



Title

Nicola L.: I Am The Last Woman Object

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Cover image:

Nicola L.: I Am The Last Woman Object

by Clelia Rebecchi • 06.11.2024

A soft, vinyl sculpture resembling a loosely configured woman-commode **FIG.1** is slumped against the first wall of this exhibition dedicated to the work of Nicola L. (1932–2018) at Camden Art Centre, London. Wedged between drawers in the shape of breasts and genitalia, a small television screen intermittently displays the artist's words:

I am the last woman object



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Nicola L.: I Am The Last Woman Object* at Camden Art Centre, London, 2024, showing *Little TV Woman: 'I am the Last Woman Object'*, by Nicola L. 1969. Vinyl, wood, television and acrylic fur, dimensions variable. (Photograph Rob Harris).

You can take my lips
Touch my breasts,
Caress my stomach,
My Sex

But I repeat it,
It is the last time.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Nicola L.: I Am The Last Woman Object* at Camden Art Centre, London, 2024. (Photograph Rob Harris).

The same words also emanate from the television in the artist's native French, resonating loudly around the central gallery space. It is a fitting welcome to the largest European retrospective to date of the Moroccan-born French artist, and marks her return to Camden Art Centre, where fifty years ago her work was included in the 1974 group exhibition *Soft Art*.

The work, which gives the exhibition its title, belongs to a larger corpus of anthropomorphic sculptures that the artist began in the 1960s, many of which are reunited here **FIG.2**. Boasting an affiliation with the Surrealist objects of Salvador Dalí and Meret Oppenheim and the designs of Gaetano Pesce and Allen Jones, Nicola L.'s furniture pieces transmute eyes into lamps, feet and human silhouettes into couches, and women's bodies into chests of drawers or ironing boards. These works are among the artist's most well-known and commercially successful. Their language is unequivocally Pop – then at its zenith – with its preference for lusty vinyl and pliable, mass-produced forms that borrow from the advertisement and entertainment industries. At the same time, her works also responded to the then-burgeoning Women's Liberation Movement and are ripe with feminist critiques, although it should be noted that Nicola L. never associated herself fully with the movement, claiming it to be too divisive. In her work, utilitarian objects double as tongue-in-cheek puns on the domestic confinement and objectification of women – their resignation to interior-object-like status so final as to have become part of the decor themselves. With humour and irony, Nicola L.'s women-objects confront the politics of domestic labour, forcing viewers – or, more accurately, users – into a perverse relationship that leads them to question their own position in society.¹

Nicola L. referred to these anthropomorphic works as 'functional art', claiming that there should be no separation between them and everyday items and that they were to be used on a daily basis.² However, their popularity has primarily been facilitated through their circulation in a design, rather than art, context – supported by, for example, exhibitions at Alan Moss Gallery, New York, and Art et Industrie, New York. Recent initiatives, such as the 2017 retrospective at SculptureCenter, New York, and an exhibition at Alison Jacques, London, in 2022, have sought to reposition the discourse around them through the preclusion of any physical engagement with the objects themselves.³ The Camden Art Centre exhibition takes a similar approach, preventing visitors from touching the majority of works. Although partly motivated by conservation purposes, this decision also suggests that discussions concerning design and functionality have overshadowed a more in-depth appreciation of Nicola L.'s practice, particularly as it relates to sociopolitical conditions. The juxtaposition of these objects with paintings, works on paper and soft sculptures affords a renewed visibility to the overarching imagery and humour-driven language that dominated the artist's work and life. Marked by a taste for absurdity and exaggeration, her works question gender and race-based divisions, attempting to bridge the chasms of individualism and engage visitors in a collective experience.

