

LESSON

Portraits of Mercy

NE10 Artist: Melissa Alcena

Grades 7-9

National Art Gallery of The Bahamas



THINK

**What do you think of when you hear
the word mercy?**

THINK

What does *community* mean to you?

THINK

**How can art be used to reach
communities?**

MEET THE ARTIST

Melissa Alcena is a Bahamian portrait and documentary photographer.



MEET THE ARTIST

Melissa moved back to The Bahamas in 2016, where she became inspired to take portraits of working class and marginalized Bahamians in their environments. Her work focuses on shifting the paradise narrative of the Caribbean, by directly engaging with the people of The Bahamas in the everyday and tapping into the humanity of its citizens.

[Source: TERN Gallery](#)

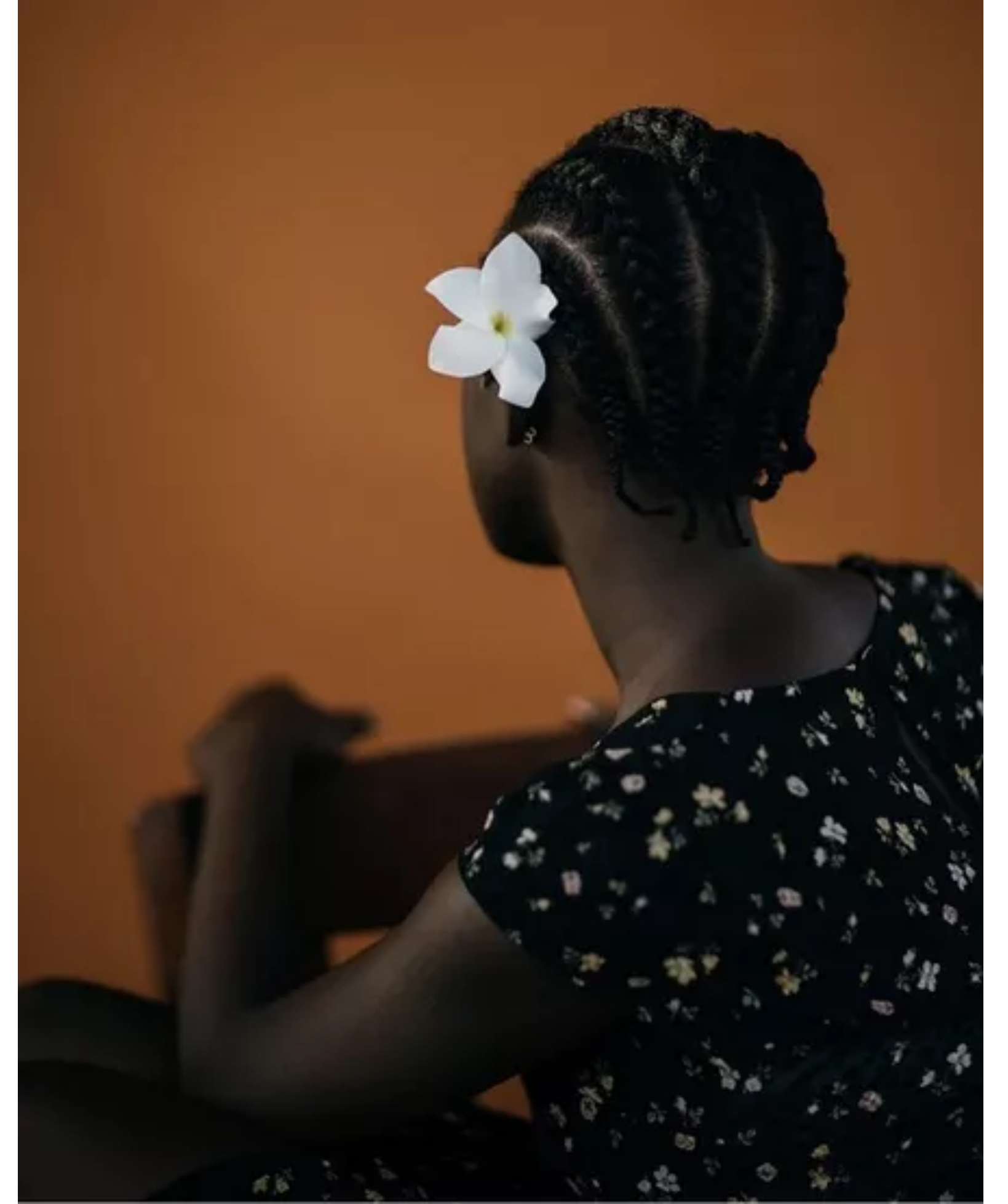
VIEW & DISCUSS



Arawak Cay, 2022



Marty Riding Through Water, 2019



Kella, 2020

VOCABULARY

A portrait is typically a painting, drawing or photograph of a person's face or head and shoulders. Portrait photography can be traditional, experimental, candid, posed and conceptual.

VOCABULARY

Sometimes portraits don't feature a person's face but instead features their back, arms or hands. Hands are a recurring motif in Melissa Alcena's work. Hands and their gestures can be quite expressive and personal. They can reveal a lot about a person. What do the following photographs make you feel?

VIEW & DISCUSS



Bj's Hand on Horse, 2019



Auntie Val, 2020



Zack, 2019

THINK

Aside from capturing the visual representation of a person, portraits often seek to represent the essence, emotions and characteristics of a person. What do the following photographs reveal about their subjects?

