

(Alvaro Barrington)

# The art of making art

by  
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(Fantastic Man)



(Alvaro)



Alvaro wears two cotton tank tops, one woven and one not, with brown wool trousers. The red wool hat, seen here and throughout, is his own.

In the opening image he is wearing a linen intrecciato hand-knit jumper, and on page 118 he has added sesame-coloured nylon trousers and silver Orbit sneakers.

FIFTEEN TAKES  
ON ALVARO BARRINGTON

1. INTRODUCTORY

Subjects the artist Alvaro Barrington feels comfortable talking about include 1990s hip-hop, the art of Jeff Koons, the novel ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s’, the concept of community, the TV series ‘Sex and the City’, the Harlem Renaissance, the European Renaissance, the sport of basketball, Hieronymus Bosch, and the notion of the Baroque. Alvaro considers himself a painter and much of his work does indeed involve the application of paint, but quite often it also involves materials like yarn, concrete, steel chains, brooms, tyres, and patterned leather. Nor is it limited to flat rectangular spaces: he will sometimes create entire environments that are at once settings for and part of the work. From the end of May a newly commissioned work by Alvaro will inhabit the vast Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain. What will he do? He’s not willing to say yet, though he does observe that “this is the first year that I’m starting to really think about work that is about the future” and he says he is thinking a lot about “the idea of duality.” Alvaro declared not that long ago that “every exhibition is autobiographical,” and it’s true that his projects tend to represent his life in many ways, but they are also densely packed with references of both an art-historical and a pop-cultural nature, smashing them together with a Cern-like zeal. Whatever he does at the Tate will surely only amplify his status as one of the world’s most talked-about artists.

2. THE ARTIST’S AGE

Alvaro is 41. He was born in Caracas, Venezuela, on 1 February 1983 to parents from the Caribbean. Popular songs released that month include ‘Little Red Corvette’ by Prince and ‘Total Eclipse of the Heart’ by Bonnie Tyler. Millions of people born in the 19th century were still alive that year; none are now. Several of Alvaro’s artistic heroes, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Louise Bourgeois and Tupac Shakur, were alive then. Alvaro grew up between Grenada and New York City and graduated from the Slade School of Fine Art, London, in 2017.

3. WHERE IS HE?

Alvaro is wearing a grey-green sweatshirt and has a black beanie quite high on his head. He is in his studio in Hackney, London. Shortly after our video call begins, he apologises and leaves to deal with a delivery. I examine the room in his absence. Alvaro’s

empty seat has a slightly curved backrest made from dark wood, quite similar in colour to a cabinet and bookshelf elsewhere in the room. In conjunction with the blueness of the carpet, the plain whiteness of the wall and the beadedness of the plastic cord that opens the window blind, it makes this room (which is clearly part of a larger complex) seem less like an artist’s studio than an office in a university or museum.

What it doesn’t resemble is the studio which the artist recreated in a ground-floor room at MoMA PS1 gallery in Queens, New York, for ‘Alvaro Barrington’, his first solo exhibition after graduating. As well as the paintings of hibiscus flowers that would become a signature motif, the show included Alvaro’s work desk and a number of handwritten notes containing various prompts-to-self such as “What is the next obvious but unexpected move?”

One of the books in the room I’m observing is called ‘Jamaica Vibes’. I look it up: a glorious large-format volume by Lisa Lovatt-Smith and Novia McDonald-Whyte, published last year. More books and papers are stacked on the flat surface below the shelf. At the other side of the room is a single kick drum. When Alvaro comes back, I ask him about it and he explains that, having used the drum as the basis for a sculpture, he’s been finding it useful in other ways. “You grow up with the drums as a symbol for so many things, and so I’m just keeping it around me, just helping me figure some stuff out,” he says. Alvaro is thoughtful and doesn’t take much shit. He will often think for a while in response to a question before setting off on a circuitous monologue that at some point nails the point from an unexpected direction.

