

BLACKBOOK

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ALVARO BARRINGTON'S 'LA VIE EN ROSE' EXHIBITION IS AN HOMAGE TO TUPAC SHAKUR

by Nena Hawke



Perhaps it was Alvaro Barrington's peripatetic childhood that set him up as an artist with such a wide-ranging curiosity. He was born in Caracas, Venezuela to a Haitian father and Grenadian mother, then raised in Grenada until the age of eight, finally settling in Brooklyn, which home he now divides with one in London. He has said that his work is concerned with "the diverse cultural languages in which we celebrate ourselves."

A serial learner, he did stints studying art (as well as literature, history, philosophy) at Long Island University, Hunter College, and ultimately London's Slade School of Fine Art. It paid off, and by the time he graduated in 2017, he had his first solo exhibition – a replica of his London studio – lined up at MOMA PS1. It was followed by six solo shows in the UK, before Thaddaeus Ropac Paris staged the dramatically titled '*You don't do it for the man, men never notice. You just do it for yourself, you're the fucking coldest*' (it's a lyric from Drake's 2010 track 'Fancy') in March/April of last year.

Now Ropac is again presenting his work, this time at their original Salzburg gallery, under the decidedly more succinct title *La Vie en Rose* – which directly references the Tupac Shakur autobiographical poem *The Rose That Grew From Concrete*.

Barrington had actually recently adopted the rose as a signature motif, with his 2021 *A Rose For a Rose* being dedicated to fellow artist Rose Wylie. But this exhibition springs directly from his goal to "turn physical the music I love." Though he grew up in Brooklyn and Tupac (who would have turned 50 last year, if not mysteriously gunned down in 1996) was from Harlem, they shared circumstances, and he was deeply affected by the rapper's message of perseverance in the face of hardship.

“It’s this idea that even in the toughest conditions,” Barrington observes, “there are people that are beautiful and fragile and tough – all the kinds of qualities that you see in a rose.”

Interestingly, of the roses he chose to reimagine in these paintings, some were actually based on the works of other artists – for instance, Isa Genzken’s steel + aluminum installations in New York and Hong Kong.

Barrington has also been known for his use of non-traditional materials. And his employment of concrete here is once again a reference to the same Tupac poem, which concludes with the exultation, “Long live the rose that grew from concrete when no one else ever cared!”

“I try to be very careful with the material choices,” he explains. “It’s not just randomly on the canvas. Cement holds this memory of being a kid, and when they would put a pavement on the street, we would put our feet in there or draw all over it. And that was one of our first real sites of drawing and painting. Cement has this history of drawing that I needed to pull apart.”

Black History Month, of course, is very much a time to reflect on memory, as it is essentially about where Black America has been, and where, through never ending struggle, it now finds itself. Artists like Barrington, certainly, play an essential role in explicating that journey.

“I grew up in a culture where it was really about erasing hierarchies. And when you look at my paintings, you’re encountering parts of my identity.”

Alvaro Barrington’s *La Vie en Rose* will be on show at Thaddaeus Ropac Salzburg through April 2, 2022.