Nicola L.'s communitarian ambitions are poignantly emphasised in Galleries 1 and 2, which focus on her *Pénétrables* series [FIG.3](#), the title of which derives from a text written by the French critic Pierre Restany for her exhibition at Galerie Veranneman, Brussels, in 1968.⁴ These life-size rectangles of coloured canvas have inserts for the head, arms and legs, so that viewers were able to enter and activate them. Inspired by the artist Alberto Greco (1931–65), who encouraged Nicola L.'s shift from painting to performance, the textile sculptures function like a second skin, allowing participants to take on an anonymous persona. Crucial to these works was a denouncement of the way that skin is used to project and define identity. Making this critique even more apparent are a number of the artist's *Pénétrables* that take the form of protest banners, such as *We Want to Breathe* [FIG.4](#) and *Same Skin for Everybody* (1975). With their limb inserts drooping loosely against the gallery walls and crumpled on the floors, the textile sculptures are now inert, eerily and ghostly vacated.



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Nicola L.: I Am The Last Woman Object* at Camden Art Centre, London, 2024. (Photograph Rob Harris).

Red Coat (1969), perhaps the most well-known iteration of the *Pénétrables*, is absent from this exhibition, although its journeys are retraced through archival video recordings. Nicola L. created the red vinyl coat, which fits up to eleven people, for a performance by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil at the 1970 Isle of Wight music festival. In the following years, the artist travelled throughout cities carrying the coat in a small metal case, which she would open in the middle of the street and invite passers-by to put on the coat and take part in a performance with ten other strangers **FIG.5**.⁵ Like Nicola L.'s functional sculptures, the *Red Coat* was conceived as a utilitarian object and soon became a means to convey the invitational nature of her practice, encouraging participants to rethink their own positioning in a community, leave aside their differences and share a single, extended social skin. Despite the absence of *Red Coat*, its relational and participatory spirit are brilliantly captured in another *Pénétrable* titled *Fur Room* **FIG.6**. The freestanding enclosure is constructed from purple, carpeted walls, which hold inserts for limbs, accessible from outside and inside. A restaging of its first presentation at Camden Art Centre as part of *Soft Art* in 1974, it is the only piece that visitors are encouraged to interact with, foregrounding tactility, proximity and play as key strategies in the artist's work.



Fig. 4 *We Want to Breathe*, by Nicola L. 1975. Ink, cotton and wood, 110 by 255 by 14 cm. (© Nicola L. Collection and Archive; private collection; Michael Brzezinski; exh. Camden Art Centre, London).

The exhibition continues with a room dedicated to the motifs of the snail and the head [Fig.7](#). They appeared in Nicola L.'s production only from the late 1980s onwards but rapidly became dominant, extending her exploration of the duality between mind and body, interior and exterior. A series of drawings made during a brief imprisonment in Lebanon in 1974, due to her alleged possession of marijuana, are also shown alongside these works and convey the artist's reflections on spirituality, sexual liberation and ecology. In the last galleries, Nicola L.'s functional art is exhibited in a setting that recalls how the objects would have been scattered around the artist's Chelsea Hotel apartment [Fig.8](#), where she resided from 1988 until her death. Here, the feminist undertones of her work also resurface, especially in the *Femmes Fatales* series [Fig.9](#), large-scale paintings that investigate the lives and tragic deaths of nine historical and fictional women. The two final rooms present archival recordings showing the *Pénétrables* and the *Red Coat*, along with its blue counterpart, in action, together with the artist's ventures into film-making, to which she dedicated herself from 1977.

Through a wide presentation of works on paper, paintings, films and soft sculptures, *I Am The Last Woman Object* makes a strong case for Nicola L.'s rejection of categorisation and predilection for fluidity. And yet, among all the rich variety on display, the human body – whole as well as fractured – emerges vividly as the one concern that governed the artist's five-decade-long career. Conceived through the lens of contemporary gender, feminist and anti-racist ideologies, the human form in the exhibition is

presented as an abstract vessel: the first marker of identity, but also the site through which divisions and differences can be transcended. The abstraction and fragmentation of the body – together with the interchangeability, expandability and emptiness of the skin – is a strategy through which Nicola L. undermines the stability and logic of individualism. Instead, her work invites viewers to interrogate their own embodiment and reconsider what it means to inhabit a physical as well as a collective body.