4. BIO-POEM

In lieu of an official biography, Alvaro often provides an extensive text, the status of which — Poem? Song? Ready-made? — remains ambiguous. This is an excerpt:

You’re the most insecure person I know and it’s disgusting/  
We have to be gentle with each other’s hearts  
I Like America and America likes me  
For the CULTURE/  
If you were them, You would be them/  
LISTEN/  
“You’ve got to give them something special, you got to give them you, what you do, what you represent”  
New women, old ways, Gotta Keep a Balance/  
I look cooler than I am/  
I don’t want my work to be some fucking free zone associations/  
Build the margins/

## 5. POLYCULE

Alvaro places himself outside the conventional system where an artist is represented by a very small group of commercial galleries on an exclusive basis. Instead, he has developed what's been called a non-monogamous arrangement, meaning any of the below should be able to field an enquiry on his work.

Anton Kern Gallery  
16 East 55th Street  
New York, NY 10022  
United States of America  
+1 212 367 9663

BLUM Gallery  
2727 South La Cienega Boulevard  
Los Angeles, CA 90034  
United States of America  
+1 310 836 2062

Corvi-Mora  
1a Kempsford Road (off Wincott Street)  
London SE11 4NU  
United Kingdom  
+44 20 7840 9111

Emalin  
The Lazarus Building, 1 Holywell Lane  
London EC2A 3ET  
United Kingdom  
+44 20 3976 5340

Karma  
22 East 2nd Street  
New York, NY 10003  
United States of America  
+1 212 390 8290

Mendes Wood DM  
Rua Barra Funda 216  
01152 - 000 São Paulo  
Brazil  
+55 11 3081 1735

Nicola Vassell  
138 Tenth Avenue  
New York, NY 10011  
United States of America  
+1 212 463 5160

Sadie Coles HQ  
62 Kingly Street  
London W1B 5QN  
United Kingdom  
+44 20 7493 8611

Thaddaeus Ropac  
Mirabellplatz 2  
A-5020 Salzburg  
Austria  
+43 662 881393 0

## 6. THE ARTIST'S MOTHER

Emelda, Alvaro's mother, was from Grenada. She died from cancer in 1993. She was a teenager when Alvaro was born, and then moved to New York. Alvaro lived with his grandmother for a time, only moving to Brooklyn to join his mother two years before her death. As well as naming his Notting Hill Carnival stage after her (more on that next), he is working on turning a building in Whitechapel into a hybrid art space called Emelda's. His beguiling website, a hybrid of portfolio and e-shop — as well as displaying his work, it offers aromatherapy products from the London brand Cremate — is located at the URL [emeldaart.net](http://emeldaart.net). "I only knew her as the person she knew I needed, and so in a way, she's only the person that I need," he says. "When I chose to be an artist, she was the reason. She's just someone that I project my needs on. I allow myself to go down that road with a joy knowing that that is my safety."

## 7. CARNIVAL

When he was a young child, Alvaro's cousins took him to J'ouvert, the day of festivities that serves as an unofficial start to carnival in the Caribbean. He climbed on top of a sound system and promptly fell asleep. In 2022, the experience inspired a pavilion at the Notting Hill Carnival, created by Alvaro and the architect Sumayya Vally, where people were invited to take some downtime from the action elsewhere. The following year he created a stage for the carnival called Emelda's Junction, which was in Powis Square. He held an exhibition to coincide with it, which was at 62 Kingly Street, an address you probably remember from section 5 (Polycule) above.

## 8. SADIE COLES DESCRIBES A SHOW

Affable gallerist Sadie Coles was instrumental in the Young British Artists movement of the '80s and '90s. Her gallery represents 52 artists, including Matthew Barney, Ugo Rondinone and Martine Syms. She would normally never work with someone right after graduation, but with Alvaro it was different. "He was such a standout," she says. "Alvaro's use of materials is so very particular." In a late-afternoon call she describes his show that evolved from Emelda's Junction: "The exhibition was called 'Grandma's Land'. The paintings that we showed in the gallery were the stage flats for the sound stage, at Powis Square. They were literally on stage and then at the end of the carnival they were rolled up and came into the gallery and were put into frames. So there was a very, very strong connection to his Caribbean ancestry."



