

ARTFORUM

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ALVARO BARRINGTON | NICOLA VASSELL

by Colbt Chamberlain



Alvaro Barrington, *Black Power*, 2021, oil and acrylic on burlap in artist's wooden frame, steel oil drum, shelf, metal chains, 75 1/4 x 103 x 26 1/2".

Is everything all right over at the New York Times arts desk? In the paper's review of "Greater New York" at MoMA PS1 this past October, Martha Schwendener devoted whole paragraphs to disparaging the acknowledgment of artists' ethnic background on wall labels. Three weeks earlier, co-chief art critic Roberta Smith's write-up on Alvaro Barrington's recent solo exhibition told visitors to "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." Smith then proceeded to liken Barrington's quasi-figurative paintings on burlap to the neo-expressionist confections of David Salle and Julian Schnabel. There's some merit to the analogy, but to invoke these much-maligned figureheads of the 1980s without also mentioning the member of their milieu that Barrington has actually cited as an influence, Jean-Michel Basquiat, feels less like an astute observation and more like a microaggression.

Plenty of press releases are larded with jargon and pretense, but here the talk of "migratory paths" explained an important conceit. Barrington has mapped out a series of exhibitions dedicated to Marcus Garvey, the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and an early proponent of Pan-Africanism, whose biography and philosophy exemplify the geographical coordinates and structures of feeling that sociologist Paul Gilroy has called "the Black Atlantic"—a sense of commonality that is both haunted and held together by the half-forgotten memories of the Middle Passage. Barrington uses Garvey as a prism for viewing the historical dimensions of his own life's itinerary, which spans Venezuela, Grenada, the United States, and, most recently, the United Kingdom. The colors and imagery of the main room were selected to evoke Garvey's native Jamaica. An adjoining corridor was lined with small panel paintings in handmade wooden frames that each featured in their title "1916," the year Garvey relocated to New York. At the exhibition's conclusion stood *Be His Peace* (all works 2021), a tapestry of

yarn and burlap attached to a concrete block and holding aloft three Spalding basketballs couched in milk crates—an apparent nod to the hard-court terrain of Harlem.

A key concept in Gilroy's 1993 book on the Black Atlantic is the distinction between "roots" and "routes," i.e., between affiliations tethered to the soil of nation-states and those stretched across waterways once traversed by migrants, merchants, and slaves. To a striking degree, these two modes of identification inhere in Barrington's paintings as a play between his subject matter and material supports. In terms of what he chooses to represent, Barrington paints the green and gold of Jamaica's flag, close-ups of its local plant life, and scenes of Black bodies joined in celebration. By contrast, the materials he selects relate to shipping, mobility, and trade. The burlap he employs instead of canvas comes from sacks for cacao beans, and in *Black Power* a pair of chains suspend an actual oil barrel in front of the picture plane. Affixed to the frame of *U the Wettest* are two additional barrels that had been refashioned as steel-pan drums, musical instruments that epitomize the Black Atlantic's capacity to transform extractive tools into expressive mediums.

In a recent interview, Barrington noted that he reevaluated his work after realizing that members of his extended family were missing his art-historical references. "It was never my mission to get an education to make my family, who are all Black, feel unintelligent," he said. "I wanted . . . a more balanced approach of questioning and holding together my contemporary life and the long history of painting, which I also love." Barrington's paintings are densely packed with the sort of allusions that routinely pique the interest of critic types who write for *The Times* or, for that matter, *Artforum*. Walking through the show, I found myself thinking about Barrington in relation to Frank Bowling circa 1970. Both painters cover their canvases with vibrant color fields against which the outlines of figures alternately cohere into fixed images or dissolve into ghostly traces. Meanwhile, I missed that the words painted across a trio of compositions—*SLOW DOWN*, *DON'T RUSH*, and *GET IT RIGHT*—were actually lyrics from a song by Mary J. Blige, a favorite among Barrington's relatives. Perhaps the quality in Barrington's practice that Smith suggests is "overreaching" could be better understood as reaching out.