



The New York Times

Behind the Wheel in L.A., With a New Destination

Once the head of women's wear for Stella McCartney and Jil Sander, Leena Similu has taken a 180-degree turn into ceramics.



"A Goat in the Palace," 2022, explores the relationship between human and animal, and will be on view at The Future Perfect's new location this fall. Bethany Mollenkof for The New York Times

By Lauren Messman

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This article is part of our [Design special section](#) on how looks, materials and even creators evolve.

LOS ANGELES — Leena Similu leads the way from her porch to her backyard, in a hilly portion of Silver Lake. Outside, she passes a large electric kiln, a potter's wheel and a shelf of grimacing and grinning figures that have come to define her ceramics work. Near the back door of her house, a child's scooter lies on its side.

It is here, in the shade of a fig tree, that Ms. Similu, who is in her 40s, now works — a very different setting from the fashion houses and clothing companies where the former designer spent much of her career.

Ms. Similu, who was born in south London, may be best known as a clothing designer for Stella McCartney and Jil Sander, before founding and running her own label, Les Chiffoniers, for seven years. In 2014, she moved to Los Angeles to work as the vice president of design for the clothing company Equipment, but left in 2017 when she decided to become a mother.

Before she exited the industry, a former colleague suggested she take a pottery class as a form of stress relief. She stuck with it throughout her pregnancy with her son, Cosmo, who is now 5.

“I stopped when I couldn't sit at the wheel anymore,” she said. “My belly was too big.”



Leena Similu's work is inspired by her West African heritage, and her son Cosmo. Bethany Mollenkof for The New York Times

It was during that time that Ms. Similu started thinking about her maternal lineage, specifically her grandmother, who delivered babies as a midwife in Cameroon. Ms. Similu started creating vessels (“It’s all very subconscious, isn’t it, because it’s a vessel and I’m pregnant and I’m carrying someone?”), adding ceramic eyes and mouths to create faces. Something about them, she said, reminded her of artwork specific to the region of her forebears, including traditional Cameroonian masks.

“A lot of African masks are messengers,” she said. “They’re carrying a message for a specific reason when they’re worn or how they’re displayed.” In creating the work, she said, she felt as if she were speaking to her grandmother, who was no longer alive.



Leena Similu's work at her home studio in Los Angeles. Bethany Mollenkof for The New York Times



"The Panthers Tree," 2022, glazed stoneware with gold, will also be shown at The Future Perfect. Bethany Mollenkof for The New York Times

What started as a hobby grew into an artistic examination of motherhood and heritage. It also became a new creative and professional outlet. Ms. Similu first explored selling her ceramics in corporate retail stores and specialty boutiques, but was then approached to present her work in galleries.

“A lot of the retail expectations just again reminded me of that kind of generic production, which is what I was doing in fashion,” she said. As an example, she picked up a vase and pointed to a small knob of extra clay that had fired on the underside of its base. “If this was going to retail, I’d get it sent back for being defective,” she said.

Without oppressive deadlines or creative constraints, Ms. Similu has been free to experiment with different clays, glazing processes and pottery techniques. In [“Keepers,”](#) a recent exhibition at Emma Gray HQ, in Los Angeles, an assemblage of black, white and yellow pots scowl, glower and even stick a tongue out at the viewer. Other times her work takes a female shape, like the vases released in 2020 under the name [Yaya Situation](#).

Ms. Similu credits the drive to push her art in different creative directions partly to her long fashion career. In that industry, she said, “There’s that whole seasonal thing, right? Where you start fresh and everything is dead and we’re going to do a new collection. Maybe I still have that cyclical thing built in me, which is what pushes me to keep taking my work somewhere else.”



Similu holds her “Secret Sister,” 2022, which incorporates beaded wooden bangles from Cameroon. Bethany Mollenkof for The New York Times

Her backyard studio now includes ceramic animals, including a mystical goat-like creature and a sock monkey. This work was inspired, in part, by [David Alhadeff](#), who approached Ms. Similu about exhibiting at his design gallery and retail space, the [Future Perfect](#). From Sept. 8 through Oct. 15, the collection will be displayed at the Future Perfect's newest location, in Hollywood, at a home that once belonged to the film producer Samuel Goldwyn.

In a phone interview, Mr. Alhadeff said that Ms. Similu's experience in fashion, an industry that "can really chew you up and spit you out," may have helped her to develop and trust the clear artistic voice expressed in her pottery.

"That's the thing that, in my opinion, is your make or break," he continued. "You either have that or you can spend your entire life trying to figure out what that is. And she has it."

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