

100  
THE CUT

# THIS IS

# AMBER

She's the Jamaican-born fashion photographer whose unique eye has brought a novel yet vital cultural language to the industry. Now based in London, **Amber Pinkerton** has new worlds opening up to her, and almost more projects in her inbox than time will allow. **Sebastian Cabrices** sits down with her to find out how we almost lost one of the U.K.'s brightest talents to the bright lights of New York City.

PHOTOGRAPHER | FHUAD BRAIMOH







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**If you were to scroll down Amber Pinkerton's Instagram feed, glossy fashion images, magazine covers and self-expressive portraits would rapidly start to load your senses. Your preferred fingers or thumbs for browsing would also be greeted by outstanding accolades, exhibition flyers, press features and luxury brand campaigns. Before reaching the bottom, you'll find a video dated December 2000 showing baby Amber cuddled under her grandmother's arm and cheekily laughing. It was perhaps a bit of a Chekov's Gun that one of her relatives was also holding a camera in the frame.**

It's a few days until Christmas and Pinkerton joins me online for our interview. Low temperatures prevail in London, where she has lived since 2016. Although she's not going home for the holidays – travelling to Greece instead – she's reconciled herself to the solo moment; cosying up for a chat with hot tea in a cup that reads 'Jamaica.' "Usually, I would be overwhelmed by the workload at this time of the year, but I've learned to balance. I'm moving at a manageable pace, and I feel healthy," she declares. Although balanced, Pinkerton still has a lot on her plate. She recently returned to

university and is working on her dissertation, "a look at the representation of Jamaican society in contemporary fashion editorial imagery," she explains.

Pinkerton herself was brought up in vibrant Kingston, Jamaica, in a spacious house where the afternoon light passed through the windows and ricocheted off the cold tiles, as she tells it. "There was lots of noise," she laughs, "but the noise was also from music. Speakers were everywhere," she continues, eyes closed as if being transported. And, it was to that music that young Amber danced. "I was a performer as a kid. I danced and sang, I did speech and drama, and, at one point, I wanted to be an actress." It was fortunate then that Pinkerton lived in a near-idyllic home environment for developing her kind of artistry. Her mother had a fondness for furniture and interiors – "she loved making mosaics," she remembers – there's an uncle who excelled as a painter, and brothers who "could draw very well."

Pinkerton's eventual photographic awakening happened in parallel with the rise of the Facebook, Tumblr and then Instagram digital age. Images stopped being walled off behind magazine covers and exhibition doors. The



Youthquake Daydream,  
Document Journal Online  
Modern Day Brady Bunch, July 2020

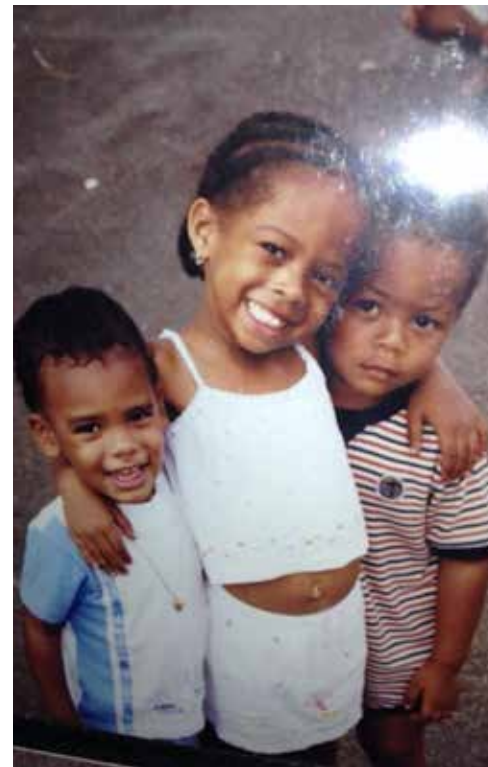
interactive photo editing tools and resources that became available in the early 2000s began to revolutionise the landscape. In 2005, Picnik launched to grand success. The photo editing service allowed for the embellishing of images with filters, graphics, cartoon-like treatments, and analogue light effects before reaching their ultimate destination: Facebook. The internet was booming, photography was turning digital, and the combination of those two creative forces harnessed an alternate reality for Pinkerton. By then, at age 13, she had just received her first camera. "At the time, I would take my camera everywhere – to high school and every party – just so I could feed my Facebook album." She remembers how, at 14, on a trip to England with her grandmother, she would constantly take pictures and journal about it. "I was putting out images almost every day. And, the editing? I got into it quite a lot." Even now, she still preserves most of her material from her Picnik days. Which, for those paying attention, should already tell you a lot about her dedication to her art.

