

HYPERALLERGIC

Alvaro Barrington's Love Letter to Los Angeles

Beyond a mere homage to LA's aesthetic vocabulary, Alvaro Barrington sees past the superficiality of Hollywood to celebrate the myth-making at its center.



Caroline Ellen Liou April 18, 2022



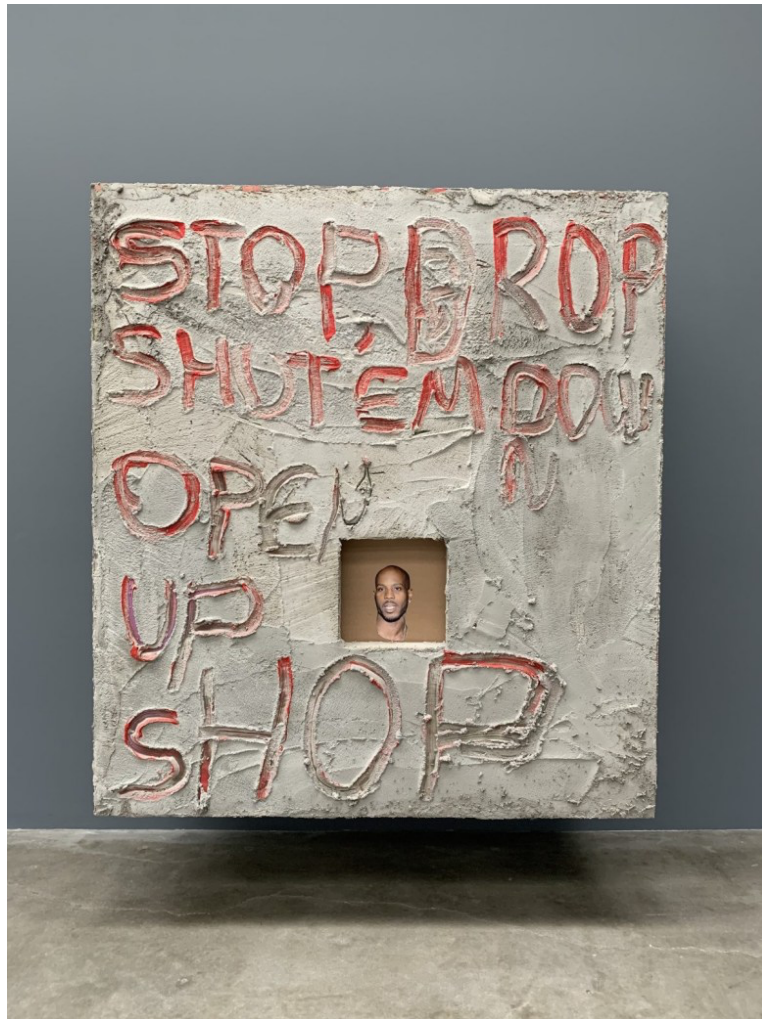
Installation view of Alvaro Barrington: 91-98 jfk-lax border at Blum & Poe, 2022 (photo by Josh Schaedel, image copyright the artist, courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo)

LOS ANGELES — Pacing the concrete floors of Alvaro Barrington’s solo exhibition *91-98 jfk-lax border*, my footsteps echoing in Blum & Poe’s cavernous first-floor galleries, I come across a row of celebrities. I’ve seen their faces a million times: Missy Elliott, Lil’ Kim, Lauryn Hill. Growing up in Los Angeles — a city saturated with images of celebrities, on billboards and in advertising campaigns and, above all, images of itself — images are so ubiquitous here that they become banal. Everything is reduced to a representation of itself. But the last picture in the row of Lauryn Hill, made me pause, just for a moment. How many times have I listened to *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, rewinding its tracks over and over again, thinking I had memorized every word only to unearth new meanings each time?



