

CANDIDA ALVAREZ PAINTS LIKE A POET

Written by Toniann Fernandez





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PICA, PICA 4, 2021
Acrylic on linen
84 x 72 in.
213.4 x 182.9 cm.
7 x 6 ft.
Private Collection

Candida Alvarez paints like a poet. And she speaks like one too. In lyrical arcs she shifts between Spanish and English, creating a purple tinted aura of energetic excitement in the midday light of her Southwest Michigan studio. She is almost always smiling and often laughs as we video chat through our phones. Images of her library, large windows, and works in progress move about my screen, sometimes stalling and flipping upside down due to a spotty connection. The images pause and trail, creating abstract forms of monstera leaves, glittering paint, and the artist's finger pointing at raw linen amidst her narration. We talk about her history, process, the window, the impossibility of solitude, and the bumpy ride.

Alvarez was born in New York in 1955, but as was instilled by her family growing up, she is Puerto Rican first. As a child, she spent much of her time gazing out of the window of her family's 14th floor apartment in Brooklyn's Farragut Houses. She compares the vantage point from the window to that of a perched bird and describes this view as central to her early explorations as an artist. She studied at Fordham University in 1977, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1981,

and in 1997, earned her MFA from Yale School of Art, all the while exploring the bounds of media and establishing herself as one of the most innovative experimental painters of her generation. She has been a tenured professor of Painting and Drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago since 1998, but recently moved her studio to Baroda, Michigan.

"This is my library. I am so proud of this library. This is one of the reasons I moved to Michigan." From her wall of books, she shifts my focus to a large painting in progress that sits on a table. It will be shown by Monique Meloche at Art Chicago. For Alvarez, the use of tables enables her to paint from above the canvas. "It evokes the intimacy of drawing," she tells me. Abstract shapes are drawn on raw Belgium linen in silver marker. Royal violet shapes seem to hover above the burlap textured surface only partially covered in acrylic. "I love acrylics," she tells me. "Oils always felt so seductive, so creamy and delicious, and I used them a bit in the 90s, but acrylic is the paint for the times. I don't know if I'm gonna be around in a month, you know, acrylics allow me to get it down, now. It's a notation. It's cursive. The use of the hand is so important to me, the gesture, the personality in the mark."

She gestures toward the pigment. "I was feeling purple. I usually just go with this feeling I have, a vibration. And then this harmony takes place. One color usually dominates, and from that, the form and the palette grow. The painting becomes itself." She talks about the attitudes of the colors, how they don't always behave, and laughs about a "naughty" blue she interacted with a few days ago.

MAGNIFY, 2020-2021 Acrylic polymer paint with glitter and uv-cured ink on canvas 80 x 60 x 2 in, 203.2 x 152.4 x 5.1 cm - Courtesy of the Artist and GAVLAK



MAGNIFY, 2020-2021 Acrylic polymer paint with glitter and uv-cured ink on canvas 80 x 60 x 2 in, 203.2 x 152.4 x 5.1 cm - Courtesy of the Artist and GAVLAK





LICKING A RED ROSE, 2020
 Acrylic on linen
 84 x 72 in
 213.4 x 182.9 cm
 Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

“Oils always felt

so seductive,

& delicious”



SO CREAMY

**IT WAS SO DARK,
 I COULD SEE THE STARS, 2019**
 Acrylic on linen
 84 x 72 in
 213.4 x 182.9 cm
 Courtesy of San Jose Museum of Art
 Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