"I loved being at a computer and immersing myself in a completely different world that my family probably

didn't know about," she says. That world was far away, happening in New York City and only accessible to the 14-year-old through Tumblr. As well as being a child of the internet, she was a Tumblr alumna – the first platform for many creatives. "I think that's where much of my aesthetic values came from, because Tumblr was very international. I was specifically looking at photographers from New York, and they were taking these fascinating self-portraits. I thought, 'Oh my God, these pictures are really cool.'"

The 'cool' in the images that appealed to Pinkerton relied mainly on the Emo element that characterised them: "black eyeliner, dyed shorts kinda tasselled at the bottom, big clear glasses; that was the Tumblr aesthetic." Upon revisiting old photos, she recently realised that she had created an alter ego for this infinite digital universe; an online avatar of her real self. The internet became this kind of never-ending outlet in service of her imagination; a space for the reinvention or reconstruction of her image through self-portraiture – of which, she confesses to taking one too many. "I had an image-making addiction," she laughs. Though addictive, Pinkerton also acknowledges that this moment was





*Left:* Amber at home with Dad, 9 months, Kingston, Jamaica  
*Middle:* Amber with parents at her 1st birthday party, 1 year old, Kingston, Jamaica  
*Right:* Amber with younger brother (*right*) and childhood friend (*left*), 3 years, Kingston, Jamaica

crucial in the development of her creative vision and professional career. "At the time I also made some crazy inappropriate photographs. But if I hadn't have made those, I wouldn't be the Amber that I am today. Having that space and freedom to express myself was very healthy."

There soon came a definitive moment in Pinkerton's childhood and early exploratory work: when she stopped being the subject. Turning the lens away from herself allowed new elements into her photography – friends, nature, her surroundings. It created a more complex understanding of image-making and motivated her compulsive desire to continue taking pictures. Equipped with a DSLR camera, she took her experimentations out of her bedroom and beyond the confines of the internet. "I began taking my parents' clothes and taking their car to go do shoots. I opened a photography page on Facebook that eventually gained an audience. And, even though I was experimenting and having fun, I think people had an interest in what I was making," she says. "I had around 3000 friends on Facebook, which was like being 'popular' at the time." She was right. People were indeed paying attention to her unconventional teenage perspective. "I even had a little write-up from a journalist – 14-years-old and in the newspaper, which was very cool." In tandem with this, the recognition was also starting to come at home, where her parents acknowledged Pinkerton's interest in photography from early on. "They got me my first camera when I was 12 or 13, and probably just saw it as a kid experimenting. But it was always a very serious thing for me. I had a clear path to where I wanted to go." The destination was, of course, New York City, where she planned to follow her Tumblr dreams.

At home in Kingston, there was a following and a family supporting her, but to flourish, a blossoming artist might need a little more than just love and inspiration to conquer the world. An established environment would be required for that artistry to develop, and, according to Pinkerton, "photography is still an undermined category" in Jamaica. As she saw it, much more was available to her in other fields, like film. So, to educate herself on it, she relied on YouTube. "There wasn't much support or infrastructure," she laments, "so the internet was my best friend."

