MOUSSE MAGAZINE
DECEMBER 1, 2017

COMBINING HISTORIES: ALVARO BARRINGTON

by admin

Installation view of *Alvaro Barrington.* Image courtesy MoMa PS1. Photo by Pablo Enriquez.

Alvaro Barrington and Dana Kopel in conversation

Alvaro Barrington's paintings attend to combinations of materials, movements, and references both art historical and cultural in a broader sense. Bright hibiscus flowers evoke bodily forms and tones, while thick yarns more explicitly delineate body parts: a grasping hand, a penis, a face. The son of migrant workers, Barrington was born in Venezuela and spent his early childhood in the Caribbean before moving to Brooklyn. An engagement with the personal and collective histories of these places—along with a consideration of the ways in which identity narratives come to structure understandings of artistic practice—forms a core concern of his work. Barrington's current exhibition at MoMA PS1 in New York features an extensive selection of his recent work, including a number of paintings, sketches, and experiments that the artist describes as "still in process."

DANA KOPEL: Much of the framing around your exhibition at MoMA PS1 focuses on your Caribbean heritage and early upbringing in Grenada and elsewhere. Could you talk about how your relationship to the Caribbean has influenced your work?

ALVARO BARRINGTON: It's a very romanticized Caribbean for me. It's a Caribbean that I left when I was seven or eight and it's just all in my mem-

ory, so things have to be bigger and brighter and not quite what they are. I think I have a deep fear of going back to Grenada because it's so not what it is anymore. And so the work is a way of trying to process this very romanticized idea: What would Grenada look like if I had to make a painting about it? Could this look like Grenada in my memory? The flamboyant flower, the hibiscus flower or jamaica in Spanish, all of it is a reference to the Caribbean. Even this blue in one of the hibiscus paintings came through Lisa Brice, who lived in Trinidad for a while. She paints with that sort of blue, but I remember she was telling this story of how that particular blue was spread from England all over colonies that were once owned by the British Empire. It was a way of bleaching clothes. And so even though there's no hibiscus flower that exists in that color, I thought it was interesting that I could make this blue hibiscus flower, with a blue that was spread through colonialism.

DK: These overlapping histories of the Caribbean and colonization don't necessarily resolve into clean, easily legible images—of an accurate hibiscus flower, for instance.

AB: When Lisa was telling the story about how she paints with that blue, how it reminded her of being in South Africa and using that blue, all of a sudden it sparked this memory of my grandma washing clothes. And I thought, maybe I need to make this sort of combined history, blending all these things. I think hip-hop does that a lot, Carnival does that a lot, Black culture tends to do that a lot—just throw a bunch of things together and then figure it out.

DK: Maybe it also has to do with this idea of Grenada and the Caribbean for you as a site of memory and nostalgia, a place that's simultaneously real and imagined. You mentioned your grandmother and I wanted to ask about your relationship to the traditions of the women in your family, especially sewing, which appears in your paintings and in the a different world series.

AB: It was more my aunts who used to sew, or who I remembered seeing sewing when I was growing up. I remember being fifteen and my aunt giving me a really bright red tablecloth that she had sewn, and I just thought, "The last thing I need is a tablecloth." [Laughs] You know what I mean? As a fifteen-year-old boy, I'm like, "Where's the Jordans?" or some shit, you know. But as I got older, that tablecloth stuck in my mind and I remembered how imaginative and inventive it was. When I started painting again, it felt like I was bumping into histories that I didn't necessarily know how to position myself within—a lot of histories that were deeply European. And I thought, "Well, here's a history that I know is connected to my family, so let me just try to do it." But I also didn't want to sew how they sewed, so I thought I could just explore the formal qualities of sewing, and then through that maybe figure something else out. But then, the more I did it, the more I began to understand that I'm watching more than the history of the women in my family sewing, because a lot of folks from the Caribbean talk about their family. It has to be this overlapping history that my aunts were participating in; that

they weren't just individuals—they were part of a larger community of folks who were doing this thing. That's something else that painting can do, it can activate and trigger personal memory.

DK: And also this collective memory, and the way those two are intertwined. I remember an early painting that you showed me a while ago, of a school near where we were both living in Bed Stuy. I feel like you've moved away from more social-architectural investigations in your recent work—aside from the post-cards in a different world, in which you disrupt the pristine pictorial space of the postcard image with your sewing, which is very thick and textural and abrupt. Could you discuss how your process and your focus have developed over the past few years?

AB: During my BA, I thought I needed to copy everybody, but not quite copy. It wasn't necessarily about the school; it was more so a way to sort of think about cubist space. That school was something that I was just walking by, and then I thought, let me explore how Jacob Lawrence explored space. He painted these really weird buildings that were super funky, and I was going through that to see if I could do something else. I remember copying a lot of people, making shitty Glenn Ligons and shitty Chris Wools and so on.