Alvaro is wearing a cotton shirt, a denim jacket and denim trousers, a leather tie and black leather shoes, all by Bottega Veneta.



“The first hibiscus I drew was  
in New York.”





“My friends don’t necessarily go to galleries.”



The show had three structures in it, and they were referencing his grandma’s house, his uncle’s house, and his auntie’s house. So it felt like a village situation. Each of the structures had a painting on the side of the building, and his works were on the outside of them. On the inside of the structures, he was hosting another artist, which is typical of Alvaro’s inclusive generosity. He’s often doing projects where he brings other people into them. And we were lucky enough that we had Sonia Gomes in the grandma’s house, we had Paul Anthony Smith in the auntie’s house, and Akinola Davies Jr. had a film of the carnival that we were also showing, so it really felt like Alvaro was hosting other artists within his show, which was very nice.” This year’s Notting Hill Carnival will take place 25–26 August in west London.

#### 9. THREE AMERICAN CHAIN STORES

— Bob’s Discount Furniture. Co-founded in 1991 by Bob Kaufman (now owned by a private investment firm).

— Circuit City. “Where the streets are paved with bargains,” went the slogan for this consumer electronics chain until its bankruptcy.

— P.C. Richard & Son. Televisions, appliances, mattresses. Distinctive jingle.

“My friends don’t necessarily go to galleries,” says Alvaro, who spent time on the payrolls of all of the above, back when he was living in New York and had yet to achieve the success that awaited him in London. “When I worked retail, more of my friends would come to visit me, because everybody bought a TV. Everybody wanted to have a TV. So now it’s just, ‘How do I make my art world into a place, like, where everybody comes to buy a TV?’”

#### 10. TUPAC

For a recent Paris exhibition, ‘They Got Time: YOU BELONG TO THE CITY’, Alvaro mined memories of New York via a three-part installation. Staged at the Thaddaeus Ropac gallery’s space in the suburb of Pantin were a series of imitation shop fronts (a reference was Walter Benjamin’s unfinished book ‘The Arcades Project’, a sprawling work of cultural criticism largely concerned with the shopping arcades of 19th-century Paris). Alongside Alvaro’s retail-based interventions were works featuring figures such as Andy Warhol, Mary J. Blige and Tupac Shakur, the latter re-enacting a 1996 photograph by David LaChapelle in which the rapper (who would be killed in a drive-by shooting later that year) is

lying in a bathtub covered in gold jewellery. Alvaro has described Tupac as the most significant artist of his lifetime, and his 2021 painting ‘They have They Cant’ pays tribute accordingly. Lyrics from the song ‘Keep Ya Head Up’ are stitched in yarn across a canvas of spray-painted concrete. Draped below it, bunting-like, are patterned bandanas, each a different colour.

#### 11. AUDRE LORDE

“The quality of light by which we scrutinise our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives,” writes self-described “black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, mother, warrior, poet” Audre Lorde in the essay ‘Poetry Is Not a Luxury’. Alvaro has cited it as a formative inspiration. “It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realised. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless — about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.”

#### 12. BASKETBALL

The Tate’s collection includes Alvaro’s piece ‘Street Dreams are Made of Basketball’, in which a basketball sits on a block of concrete, which is in a milk crate, which is itself on top of a wooden frame stretched with hessian, which in turn has been laced with plastic ropes. These ropes adhere to an orange, yellow and lilac colour scheme inspired by Josef Albers, a favourite artist of Alvaro’s.

Basketball is a frequent motif in Alvaro’s work. In 2022 he created a functional court in Bethnal Green, east London, in collaboration with organisations including the Serpentine Gallery, Tower Hamlets Council and the basketball team London Lions (by far the winners of the 2022–23 British Basketball League season, with 64 points to the second-placed Leicester Riders’ 50).

The blue, khaki and green court can be found at the north-eastern corner of Weavers Fields. Alvaro described it as being at once a working recreational facility and “a map that represents both migration and athleticism.” The free-throw circles, he said, double as suns setting in distinct lands, the triangles on the sidelines as mountains and valleys. The inspirations at play included the work of pop artist Bridget Riley, video artist Arthur Jafa, and the celebrated creations of the Gee’s Bend quilt movement.