Her first professional photography experience, test-shooting at a model agency, also came with a quick education in how to edit the photographs that would go in these models' portfolios. "In the sixth form, I learned Photoshop from my art teacher, which was a new level for me. Before that, everything I knew was Picnik," she laughs, "and there was an extent to what you could do with it." During this time, Pinkerton's gaze was still fixed further afield towards The Big Apple and the possibilities in film that it meant for her. She was accepted to the film program at the Tisch School of Arts of NYU, which

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18-years-old, on the set of a school film project, Kingston, Jamaica

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19 years old, Jamaica  
Portrait shot by Keanu Gordon

was her biggest achievement to date and the excitement began to bubble. But her American dream soon succumbed to the American reality of extravagant tuition costs. There was a response for an NYU scholarship to wait on, but her more realistic parents considered the facts, and Amber's father's British nationality, and took the initiative to start applying to schools in the U.K. on their daughter's behalf. "I didn't want to come to the U.K. because my idea of it was of a grey and boring place. But the school I got in to, I applied to myself," she recounts. "My parents were sending me to schools in Edinburgh and in the countryside and I thought, 'No, it has to be in a fashion capital.' So, I applied to a film school probably three weeks before, and I got in. Suddenly it was like, 'Oh well, I have to go now.'"

In September 2016, Pinkerton arrived in London to study filmmaking at the Met Film School. A year later she dropped out of the program without consulting her parents. Reality had struck. This time there was no crushing of American dreams, but the dismantling of her ideas on university life. As a teenager in Jamaica, she had managed to juggle school and work simultaneously. But, as she explains: "when I started the course, I didn't have any time to do anything else, and I like to ensure I'm doing practical things outside of school. It was getting in my way of doing internships or getting experience." She committed to making sure the decision to drop out would be the right one and started proactively from the beginning. First, she transferred her credits to a one-year program as insurance, in case she wanted to return to school. Then came the internships, of which she did seven, primarily as a photography assistant. The last two names she assisted were Tim Walker and Jillian Edelstein. The latter, Pinkerton admits, had a real impact on her eventually going back to school in 2019. "Once while working with her," she says, "she mentioned a pivotal pioneer of photography. I had no clue who she was talking about, and she was surprised that I didn't know. Jillian made me realise that I didn't know as much as I should have, which I appreciated."

Out 'on her own,' London became essential to Pinkerton's development, personally and as a photographer. It was only when she arrived that she was introduced to the wonders of analogue photography. "My landlady introduced me to the Pirelli Calendar, and that's when my fascination with film started. I had never seen images like that before, with such richness, colour and texture. I knew how to use a digital camera very well, but never an analogue. We didn't have any facilities for analogue at that time." This first encounter with film clearly had its long-lasting impact on her own oeuvre, in which colours and textures always demand attention. They reaffirm their authority with every new image; constantly manifesting in different environments and on many faces. Whether with the clothing, in the make-up design, backgrounds or filters, flamboyant shades and distinctive shapes are a sacrosanct habit of Pinkerton's artistry. This now distinctive style wasn't easy to divine however, but London had maximized her exposure to the kind of new publications that had expanded her mind. "In Jamaica, we only had Architectural Digest, Vogue, and perhaps Harper's Bazaar," she says. "A lot of it just came from me and the internet. When I found Models.com things changed a lot for me, because that's when I started to understand what was out there, with the different aesthetics and styles."