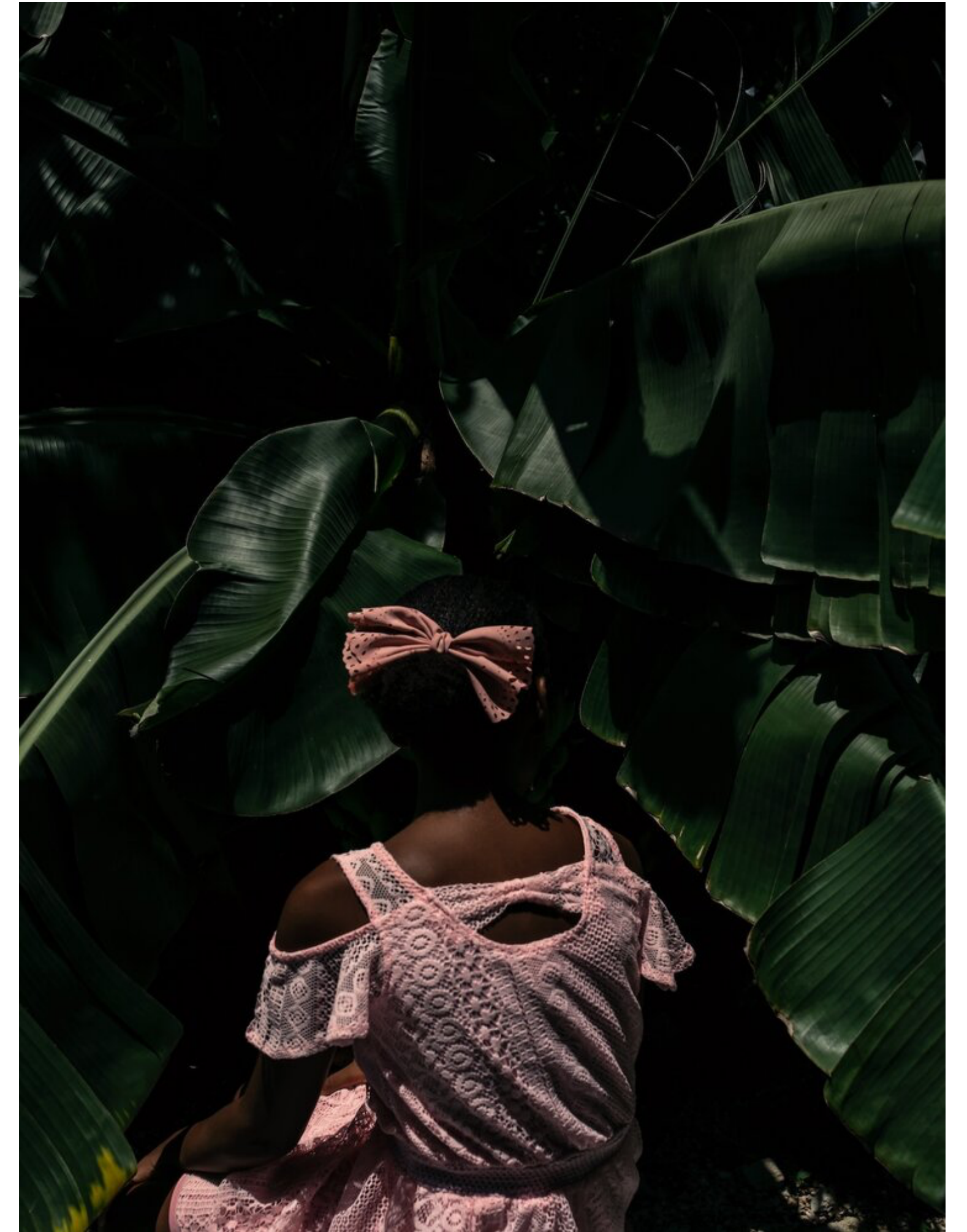
VIEW & DISCUSS



Jason, 2020



Poinciana Princess, 2019



Ellie, 2020

THINK

- **What are some characteristics of Melissa Alcena's portraits?**
- **How can a portrait tell you something about a person?**
- **What is the value of capturing a portrait?**
- **How can you identify emotions in a still photograph?**
- **What comes to mind when you think about the word representation?**

SHARE

“Imagery and words help us to conceptualize the perspectives of others—Their struggles, triumphs, and emotions surrounding their lived experiences become identifiable, as if it were our own personal realities. In turn, the foundation of the bridge is laid with empathy.”

—Melissa Alcena

SHARE

Photography in The Bahamas has a flawed and racist history. White photographers were hired by colonial governments to photograph The Bahamas as an exotic paradise to encourage tourism. Black people were often photographed in a way that made them appear naive and unsophisticated.

SHARE

Representation of working class Bahamians is important in Melissa Alcena's work. She seeks to give a voice and platform to Black people to share their stories with pride and dignity. She also seeks to dismantle stereotypes and tropes about Black people and the notion that The Bahamas is a paradise. Why do you think this kind of representation is important in photography?

VISIT THE MUSEUM

Melissa Alcena's work is a part of the tenth National Exhibition titled "*Mercy.*" This tenth national exhibition is a nationwide opportunity for collaboration with a diverse community of Bahamian artists, creatives and storytellers to reflect on the shared theme of mercy, evoking personal and collective historical experience.

VIEW & DISCUSS



