flag, which Garvey designed in 1920. Phallic shapes figure as close-ups of his father and stepfather (in yellow and red respectively). Yarn-like strands represent the sperm that fertilized his mother egg (typically green). In one image, she bridges the gap between the two men. Ghanaian fertility signs are used as motifs, as well as Caribbean vegetation, such as the hibiscus flower, reminding viewers of the cultural and geographical context of the family picture.

Another extension of Barrington's family is on view at Emalin, where a competition with his artist-friend Teresa Farrell is presented under 'Tt X AB: TALL BOYS & A DOUBLE SHOT ESPRESSO'. The two shows bear almost no relation in theme and style – a bed-frame is planted in the middle of the room, life-size portraits and expressionist canvases take up majority of the wall space. But each require a certain attentiveness to catch the finer details. The mixed media painting, Tall Boys & A Double Shot Espresso (2019), traces a much smaller collaboration between the two artists. Two shot glasses are depicted steaming in the right-hand corner, while hand-drawn caricatures of Teresa and Alvaro stretch out their arms in the background, as if energized by the coffee spilling over the canvas, giving the surface a washed brown tone.

Born in Venezuela to Haitian and Grenadian parents, Barrington's cultural and lateral ties to Central America, the West Indies and the USA informs his internationalist view. Although his interest in painting was piqued during his travels in central America, he was formally trained at Hunter College in New York before completing his MFA in painting at London's Slade. An impressive trajectory for a young man born in 1983, the same year of the United States invasion of Grenada, where he would live until the age of eight with his grandmother, sharing the same bed. Whilst embracing, he was comforted both by the sound of the heavy tropical rain pelting the rooftop and by the kind of kinship you can literally hold.