This was the moment Pinkerton realised, in her own words, "that there was an entire industry and infrastructure out there for a photographer." Fortunately enough, the realisation coincided with the first time she had felt moved by a particular image, from celebrated photographer Charlotte Wales. "Her fashion stuff fascinated me – the 70s themes, kinda old school, very playful and theatrical," she recalls. So, as proactive as ever, Pinkerton assisted Charlotte on one of her shoots (because of course she did) which began her next education in art as a business. "I guess I wasn't thinking about it in terms of money," she says. When I realised people had agencies and galleries, that was all very new to me. I had no idea that all that existed." These newly discovered revelations gave Pinkerton



Scans of single 6" screen printed tiles from the artwork  
'A Taste of Home Served', 2021





Everyday Style in Jamaica, Document Journal Online 'Victorious Rastas', 2019



Everyday Style in Jamaica, Document Journal Online 'Sundays', 2019



Film Still from the VR Film Installation

the foundations to navigate an industry previously unknown. An astute convergence of business and aesthetics, combined with her innate visionary skills, elevated her to the next level. Her work has since graced the covers of influential publications like New York Magazine's The Cut and Katie Grand's Perfect. She has shot campaigns for giant fashion brands like Gucci and Moncler, and has illustrated the pages of Dazed, Another and Black Fashion Fair with her endlessly compelling editorials. If there was more evidence needed of Pinkerton's growing influence within the industry, then her

photographer's portfolio reveals an ever-astute ability to reveal society through an artistic lens. The fascination lies in how she absorbs her surroundings and extracts every element to use in her visual theories. "The creative process happens in different departments," she explains. "There's a structure to Amber. She has different cubicles and different ways of doing things within those cubicles. My personal work definitely comes from personal experiences, my personification of those experiences and my outlook on society. A lot of my initial works started from me feeling 'othered'



inclusion in last year's Forbes 30 Under 30 list should just about do it.

Beyond the resumé however, Pinkerton has achieved what most other photographers spend their careers chasing: for their work to be the catalyst of a greater, more profound good. Her sensibilities have allowed her to be an unofficial spokesperson for her home of Jamaica through her work, leaving hints of her identity and her story in every photograph, like a biography in imagery. She uses this work to shine a spotlight on important themes like colourism, class and the Jamaican diaspora. A look at the young

here in London, and then realising it was the same dynamic at home – except I'm probably on the opposite side there; not the underprivileged person, or the person being stereotyped."

In a world where narrative is always subjective, one of the many factors behind Pinkerton's success has been how she has always pushed herself to see her work and concepts from as many different perspectives as possible, and not just her own singular viewpoint. "Whenever I make a personal piece of work, it's usually speaking to two demographics, and I always keep that in mind.

'Self Dialogues: Hard Food', 2022

Kyesha and Davinya, July 2020







I always think, 'How would this project read for a Jamaican person? And how would this read for an international person?'" Such a creative process always strives to keep polarities and different contexts in mind, and explore the positives and negatives of each to stimulate discussion and debate. It's another reason why Pinkerton is so talked about, after all.

Throughout her work there are call backs to the vibrant, colourful canvas' she grew up to as a child, but always recontextualised for a contemporary global fashion audience. It's through these images that some of her most personal stories are told. "When it's in Jamaica, it always has a more societal and socio-political context to it that I can't avoid, but just naturally keep in mind," she says in a statement that will make perfect sense to any spectator of her work. In her photographs, Pinkerton draws a picture of her homeland that compels you to immerse yourself in it so deeply that you feel an urgent need to know more; to understand more. Having developed her eye in such a target rich environment, it's perhaps unsurprising to hear her describe herself as

an easily inspired person: "I can take influences from almost anything and inject it into something else. I have a mind that needs constant feeding, so whenever I look at things, something will always come."

