

Alvaro Barrington

MY MAMA TOLD ME YOU WAS A PROBLEM, BITCH

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MASSIMODECARLO is delighted to present *MY MAMA TOLD ME YOU WAS A PROBLEM, BITCH*, the second solo exhibition by London-based artist Alvaro Barrington in Milan. Barrington explores the layers of Black identity, simultaneously confronting the challenges of hypervisibility and social invisibility. His practice, informed by his multilayered relationship with America, race, and class, is a continuous act of reimagining. In a nod to Arte Povera, Barrington transforms unconventional materials – concrete into canvas, rope into backdrop, and milk crates into stained glass – creating a personal American narrative.

The title *MY MAMA TOLD ME YOU WAS A PROBLEM, BITCH* captures the energy of 90s rap, a genre that reshaped cultural narratives with its sharp wit, raw emotion, and unapologetic commentary on life. Inspired by the rhythm of five iconic tracks – Biggie's *Mo Money Mo Problems*, Jay-Z's *99 Problems*, Nas's *Life's a Bitch*, Tupac's *Wonder Why They Call U Bitch*, and LL Cool J's *Mama Said Knock You Out* – Barrington stitches together a homage to a time when beats and biting truths formed a communal anthem for self-expression.

The exhibition brings together three distinct bodies of work, each engaging with the conditions of Black life through Barrington's characteristic use of unusual materials. Jute rope, concrete, denim, and milk crates – materials tied to labour, mobility, and survival – become central to his reimagining of an American landscape.

His jute rope works evoke the vastness of American landscapes while hinting at the haunting legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. Arranged in horizontal and vertical compositions, they gesture toward the structure of a landscape painting, layering histories of migration and displacement. Concrete slabs framed in denim – a fabric emblematic of the American working class – are overlaid with delicate pencil sketches of pigeons, bulls, and bucks. These recurring motifs carry diverse meanings: pigeons, omnipresent yet overlooked, mirror the resilience of working-class lives, while bulls and bucks nod to basketball's centrality in Black culture, embodying strength, aspiration, and cultural pride. The pencil drawings, fragile to the point of near-erasure against the coarse

concrete, were inspired by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), a pivotal novel exploring visibility and invisibility. In the book, the unnamed Black protagonist faces racism through social invisibility, humiliation and injustice. The drawings, too, seem to vanish from certain angles, mirroring the fragile and shifting nature of identity in Ellison's narrative.

In another body of work, Barrington pays tribute to Kobe Bryant, the basketball legend who spent part of his childhood in Italy. Bryant's evolving public identity – shaped by media narratives and personal milestones – is captured in gestural brushstrokes influenced by Willem de Kooning. The works feature silhouette-shaped painted cardboard panels framed by plastic milk crates, referencing their use as makeshift basketball hoops in playgrounds. Filled with stained glass and lit from within, these frames channel the spiritual glow of church windows while also drawing on the aesthetics of the AfriCOBRA art collective.

In his abstract works, Barrington adopts an experimental approach to painting, using unconventional materials such as concrete layered over torn and painted cardboard. These pieces are rich with art historical references, including Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square* series, Matisse's *The Swimming Pool* (1952), and Lucio Fontana's *Spatial Concept* series (1947–68). Framed with denim and industrial rebar, the works allude to the textures of urban life – where materials, like histories, are fractured, rebuilt, and reimagined.

Barrington's work is defined by his uncanny ability to fuse seemingly incongruent influences – from Arte Povera's embrace of humble materials to Francisco Goya's etchings, Pablo Picasso's animal studies, and the bold visual language of hip-hop.

Ultimately, *MY MAMA TOLD ME YOU WAS A PROBLEM, BITCH* is a blend of rhythms, materials, cultural references, and deeply personal stories. Barrington's work reflects both his journey and the world around him – part homage, part rebellion, but always authentically his own. In the exhibition, Black identity intertwines with memory, myth, and street lore. Barrington reminds us that art, whether in the form of a basket made from scraps or dots on a

canvas, thrives by bridging the personal and the universal.

Alvaro Barrington

(b. 1983, Caracas, Venezuela)

You're the most insecure person I know and it's
disgusting/
We have to be gentle with each other's hearts
I Like America and America likes me
For the CULTURE/
If you were them, You would be them/
LISTEN/
"You've got to give them something special, you got
to give them you, what you do, what you represent"
New women, old ways, Gotta Keep a Balance/
I look cooler than I am/
I don't want my work to be some fucking free zone
associations/
Build the margins/