Alvaro Barrington, “This week 25 years ago Buffy Rose” (2022), collage, concrete, acrylic, and charcoal on paper on wooden panel, 94 1/2 x 94 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches (photo by Josh Schaedel, image copyright the artist, courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo)

Just across the room, another artwork punched me in my gut: an altar, if you will, to the hit TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. To say that I was (and still am) obsessed is an understatement. Despite its numerous problematic aspects, the show defined me in many ways. *Buffy* accompanied me through high school angst and heartbreak, providing a measure against which to understand myself, with all of my flaws and insecurities and aspirations; it taught me nothing less than how to be human. The work, titled “This week 25 years ago Buffy Rose” (2022), features a border composed of collaged magazine and poster cutouts, much like the ones that used to plaster my school binders. In the middle of the painting’s concrete surface is a rose. The message here is obvious: that a rose can grow out of concrete, that something can grow from nothing, that beauty can still arise despite an environment of neglect. Considering the numerous rap and hip-hop references sprinkled throughout the exhibition, Barrington is perhaps alluding to the famous lines written by rapper Tupac Shakur: “Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete / proving nature’s law is wrong it learned to walk without having feet / funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams, it learned to breathe fresh air / long live the rose that grew from the concrete when no one else ever cared.”



Alvaro Barrington, “DMX Stop Drop LA” (2022), C-print on cardboard in wooden frame covered in concrete and acrylic, 79 x 71 1/4 x 32 1/4 inches (photo Caroline Ellen Liou/Hyperallergic, work copyright the artist)

With these words in mind, the press release accompanying the exhibition suddenly takes on a deeper poignancy. In the statement, written as a personal note from the artist, Barrington points out that these figures — like Buffy Summers, Lauryn Hill, DMX, and even Batman — are what's left for the popular imagination to wrap its dreams around, after an entire generation of heroes had been taken away during the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and '60s, and again, with HIV and crack epidemics of the Reagan era and new Jim Crow policies of the '80s and '90s. With political representation of Black and Brown communities stymied and only commercial avenues available to them, new generations nevertheless found a way to mine and make meaning for themselves through this new crop of figures, whether real or fictional.



Installation view of Alvaro Barrington: *91-98 jfk-lax border* at Blum & Poe, 2022 (photo Caroline Ellen Liou/Hyperallergic, all works copyright the artist)

In this way, *91-98 jfk-lax border* is a love letter to Los Angeles. Beyond a mere homage to LA's aesthetic vocabulary — the artist's frequent inclusion of concrete feels like an ode to the city's urban landscape of parking lots, curb stops, and freeways — Alvaro Barrington sees past the superficiality of Hollywood to celebrate the myth-making at its center. Movies, music, and the celebrity industrial complex respond to the persistent, relentless human need for stories and meaning. By spotlighting the fandom and communities that crop up around celebrity-like figures, Barrington gets to the root of

why celebrities (and, by extension, representation) matter, the details of who they are as almost besides the point; it's about who they allow us to be. As he writes in his statement, "the only real narrative was that we saved each other."



Installation view of *Alvaro Barrington: 91-98 jfk-lax border* at Blum & Poe, 2022 (photo by Josh Schaedel, image copyright the artist, courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo)

For the artist, this is not a mere sentiment. Rather, Alvaro Barrington puts weight behind his words to uplift the work of other artists through his platform of a solo exhibition. The portraits of Lauryn Hill, Missy Elliott, and Lil' Kim, for example, are by Brooklyn-based artist Aya Brown, while significant sections of the sprawling exhibition are almost entirely dedicated to other artists, such as the salon-style wall featuring the work of Barrington's longtime collaborator, Teresa Farrell. If *91-98 jfk-lax border* is like the artist's debut album, these moments are like guest verses, samples, and stacked tracks created in dialogue with his circle of friends. In doing so, Barrington reverses the spotlight of celebrity to shine a light upon the often-unrecognized support systems behind any one person, or indeed, image.

[91-98 jfk-lax border](#) is on view at Blum & Poe (727 South La Cienega Boulevard, Culver City, Los Angeles) through April 30, 2022. The exhibition is organized by the gallery.