

Leena Similu: a.k.a
The Pit Los Angeles

The Pit is pleased to present *a.k.a* Los Angeles-based artist Leena Similu's first solo exhibition with the gallery. The show will be on view at the gallery's Los Angeles location from September 17 to October 15, 2022 with an opening reception on September 17 from 5 to 7pm .

Similu's practice is guided by a constant, evolving confrontational revisiting of her identity. Questioning the origins of identities, she asks what is available personally, socially, and culturally to define oneself and enable individuality.

She grew up in London, but more specifically, she was raised in the neighborhood of Brixton, where her Africanness often got lost in the shuffle with all the Patois in the air—a language she nods to with some of the titles in this exhibition like *Yellow Gyal*, *Facety*, and *Kun Kum Kum* (some of her “a.k.a.”s growing up). On the days she found herself in Black hair salons, she was reminded of her biraciality and how it othered her. Her introduction of synthetic hair in pieces like *Just the rude gyal way* and *Chic Unique* (the name of one of her local salons) was a way of reflecting on her earliest memories of reconciling with her sense of self and the predicament of where to associate. The reconciliation of her African heritage with an upbringing in a European-dominated society inspired an interest in cultural identifiers and an exploration of her Mother's Cameroon lineage.

Similu's earliest work, which consisted of coil building, naturally took the shape of fertility figures, but her most recent glazed ceramics are a nod to West African masks in which identity groupings are arbitrary, inconsistent, and perhaps imaginary. As if by some sort of muscle memory instilled in her by her predecessors, Similu came to find that her masks were bearing resemblance to the kind made in her mother's region of Cameroon. Futurists like the late Jacque Fresco have disputed the concept of ancestral memory, but this likeness between Similu's masks and those made by her people was not shrugged off as mere coincidence—it fueled her desire to further explore this throughline. As the masks began to visually represent her heritage they also acknowledged a shifting identity. Similu's investigation of double consciousness represented by the mask brought her sculptures into a cultural tradition of literary works such as W. E. B. Du Bois's autoethnographic work, *The Souls of Black Folk* 1903 and Paul Laurence Dunbar's 1895 poem *We Wear the Mask*.

In the resulting body of work Similu has expanded on the trope of the mask while continuing her fascination with the original womb, a reference to a family's lineage which can be traced all the way back to the founding matriarch. Looking back and forth between contemporary Black culture, African art, and the commodification of historical artifacts, Similu's masks explore female archetypes with a nod to colonial representation. Mothers nesting in beds of coiled clay echo the peaks of a crown of short dreads. Heads topped on wooden pikes, a technique historically used to define ancestral boundaries, specifically echo the visual qualities of African

artifacts. Unmasking intrapersonal conflict each piece looks to the past and the present in the pursuit of an ideal self.