DK: That's what school is for, in a way—to copy and confront the artists you look up to, to explore different ways of working.

AB: It helped me figure out a lot, figure out ways of seeing. If I hated an artist, I would copy them to figure out what they were doing that was so bad or why I couldn't stomach it, or if I loved it. And I still do, to this day. I usually keep those to the side, because it helps me figure out something else in my work. I remember copying Lee Lozano a long time ago, just a few copies. At the time, I couldn't quite understand what she was doing, but then all of a sudden, a year ago, I was really uncomfortable with the hand, and the finger, in Garvey Loves Flowers Too (2015–16), and I was like, "Why am I so uncomfortable with it?" And then she had a show at Hauser & Wirth in London, and I walked in, and I said, "Oh! That's that finger right there." It was the exact finger. I had just stored it in my memory bank from forever ago.

DK: So then, did you change the finger in your own work?

AB: Nah, I left it, because I love Lee Lozano and I just think that's something that painting can do, point to different people. I don't really like when a painting rests in one person's zone too much, but it can definitely point to a lot of different people.

DK: Many of your references, and also the language you use to talk about your work, feel very painting-specific. Are other painters your primary influences, or what other references are you looking at?

AB: When I was trying to figure out how to make the hand in Audre Lorde Flamboyant (2015–17), I was thinking about a particular sort of Caribbean dance. It felt like, back in the day, after The Matrix came out, you'd go to dancehall

parties and everyone would be doing this specific dance movement with their arms—I just thought, how do I get a hand or a finger that felt like it had the weird sort of movement that that dancing is trying to give off? The hand in the painting also happened to follow the stretcher bars, but it really was coming from a sort of dancehall image that was stuck in my head. Like my homeboy Celo, he's really skinny and like six-something feet tall, with really long arms, so he was able to contort them in the weirdest ways. His hand felt impossibly long, and just able to move in a certain way. I was thinking, if Celo's dancing, how would it look in a painting?

DK: In a way, the paintings feel really bodily, but the specific parts of them don't necessarily, for me, immediately read as parts of the body. So there's a parallel between abstraction in terms of the process of art-making and also in the way you're talking about the body abstracting itself through movement. Many of the paintings also exude a sense of profusion and generativity evoking both sex and nature. How do you think about the way sex plays into your work?

AB: A lot of the paintings touch on sex and power. Sometimes I want to be able to say that's just nature, like the vertical red flower in this drawing. A friend of mine said, "That's super phallic!" And I was like, "It's just a red flower." You know? The flower isn't concerned with that, it's just the flower. But then sometimes it's more direct. In Garvey Loves Flowers Too, the stamen of the hibiscus flower is a standin for a white dick. That painting has a really long history, but part of it was that I was in London and listening to this guy talk about Jamaican homophobia, and the way he talked about it wasn't really about homophobia—it was this sort of deeper, embedded racism that I felt really uncomfortable with. The painting is about a lot of other things, too. The character is an avatar for me, and he's coming around and he's touching the dick: the stems become the buds, the buds become cum flying all over and ideas coming out. In my mind, and based on some intimate conversations about sexuality I was having at the time, new ideas, new ways of seeing, started becoming more deeply embedded in me.

DK: A major concern of your practice seems to be bringing together a number of different, often contrasting things—materials, ideas, histories—to explore what those combinations can generate over time. Several of the works on view at MoMA PS1 are unfinished, and presented in an in-progress state. Would you discuss the way you work with materials, and how that attention informs your process?

AB: I try to let a painting work itself out over a year to two years. That way I can get the ideas down into the painting. Never try to rush a painting. All the materials are highly selective, and I try to have a conversation with the material as opposed to just using the material or dominating it. So when I picked up the burlap, it was like, what can burlap do that cotton can't do or linen can't do or other materials can't do? It has its own energy and its own vibe and its own materiality. And it really became about looking, trying to figure out what could I do with this material that makes it feel like it came here with a purpose. Actually, I remember walking to get some coffee beans and there

was a burlap sack and I think it said the coffee beans were from Barbados, and I remembered being in Barbados for a couple months when I was young, and I thought, “Oh, there have to be a bunch of workers who are packing these coffee beans.” And so I stretched a whole bunch of burlap canvases and tried to figure out how to make it work.

I think art is always about the process, it’s not necessarily about the actual painting for me; the art is always me processing. Even when my mom died, the first thing I did was draw in a corner somewhere. The only place I felt safe was making little notes, drawing little things. So for me, it’s always been that process of making, of going through stuff, of looking, making, seeing. It’s really the only the thing that matters, at least on my end, in terms of what’s in the studio. And then hopefully in the outside world it generates certain conversations.