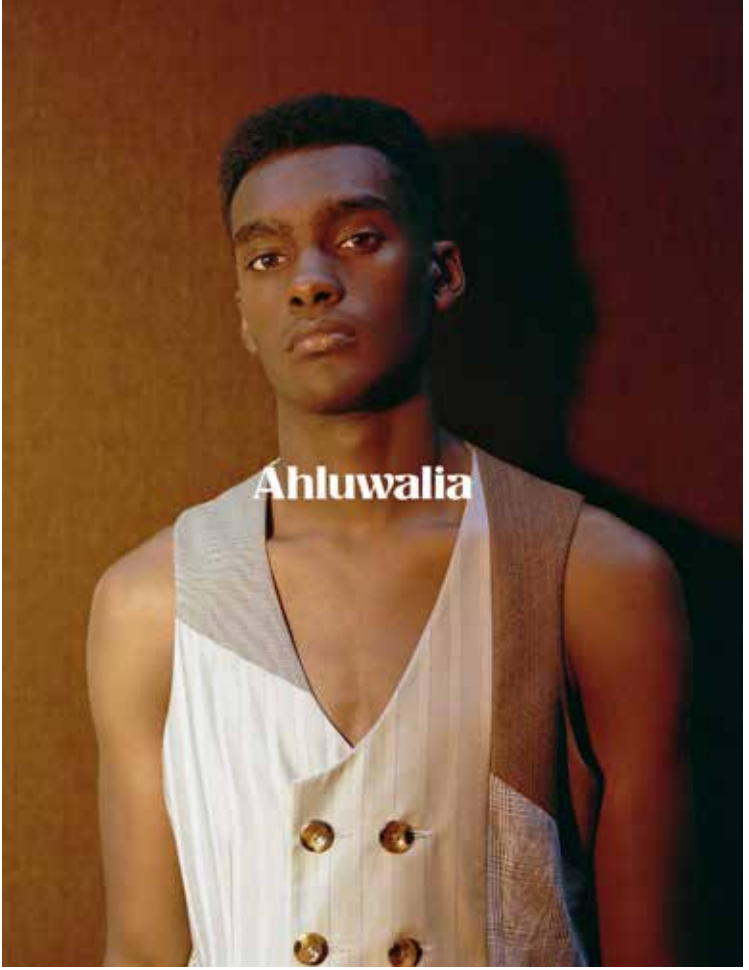
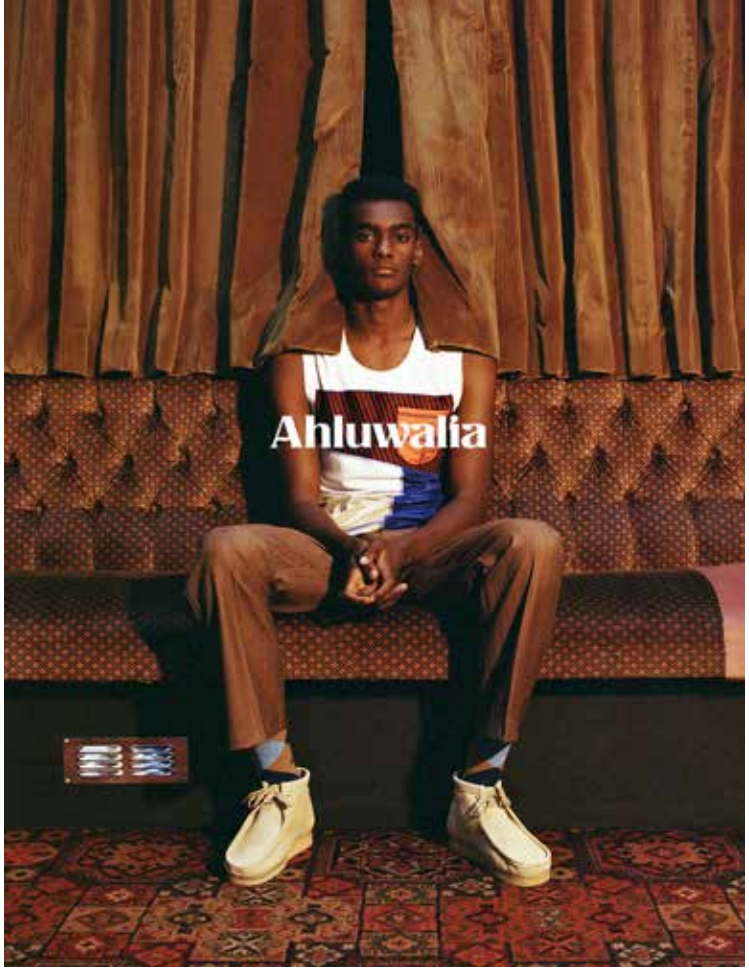
Injecting influences into her work is one thing, it's how artists are built. But what does she want, or is hoping, people take from her work when they see it? "It depends on who's looking at it," she answers. "There are a lot of subtleties that speak to different people in different ways. For people of colour, I hope that it uplifts them and they see themselves in a more positive light. That's a worldwide kind of mission for me. I also hope it provokes the people who may be very close-minded, and guides them to a kind of insight or awareness. That even applies to people of colour in my community, here and in Jamaica, who may be of an upper class and look down on people in a derogatory way. I just hope it sparks discourse and changes cognitive thinking."

