Raphaël Barontini, Islander Empress, 2022, 175 x 146 cm. Acrylic, ink, glitter and screen print on canvas. Jasmine Spezie Collection. Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim (Chicago, Paris, Mexico City)
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Raphaël Barontini, 2023. © Jalil Ourguedi. Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim (Chicago, Paris, Mexico City).

RAPHAËL BARONTINI: A CARNIVALESQUE REPRESENTATION OF MEMORY

Words BELÉN VERA

Through a distinctive visual language that merges painting, textiles, and performance, Raphaël Barontini transforms history into a dynamic, ever-evolving narrative. His work connects with the memory of the African and Caribbean diasporas, reinterpreting figures and symbols as powerful statements of resistance and celebration. His latest exhibition, Quelque part dans la nuit, le peuple danse, on view at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris until November 5th, is a striking manifestation of his artistic vision. Inspired by Aimé Césaire's La Tragédie du Roi Christophe, the show explores post-colonial identity, particularly in the context of Haitian independence, and challenges the dominant narratives of colonial history.

By fusing memory with creation, Barontini constructs immersive spaces where the past and present collide, bringing forward voices that have been historically silenced. His practice goes beyond historical re-reading—rather than treating the past as a distant archive, he revives it through imagination and collective action. His installations incorporate monumental tapestries, regal textiles, and heraldic motifs, merging royal grandeur with the aesthetics of resistance. Carnival iconography, with its ability to subvert power structures and rewrite hierarchies, plays a central role in his work, serving as a space of liberation and cultural resilience. In this conversation, Barontini reflects on his artistic process, exhibition themes, and key influences, exploring how he reclaims history through storytelling and keeps the past alive in the present.

Tell us about your beginnings. How did it all start?

In high school, I loved visual arts but never considered it a career until a teacher encouraged me to apply to art school. After a year of preparatory classes, I was accepted into multiple institutions and chose the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where I studied for five years, including an exchange at Hunter College in New York. Being among aspiring artists confirmed my goal of becoming a professional.

The early years were challenging—learning to navigate the art market and present my work. After five or six years, I had my first solo show in a Parisian gallery, followed by projects with Espai Tactel in Valencia. A major turning point came in 2019 with my first solo show at the SCAD Museum in Savannah, Georgia, which also introduced performance into my practice. That year, I was selected for an LVMH residency in Singapore and began working with Mariane Ibrahim Gallery. One of my most meaningful exhibitions was at the Panthéon in Paris. Unlike a museum show, it engaged visitors who hadn't necessarily come for contemporary art. Seeing their response reinforced the importance of expanding where and how art is exhibited.

Your exhibition at the Panthéon in Paris was quite unique, as it took place in a historically significant monument rather than a traditional museum space. How did this setting influence your work and the way audiences engaged with it?

The Panthéon exhibition was an intense and interesting experience because it allowed me to connect my artistic intentions with a building that has shaped history. Unlike showing work in a museum, where contemporary art is expected, the Panthéon presented a different challenge—it brought my work into dialogue with a space of deep historical significance.

One of the most fascinating aspects was the audience. Many visitors had come simply to see the monument, not a contemporary art exhibition, yet they engaged with my work in unexpected ways. It was rewarding to receive positive feedback from people who might not typically visit contemporary art spaces. In a way, it reinforced the idea of breaking barriers; sometimes people don't seek out contemporary art, but when they encounter it in an unexpected place, they connect with it in a new way.

You grew up in a family with roots in Guadeloupe and Italy, in a multicultural environment in Saint-Denis, near Paris. How have these diverse cultural heritages influenced your artistic practice and the themes you explore in your work?

At the beginning of my practice, all those intentions were a bit unconscious. I was just bringing together things that I liked, without really conceptualising them. I took different aspects, different forms—painting, of course, which has always been a passion of mine. That love for painting probably comes from my father's side. I remember visiting my family in Tuscany, and my father was always eager to take me to museums, chapels, and churches to see frescoes. We went to the Uffizi in Florence, the Villa Borghese in Rome, and I think that's where my appreciation for historical painting came from.