Fig. 5 *Red Coat, Same Skin for Everybody* with Fernando Arrabal, New York, by Nicola L. Performed in New York in 1992. (© Nicola L. Collection and Archive).



Fig. 6 Installation view of Nicola L.: *I Am The Last Woman Object* at Camden

Art Centre, London, 2024, showing *Fur Room*, by Nicola L. 1970/2020. Mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. (Photograph Rob Harris).

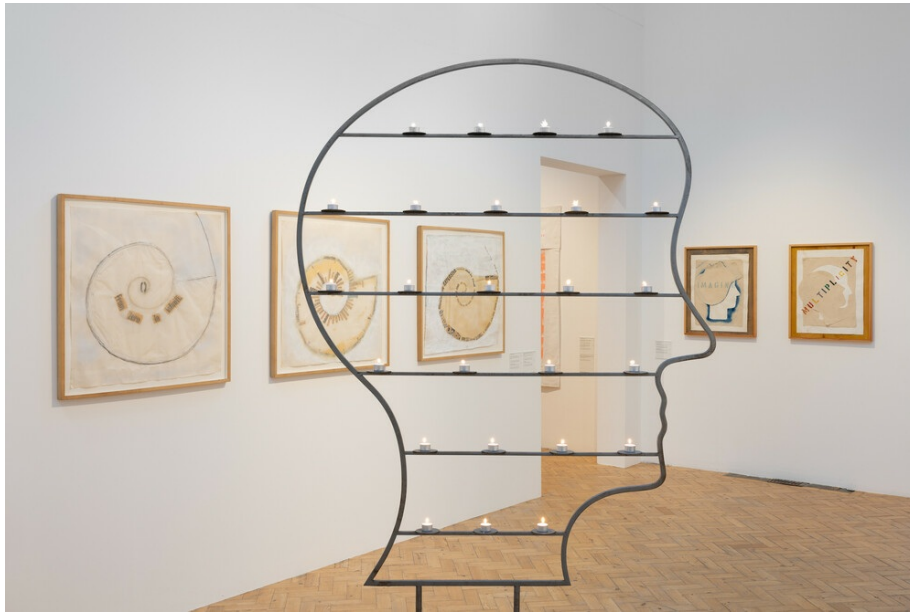


Fig. 7 Installation view of *Nicola L.: I Am The Last Woman Object* at Camden Art Centre, London, 2024. (Photograph Rob Harris).



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Nicola L.: I Am The Last Woman Object* at Camden Art Centre, London, 2024. (Photograph Rob Harris).



Fig. 9 *Frida Kahlo* from the *Femmes Fatales* series, by Nicola L. 2006. Water-based paint, collage and ink on cotton bed sheet. (© Nicola L. Collection and Archive; courtesy Nicola L. Collection and Archive and Alison Jacques, London; photograph Makenzie L. Goodman; exh. Camden Art Centre, London).

Exhibition details

Nicola L.: I Am The Last Woman Object

Camden Art Centre, London

4th October–29th December 2024

Footnotes

- 1** See R. Katrib and E.F. Battle: exh. cat. *Nicola L.: Works, 1968 to the Present*, New York (SculptureCenter) 2017.
- 2** A. Jones: 'Nicola: the profile of a moment', in D. Benaym: *Profile Nicola L.*, New York 2005, available at alisonjacques.com/uploads/files/2005-10-NL-NYC-Nicola-The-Profile-of-a-Moment-Alan-Jones-interactive.pdf, accessed 4th October 2024.
- 3** Nicola L. at Alison Jacques was reviewed by Elisabetta Garletti on *Burlington Contemporary* (28th June 2022), available at contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/the-skin-of-things, accessed 5th November 2024.

- 4** P. Restany: 'Un long voyage au bout de la peau' (23rd September 1968), available at www.nicolai.com/PRestanyLongVoyage.html, accessed 4th October 2024.
- 5** The work was most recently shown in London in 2015 at the exhibition *The World Goes Pop* at Tate Modern, see J. Morgan *et al.*: exh. cat. *The EY Exhibition: The World Goes Pop*, London (Tate Modern) 2015.

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