Pinkerton's commercial work, seen on billboards, in magazines and everywhere beneath your fingertips, has also been a valuable mechanism for platforming her points of view in projects that often



GUCCI Epilogue Hero Campaign 2021

It's a complicated thing, because in the black community we often speak about being categorised or put in these boxes – meaning, you know, 'Oh, why can't I shoot white subjects



AHLUWALIA X BROWNS Fashion Capsule Collection November 2019

reach a wider audience. Amid client demands and the varied optics of different creative teams, she injects her voice and pushes hard to achieve the kind of outcome that can please the client, the team, and herself. "I understand that brands are quite protective because they don't want to make the wrong step. Today there's more anxiety around certain ideas, everything's very political, and social media can take a nasty turn very quickly," she explains. Fair reasoning given how the scandal over the Balenciaga SS23 campaign developed last year. "I understand and respect that," she continues, "but I do love when I have a greater chance to do an idea with thought and narrative and fun in it."

It's now been almost three hours of talking, and sharing anecdotes from home, work advice and childhood memories. Pinkerton tells me how she expects to slow the pace in 2023 and focus on her personal projects, including the Jamaica Editorial Archive, a photographic resource of fashion spreads shot in Jamaica. "Use for education, critiques, research, mood boarding or enthusiasm – access for all," she said in an Instagram post published on the launch day. It's another example of how important her heritage and community are to who she is

as not only a photographer, but as a person. Which leaves the intriguing question of how she feels about her current interviewer not being a person of colour? She looks pensive for a moment and meditates on an answer for the first time. The moment doesn't last long, and she replies with the same thoughtful confidence that has underwritten our entire conversation. "I thought about it, and I looked at who everyone was and whether they were black or not," she says. "But then I thought, we can't go through life thinking everything has to match. It's a complicated thing, because in the black community we often speak about being categorised or put in these boxes – meaning, you know, 'Oh, why can't I shoot white subjects, or anyone other than a black person?' I don't say that myself, I'm fine with whom I shoot and the variety I have. But it's something I've heard many people say. Honestly, I don't actually know what people want."

It transpires Pinkerton has never spoken in an interview in so much in detail about her family, childhood, or the person behind the work. There's a sense there's more she would like people to know about her. "I have a personality. I'm very funny and crazy,"

she says (she is). While awards and even more recognition are to come, the thing she is most expectant about in 2023 is her Bachelor of Arts degree in Photography from the University of Westminster. Even now, her capacity to learn is boundless. And the more she takes in, the more we get from her. She has written poetry and directed films, and is currently focusing on creating artwork for her upcoming solo exhibition.

Amber Pinkerton is the personification of ideas and ideals, all likely to soon become images capable of questioning our views and perspectives. Her work surrenders us to a true and honest expression of beauty that runs from the simplest to the most opulent image. It's only a matter of time before some young girl or boy in a seemingly remote location discovers her pictures on Instagram and dreams of telling their own stories in London. Her 'Jamaica' mug may have ended up with English tea in it instead of New York coffee, but she's at peace with how things have turned out. Young Amber always knew what it was going to take to get where she wanted to be, and we're all now getting to know just who she is.

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