On the other side, I grew up in the northern suburbs of Paris, a working-class area with a huge multicultural mix, but I also spent a lot of time with my family in Guadeloupe. From an early age, I witnessed the traditions of carnival, music, and Léwoz—a drum and dance tradition. Many of my uncles were musicians, and before entering university, I played percussion in carnival bands in the Paris suburbs. I loved it, but when I got into arts, I decided to focus entirely on painting. Still, all of this stayed with me, as an unconscious background that later found its way into my work.

That connection to history, especially the history of slavery, the fight for freedom, and the abolition of slavery, also shaped me. As a kid in Guadeloupe, I visited old plantations and 18th-century monuments directly tied to that past. To be honest, I was shocked. I couldn't keep that sense of injustice inside me without addressing it somehow. Even if I don't always speak directly about these themes in my work, they remain a large part of it. Drums are still part of my life. Even here in my studio, I have some.

Your artistic practice spans a variety of techniques, including screen printing, digital printing, and painting on textiles. How did you develop this multidisciplinary approach, and why did you choose to explore these specific media?

I've always had a collage aesthetic in my work, and I think the narrative really comes from that mix of iconographies and images—art history, old sculptures, paintings, and costumes depicted in historical artworks. I also incorporate sacred objects, ritual masks, and small statues, mainly from West Africa. It's really a fusion of all these visual references.

At first, I worked with small physical collages and later translated them into large-scale pieces. But rather than traditional collage, these works were built up in multiple layers of screen printing on canvas. When I graduated from Arts, my final project was a series of banners—paintings in the shape of banners with fringes. They were printed on canvas using multiple layers of screen printing, but unlike traditional paintings, they weren't mounted on a rigid structure. Instead, they had a textile-like quality, slightly heavier than fabric but still flexible. That was my first step toward working with textiles.

After graduating, I began experimenting with digital printing. I would create abstract paintings on canvas or paper, photograph them, and then print the images onto fabric. This technique became integral to my large-scale works, including costumes for performances. In the exhibition, for instance, the largest fabric pieces feature a mix of digital prints and hand-dyed cotton. The background might be digitally printed, while other elements—like trees, flags, or fire—are created with dyed fabrics. It's a layered process, like a patchwork of different materials.

In addition to digital printing and dyeing, I also use screen printing to add iconographic elements, such as faces and figures, onto the fabric. Everything is then stitched together. This same process applies to the costumes. For example, in one of the caps, the background is a digital print, while the details are screen-printed on fabric. The only piece produced outside my studio was the large embroidery featured at the entrance of the exhibition at Palais de Tokyo. Unfortunately, we don't have the technical expertise for that level of embroidery in France, so we collaborated with an amazing studio in Mumbai, Amal Embroidery. It was a long process—15 artisans worked on it for four months, totaling around 13,600 hours of work. Large-scale embroidery like this is now only done in India; it's impossible to produce it elsewhere. It was an incredible process, and I'm really proud of the results.

Raphaël Barontini, Queen Ooni Luwoo, 2024, 175 × 146 × 6 cm. Acrylic, ink, glitter and screen print on canvas. Collection Gary Metzner & Scott Johnson. Crédit photo : Fabrice Gousset. Courtesy de l'artiste et Mariane Ibrahim (Chicago, Paris, Mexico) © ADAGP, Paris, 2025.

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(1) Raphaël Barontini, Cécile Fatiman, la princesse du royaume du nord, 2024. Print on cotton, embroidery (Amal Embroideries, Mumbai). Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim (Chicago, Paris, Mexico City) © ADAGP, Paris, 2025.
(2) Raphaël Barontini, view of the exhibition "I Live a Journey of a Thousand Years", Currier Museum, Manchester (USA), 2024. Photo credit: Morgan Karanasios, Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim (Chicago, Paris, Mexico City) © ADAGP, Paris, 2025.

Throughout your career, you have explored the intersection of history and fiction to create new narratives. How is this idea reflected in Quelque part dans la nuit, le peuple danse? In what ways does this exhibition mark an evolution from your previous work?