Alvarez personifies color, and remembers being mesmerized by Albers's Interaction of Color. "It's amazing how families of color exist. I mean, it's so powerful, right? How they become families. Two colors they get together and then they have the child, that's the third color, right? It's alchemy, the alchemy of colors is so mysterious. I get lost in them. Getting lost is really part of my practice. I get lost in order to find myself, and the place where that happens becomes the painting. I get lost because I trust color, the colors help me, they grab me. I believe in the power of color." She runs a finger over an unpainted portion of the canvas. "This linen, when I found this color linen I just fell in love with it." She describes it as almost skin colored, ground colored. She shows me a painting where the linen remains exposed in contrast to smooth, green acrylic. "I love leaving the linen exposed because that's how it started. And I want you to be there with me when this starts." She had previously worked on white gessoed canvases, "and color on that white just pops. It's just right. Pero after a while I got bored because it was almost too easy. When you start with white, yes, the color just blends, it's right there on the surface,

but I wanted it to be harder. It really is like being in love. Porque there's something hard about being in love, right? It's not just having a romance. It's really about being in love with something that you choose for yourself, to teach yourself. And it's not always so user friendly. Sometimes you question yourself. Is this really right for me? It's like the size of the painting. The courtship of scale, texture."

Alvarez compares the grit of the linen's texture to a bumpy ride on the island, to the feeling of bouncing from your seat in the back of a jeep, "wondering why the hell did I get in this car? I could fly out of the window. I'm scared to death man but isn't it beautiful? I don't want to go on the highway. I want to go the local way. I want to go the way it takes time. I want to take those curves."

We move to a wall of the studio covered in photographs of Alvarez's son, a dog, photographs of paintings by Matisse and Picasso. Quotes printed on computer paper are fixed to the wall with blue tape. "Ok y aqui I have some quotes. This one is by Rilke." She recites it: "Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love." A print-out of Matisse's "L'Atelier Rouge" hangs nearby and will serve as a reference for the next painting Alvarez will work on. Her palettes often reference pop, historical and modern art references, and incorporate world news and personal memories. She tells me that she is currently sourcing Picasso's "The Three Musicians" for a series called "Pica Pica." The title is derived from Picasso's name and the Spanish word that refers to an itch or something spicy.



**BETWEEN TWO THINGS,
FROM AIR PAINTINGS (2017-2019), 2019**

latex ink, acrylic, and collage
on PVC mesh with aluminum and wood
81 x 71 x 26 in.
205.7 x 180.3 x 66.0 cm
Courtesy of Jorge M. Perez
Art Museum of Miami-Dade County



"Light is like breath in that it's the vitality of energy. It's sort of like loving something, right? It's like a conversation."

"I think in my work I aim for a kind of poetry, which is not easily manifested. You have to work hard to get to this, because it's a simplification, it's just the essence of something. We have so much language, we have so many words to say one thing, but it depends on what language you speak. You speak Spanish, sí, you know, there's a way of communication that's different. If you speak German, if you speak French... There are all different ways to get to the simplicity. Sometimes you need a lot more than words, but sometimes we could just say one word. We can say, care. Or we can say wonder. Or we can say pain. You can say love, or hate, or patriotism. The best poetry, you really don't hear it all together. You only hear it in parts, two or three words. They take you for a long journey." I look at the smooth green acrylic and gravelly beige linen of her painting and think of the bumpy ride.

She moves on to a second quote. It's by John Cage. "When you start working, everybody is in your studio- the past, your friends,

enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas- all are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you are lucky, even you leave." She tells me how "underneath it all, the artists cannot escape from the social dimension of their work. Even when you're alone in the silence and the intimacy of the studio, you're in a social space. There is a contradiction, and that's kind of the task. I'm in the space between, that's where the painting is made."

How, then, do we find silence? "Breath. Breathing. It really helps me to focus. Do you ever think about whether you're breathing or not? It seems like a subtle thing, right? But breath is something that you direct. It helps you stand better. If you feel pain, you breathe, and you forget those things. It gives you better attention, and my practice, my work, it's always about giving attention to this small little thing that makes you feel so alive."

We talk about light, how light is to painting what breath is to body. "Light is the source. That's what I love about paintings. They're really alive. And you know, the light changes. Light is like air. You can't pin down an image, it's a memory. It becomes a host for the reverberation of something. Light is like breath in that it's the vitality of energy. It's sort of like loving something, right? It's like a conversation. Maybe you don't remember it word for word, but if we have a connection, that reverberation is what stays with you."

