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ART GALLERY SHOWS TO SEE RIGHT NOW: ALVARO BARRINGTON

by Roberta Smith



In "Black Power," an actual orange oil barrel hangs over the painting on burlap. Credit...Alvaro Barrington and Nicola Vassell Gallery

Alvaro Barrington

Through Oct. 23. Nicola Vassell Gallery, 138 10th Avenue, Manhattan. 212-463-5160; nicolavassell.com.

Alvaro Barrington's Manhattan debut of big, bright, sometimes object-laden paintings on burlap is portentously titled "Garvey 1: Birth — The Quiet Storm" and should be taken as a statement of intent, wide-ranging talent and exuberant ambition. Ignore the overreaching news release at the front desk which ties the artist's life to that of Marcus Garvey, because of "similarities in their migratory paths," and consider the work, which is by turn beautiful, awkward and slightly laughable.

Barrington was born in 1983 in Venezuela, where his parents (one Grenadian, one Haitian) were migrant workers; he grew up between New York and the Caribbean. He had an excellent solo American debut at MoMA PS1 in Long Island City in 2017, and, since then, seems to have taken London and Paris by storm.

The paintings here suggest an artist who may be stretching himself too thin; online shows at other galleries look tighter, his materials denser. But he is also scaling up his figures and customizing his narrative.

Barrington's physicality and color have roots in Neo-Expressionism, updated with personal references, an island sensibility and a political edge. "Black Power," for example, has an actual orange oil barrel strung to its front that a muscular Black man — painted on the burlap — may be lifting, thus linking Venezuela's primary product to nonwhite laborers.

The attached objects can recall David Salle, except they tend toward industrial. His big brushes, propensity for big scrawled words and grandiose show titles can evoke Julian Schnabel. And, like Schnabel, everything he touches seems to gain a certain visual presence, whether you think it's finished or not. In "Cloud 1," "Cloud 2" and "Cloud 3," weighty, magnified strokes of cement on expanses of Hermès yak-wool blankets dare us not to think of them as paintings.

In "U the Wettest," a larger than life Black woman wearing big daubs of green, yellow and orange seems to dance hip-deep in blue water. Two steel drums attached to the work's upper corners add to a sense that this loosely conjured image could simply, rhythmically, dissolve. See this show, but if you miss it, Barrington will be back.