

**TERESA KUTALA FIRMINO**  
**An Economy of Intimacy**

Opening: Friday, September 6, 2024, 6 – 9 pm  
Exhibition: September 6 – December 7, 2024

**PRESS RELEASE**

*An Economy of Intimacy*. This term is frequently used in discussions about social dynamics and identity politics to describe behaviors where individuals overtly support or conform to dominant perspectives or norms to gain favor, sometimes at the expense of their own authentic beliefs or those of their peer group. The term highlights the tension between personal identity and external validation, and can be analyzed in terms of power structures, social conformity, and self-presentation strategies within various societal contexts.

There is a phrase in popular culture used to identify individuals, often women, who seek out validation by presenting themselves in ways that conform to the expectations and values of a group they deem integral to their context. A call to action, perhaps derived from athletics during the process of selecting teammates, the plea to 'pick me' would be used by candidates when addressing those who would choose them. In more cases than none: inherited, Eurocentric, heteronormative and patriarchal systems have designated the role of chooser to men.

While it is often referenced to highlight the tension between personal identity and external validation, Teresa Kutala Firmino's latest body of work presents an opportunity to read 'pick me' phenomenology and other means of conformity and self-preservation within the contexts that demand them from the historically disenfranchised.

Titled *An Economy of Intimacy*, the body of work was first conceptualized during a four-week residency in Luanda, Angola after an artist made the assertion "my mother was never chosen" in conversation with Firmino. Loaded with the grief of rejection, the statement was one Firmino could reference back to the systems she witnessed growing up. "It reminded me of how my mother and the women I grew up around spoke about love and relationships with men," explains Firmino. The descendant of former 32 battalion soldiers who, following the forced removals that came after the South African border war, settled in Pomfret, Firmino has an inherited understanding of the effects of state-led displacement. Telling, the conversations moved between advice on how to keep men committed to dismissively attributing happiness in a marriage to the use of love potions.

Overlooked, *An Economy of Intimacy* brings to the fore how women in disenfranchised contexts are subject to abuse, erasure and a loss of agency that begets forced reliance. It's in the

subjects' averted gazes, their elongated smiles in exaggeration, the return of masks, every downward face and upturned ass as well as the recurring white sphere perhaps representing every bitter hard pill swallowed. Referring back to the women in her family, the artist says the women she witnessed knew what they had to do to survive during a time of war, under a patriarchal system.

As writer, anthropologist and academic Lebohang Masango said in 2019, in the framework of hypergamy and how women navigate love and intimacy in the digital era of capitalism, "The thing about romance is that [it] requires money... There is no engagement in any kind of romance without money. It's a material activity. So for us to then want to create a moral panic around what young women, who are consenting adults, are doing with their bodies, or are setting as criteria for romantic engagement, I don't think it warrants the moral panic that it has."

A thread that continues today, *An Economy of Intimacy* ties historical interventions of survival to contemporary means of thriving when black and femme. "I think I am interested in conversations today because they are very similar to the conversations and concerns that our mothers had. It makes me question what progress is and for whom it is if we are going through similar (if not the same) issues that our mothers went through," asserts Firmino.

Exceeding its role as a study by being an invitation to look at the phenomenon soberly, Firmino also points to the conditioning required to survive black femmehood. A type of satirical surrealism, the work blends humor with stark reality as a means of acknowledging the resilience and strategies that come with the black femme experience. In so doing, Firmino expands ideas of survival and thriving. Positioning the women beyond their disempowered state, the work transports their narratives into ancestral, chemical or social territories and technologies far more resilient than the systemic violences that were meant to end them.

Nkosazana Hlalethwa