This exhibition was the first time I brought together all aspects of my practice in a comprehensive way. In past shows, I presented different types of works separately, but here, everything—paintings, costumes, embroidery, and large-scale textiles—coexists on a large scale.

A major inspiration was The Tragedy of King Christophe by Aimé Césaire, a book that resonated with me since my student days when I began creating cross-portraits of Black figures as royalty. Though I hadn't explicitly referenced it before, the Palais de Tokyo commission felt like the right moment to return to it. The exhibition space itself shaped the structure of the show. The upper gallery became a throne room, while the lower level expanded into textile installations, evoking a palace interior opening onto a vast landscape.

Collectivity is another central theme. The Palais de Tokyo's season focuses on collective joy, and my work has long drawn from carnival traditions. I wanted to capture that energy with a platform of assembled figures—suggesting a ball, a parade, a protest, or an insurrection. The circular stage recalls dance formations, voodoo ceremonies, and political gatherings. One major work references the Bois Caïman ceremony, the voodoo ritual that ignited the Haitian Revolution in 1791—symbolising both collective spirit and the creation of new cultural identities in Caribbean societies after slavery.

The show also explores identity and self-representation. The court card motif in my paintings connects to carnival aesthetics, where roles are transformed. The large entrance embroidery portrays Cécile Fatiman, a voodoo priestess and heroine of the Haitian Revolution, later ennobled as a princess. I was drawn to how, within a decade, former slaves in Haiti could ascend to royalty, a shift that opens vast imaginative and aesthetic possibilities—something I wanted to explore throughout the exhibition.

The architecture of the Palais Sans Souci in Haiti inspired the scenography of the exhibition. What drew you to this place, and how have you reinterpreted its symbolism within the Palais de Tokyo? Were there any particular challenges in this process?

I don't know why, but this palace has always been a source of inspiration for me. While preparing for the exhibition, we worked with actual photographs of the castle, which today is in ruins, but still holds a strong presence. I even found some old postcards on eBay that helped me visualise certain architectural elements I wanted to bring into the exhibition's scenography. For example, here's an old postcard of the palace's arch—this was something I wanted to reference in the installation. And here's another one of the citadel that Henri Christophe built in the mountains. It's a massive structure that still stands today. What's fascinating about the palace is that it was the first major monument built in the Caribbean. I'm not sure if anything of this scale existed on other islands at the time.

Beyond its architecture, Christophe's vision was about establishing Haiti on the same level as European empires. He wanted to build not just a palace but an entire cultural and artistic ecosystem. Near the castle, he founded an art academy, a fine arts school, and even a royal manufactory to produce tapestries and costumes. That aspect really resonated with me. When designing the exhibition, I imagined the large embroidery at the entrance as something Christophe himself might have commissioned—bringing together these historical techniques and reinterpreting them in a contemporary way.

The exhibition is accompanied by a sound composition by Mike Ladd. What does this musical piece bring to the atmosphere of the exhibition?

We've been working closely together for 12, maybe 13 years now. It's a long collaboration. Over the years, Mike has created many pieces for my exhibitions and performances, and this time, our connection is even more evident—particularly in the way we both approach collage, whether visually or sonically. His sound pieces are constructed like collages, blending different musical traditions. In this composition, you can hear elements of rara—a form of street music played in Haitian carnivals and voodoo ceremonies, performed with drums and homemade trumpets. There are also Creole singers, electronic sounds, and layers of different sonic textures.

One of the most interesting additions is a segment of music by Jean-Baptiste Lully, the composer for Louis XIV at Versailles. This mix of influences—Haitian carnival music, electronic beats, Creole vocals, and French Baroque compositions—creates a real hybrid of sounds, time periods, and geographies. It mirrors the way I work with painting, blending references and histories to create something entirely new.

Your exhibition reflects on collective memory and the power of the people through dance. How do you see the relationship between movement, the body, and identity in your work? And how did your performance "Bal Pays" —performed on April 12—expanded on this exploration?

