



## Auckland

### Alice Alva *She drew the flower that started the power*

Masterworks, 16 August–19 September  
LINDA TYLER

The ornamental plant which features on the title wall of Alice Alva's first solo show at Masterworks is not a flower at all but the colourful shrub *Calathea*, sometimes known as the prayer plant. Vibrant magenta and purple contrast on its pointed foliage, variegated in lines of beadwork that striate the leaves. Jazzy black-and-white stripes define the plump pot it bursts out of, which casts a strong diagonal shadow across the foreground as if backlit. Set off against a checkerboard-patterned wall of puce and lavender squares, embroidered in silk with running stitch, this is a carefully orchestrated symphony of colour. The energy and joy leaping from the depiction belie the title, *Rootbound*. Overall, this is a very healthy show: a riot of hues on walls

and floor, resulting from the skilful deployment of patient, meditative crafting skills, with an underlying message, perhaps a prayer, for peace.

Invented by Beat poet Allen Ginsberg in 1965 to defuse aggression and make anti-war protests more user-friendly, the slogan 'Flower Power' is still universally understood 60 years later. It gets a twist of female agency, with a focus on the maker, in the titling of this show. Rather than an image of carnations placed in the barrels of rifles held by military policemen, Alva deploys her flower power to conjure fields impossibly crowded with variegated echinacea, daisies and violets, black-eyed susans and optimism. As she writes in the accompanying catalogue, 'This series of works, using a range of embroidery practices, is an act of passive resistance. I offer the flower as a repeating motif of hope and as a universal symbol of peace.'

The earliest and largest work in the exhibition, *Mother* (2023) incorporates

(left) ALICE ALVA

*Literally, all the shit on the rug* 2024

Found wool, cotton & canvas, 600 x 600 mm.

(below left) ALICE ALVA *Mother* 2023

Found wool & embroidery canvas, acrylic, 640 x 1250 mm.

(below left) ALICE ALVA *Wormy One* 2025

Stranded embroidery thread, silk on found fabric, 380 x 280 mm.

(below left) ALICE ALVA *Wormy Two* 2025

Stranded embroidery thread, wool, glass beads on found fabric, 400 x 280 mm.

a found object, an old, unopened, embroidery kit Alva picked up from an op shop, and then repurposed the open-weave Aida cloth by painting her own design on it, later embroidering over it with a half cross-stitch. This open, even-weave fabric traditionally used for cross-stitch brings an authentic snaggle-toothed edge to the text, which reads across the top 'Mother/Nature', and the bottom, 'Flower/Girl'. We should all be Mother Nature's flower girls, the artist concludes.

Alva's own maternity is the subject of *Literally, all the shit on the rug* (2024) in which the leavings of infant daughter Daphne are displayed as a parallelogram of corralled chaos, with an inflatable pencil, fluorescent tennis ball, piece of watermelon, crescent of croissant and a Matisse-like leaf presided over by a loopy serpent. The snake may have escaped from the floor rug (titled *Eden* (2023–2025)) to be replaced by a couple of love hearts. Where the artist's skills and imagination really take flight are in the two semi-abstract interlaces on patterned fabric, titled *Wormy One* and *Wormy Two* (2025). These, combined with framer Lauren Redican's wacky MDF and resin surrounds, are the standouts in this playful disruption of the orthodoxies of needlework.