### 13. HIBISCUS

A conversation fragment in which Alvaro considers how—depending on the city in which he is painting—an identical object ends up being represented differently:

ALVARO—If I paint two hibiscus flowers, one in London and one in New York, it's the same subject but it's so different. I did a show at Nicola Vassell [2023's 'Island Life', named after the Grace Jones album], and the flowers needed to be so much wider, but yet so much more radiant and bright and in your face. And it happened because I was dealing with New York.

SEB—How might the London hibiscus flower be by comparison?

A—Well, I did one series of flowers here. It was much thinner. It was much more intimate. It was much lighter. Whereas in New York, it had so much more saturation of colour. And I remember that after a couple washes and a couple of gestures, it felt finished a lot quicker, and in New York, it felt finished only after days of just pushing through it.

S—Then the hibiscus flower itself, it's from the Caribbean, right? Is it associated with one of the other places you've lived in, aside from those two cities?

A—Yeah, although the first hibiscus I drew was in New York, because it was by the playground by my parents' house, next to a mural of Marcus Garvey. I remember painting it and bringing it to my stepdad because they had these hibiscus flowers in their garden as well. And so even though I really first met it in the Caribbean, the first time I engaged with it in a real way was in New York.

### 14. BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S

As a kind of appendix to the Pantin show, Alvaro created a playlist of 45 songs which, thanks to the underrated magic of QR codes, was available to listen to as visitors pondered the work in situ or as they reflected on it afterwards. Various hip-hop artists are present in the playlist, which includes two tracks by DMX ('How's it Goin' Down' and 'Slippin') and 'Jesus Walks' from Kanye West's 2004 album 'The College Dropout', for example.

Perhaps most characteristically, it begins with three separate interpretations of the same pop-cultural artefact, namely 'Moon River', a song whose overfamiliarity never seems to nullify its impact of making the listener temporarily imagine themselves as the star of a movie. There's the sparkling original by Audrey Hepburn from the soundtrack to the film 'Breakfast at Tiffany's'; there's Frank

Sinatra's crooned one; and there's Frank Ocean's rendition, released as a single on Valentine's Day 2018, turning an otherwise wistful and nostalgic number into something more assertive and forward-looking.

It's the Hepburn, says Alvaro, that really moves him, and indeed the show took its inspiration from Truman Capote's novel: "One day I picked up 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' at Strand Book Store in Union Square and I realised the NYC I was experiencing in the '90/2000s was what Truman Capote wrote about in 'Breakfast at Tiffany's'."

That's from a statement Alvaro released with the exhibition. Can he elaborate? "It was mostly about what I thought of as an end of a New York that I think of as being between 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' and 'Sex and the City'. It's a very particular New York. How do you go from being a gay guy in the middle of Pennsylvania who's deeply religious, socially awkward at best, and imagine yourself to be Andy Warhol? Or your Notorious B.I.G. or your Jay-Z? There was a New York that was about how—no matter where you started—you could get to this impossible thing that was only limited by your imagination."

### 15. DUVEEN GALLERIES

The Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain are 300 feet long. Over a million people pass through them each year. The most recent commission to fill the galleries was by Hew Locke and was called 'The Procession', back in 2022. Alvaro Barrington's project will run from 29 May until 10 November 2024.

### CONTRIBUTION

— Seb Emina's closest Paris Métro station is the celebratorily named Place des Fêtes. He's the co-curator of Five Radio Stations, a series of online artworks funded by Lab'Bel, the artistic laboratory of the Bel Group, who create popular cheeses Babybel and La Vache qui rit.

(Photographic assistance by Andy Moores. Styling assistance by Helly Pringle. Production by Fiona Percival and Phoebe Clothier.)

Yes, that's a hole in the top of Alvaro's hat to allow an exit point for his hair. He is wearing a grey cashmere hoodie by Bottega Veneta.