**Come Baby, Come (2022) by
Melissa Alcena**



ART PROJECT

Create a photographic portrait series (5-10 photos) that explores the theme “Mercy”. Include at least two photos that feature the hands of your subject.

PROCEDURE

- 1. Create a word map for the word ‘mercy’ to think about its associations.**
- 2. Jot down a few of your ideas. Think about who you want to photograph—community, family, neighbors, friends etc.**
- 3. Ask your subjects if you can photograph them for the project.**
- 4. Think about lighting, posing, concepts before you begin. Using any camera (phone, DSLR, film), begin to photograph. Take more photos than you think you need so you can choose the best photos.**
- 5. Edit your photos. Create a presentation of your photos to share with your class.**

REFLECTION

- **What did you enjoy about this project?**
- **What did you learn about Melissa Alcena's work in the process?**
- **What did you learn about yourself during this project?**
- **How do you feel about your final artwork?**
- **If you could do this project again, would you do anything differently?**

CONNECT WITH US

Please share your work with us! You can share by:

- **Tagging us on Instagram @nagb242 or using the hashtag #NAGB**
- **Submitting your work at the link here for a chance to be featured**

Please visit our website for more information on exhibitions, workshops, and other educational activities. Contact the education team at education@nagb.org.bs for any additional questions you may have about this teaching resource.

SOURCES

- [Melissa Alcena's website](#)
- [Melissa Alcena - TERN Gallery](#)
- [Artist in the Spotlight - Melissa Alcena](#)
- [Melissa Alcena on Artsy](#)
- Portraits courtesy of Melissa Alcena
- Installation images courtesy of Marvin J Thompson