The costumes in my work have always carried a sense of ambiguity. I see them not just as garments but as paintings—paintings in volume, in three dimensions. What excites me is bringing these paintings to life through performance. When a dancer interprets a piece of fabric, its composition and the character depicted on it transform it into something more than just a static artwork. The movement gives it a new meaning.

One of my main intentions is to connect painting with the body. If a tapestry becomes a cape, the character it portrays is no longer confined to the wall, it becomes animated, it exists in motion. Another key idea is linking my work with contemporary art media while maintaining a dialogue with older and popular traditions. I want to reinterpret and recontextualise these traditions within a contemporary artistic framework, playing with symbolism and introducing new perspectives.

In this performance, I aimed to create an encounter between contemporary Caribbean dancers—who already have a background in quadrille—and a cultural association that works to keep this tradition alive in Paris. They weren't professional dancers, but rather people dedicated to preserving and transmitting this cultural heritage. Alongside them, live musicians performed authentic quadrille music, combined with electronic elements and sampling, adding another layer of reinterpretation within a contemporary art context.

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Have you considered expanding your costume and wearable work beyond the exhibition space?

Yes, absolutely, that's a great question. I've been thinking more about adapting these pieces for other contexts. A few months ago, I did a residency in New Orleans, where I spent almost three months connecting with different creatives and artists. During that time, I started working on a project, though it's still uncertain whether we'll secure the funding or if I'll have the time to fully develop it.

The project involves a group of opera singers, all Creole artists based in New Orleans, who perform music by historically overlooked Black and Creole composers from Louisiana, dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries. Many of these composers were erased from mainstream musical history, and now their works are being rediscovered. We want to collaborate on a project that brings these compositions to life, and my contribution would be in the realm of opera.

In past interviews, you have mentioned Romare Bearden and Sam Gilliam as key influences. What aspects of their work inspire you? Are there any other influences you would like to mention?

Yes, Romare Bearden has been a major reference for me, especially for his approach to collage and mythological narratives. I love how he merged ancient myths with Black history and everyday life in Harlem, creating sophisticated compositions that combined painting, collage, and photography. Sam Gilliam, on the other hand, influenced me through his use of textiles and the theatricality of painting. His ability to break away from traditional formats, playing with space and color, resonates with my interest in painting as a three-dimensional experience.

I'd also mention Kerry James Marshall, whose large-scale figurative paintings of Black life in the U.S. redefined representation in contemporary art. His works, almost like fabric banners, blur the line between painting and textile, which I find inspiring.

Another key reference for me is Hannah Höch, a key Dadaist, is another major influence. Alongside Bearden, she helped shape the language of collage, deconstructing and reassembling images in ways that continue to inspire me today.

Looking ahead, how do you envision the evolution of your artistic practice? Are there specific themes or projects you are eager to explore in the future?

There are a couple of directions I want to explore moving forward, particularly in my textile work. In the Pantheon exhibition, I created large-scale textile pieces, and I see this evolving into a series—a kind of visual history of the Caribbean. There is a significant lack of visual representation of this history, not just regarding slavery but also its traditions and cultural heritage. My goal over the next few years is to build this series, culminating in a major exhibition showcasing these large-scale works. Next year, I'll create a new textile piece focused on the history of Guadeloupe as part of this ongoing project. Ideally, in ten years, I'd love to exhibit the entire series together!

As for upcoming exhibitions, I have a group show in Zurich, but no solo exhibitions planned at the moment. I've kept my schedule open, hoping a major museum will propose a large-scale project.

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(1) Raphaël Barontini, À la cour d'Henri Christophe, 2022, 185 x 305 x 6 cm. Acrylic, ink, glitter and screen print on canvas. Private collection. Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim (Chicago, Paris, Mexico City) © ADAGP, Paris, 2025.

(2) Raphaël Barontini, Allure Eweka, 2020, 230 × 80 x 50 cm. Screen print on leather, digital print on fabric, silk print, trimmings. Work produced as part of the LVMH Métiers de l'Art residency. Photo credit: Thomas Lannes. Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim (Chicago, Paris, Mexico) © ADAGP, Paris, 2025.