

How Boobs (and Other Parts of Women's Bodies) Became a Design Trend And what it says about our titillating times By Hannah Martin — November 15, 2017



Photo: Courtesy of Katie Stout

“I just, like, love how worn the nipples are,” says Brooklyn-based furniture designer Katie Stout. “They’ve been so used that they had to get epoxied back on.”

We’re standing in front of *Little TV Woman: ‘I Am the Last Woman Object,’* a sex doll turned TV cabinet by the relatively unknown French-Moroccan artist Nicola L. She (the cabinet, that is) has two soft drawers for breasts. The work sits among a cast of functional sculptures (a woman-shaped dresser; a lip lamp; a cocktail table filled with eggs) and conceptual art pieces in *Nicola L.: Works, 1968 to the Present*, an exhibition at the SculptureCenter in Long Island City.

The artist’s own voice reads the words on screen:

“I am the last woman object. You can touch my lips. Touch my breasts. Caress my stomach. My sex. But I repeat it. It is the last time.”

The video runs over and over again on a loop. But this woman object—crafted in 1969 at the height of the women’s liberation movement and installed, funnily enough, in the window of Paris jeweler Alfred Van Cleef—was hardly the last of her kind.

Fast-forward to 2017: As pink-hatted protesters fill the streets, long-stifled cases of sexual misconduct come to light, and a surge of body positivity chips away at long-held standards of beauty, a surprising trend has tiptoed into the world of home design: Boobs (and other previously unmentionables) are budding from decorative objects left and right. What’s that on the bath mat? Boobs. Sprouting from your planter? More boobs. Painted on the new china? Gilded nipples. Suddenly—like Nicola, 50 years before them—a range



Photo: Courtesy of the Sculpture Center

of female artists and designers have begun objectifying their bodies on their own terms.

Stout, who gave a tour of the **Sculpture Center** exhibition this evening, has long admired Nicola's prescient work. And, certainly, elements of Nicola's feminist thinking (though she might not have called it that) can be spotted in Stout's own doughy, lumpy "girls," which recently starred in an exhibition at R & Company and will become full-size floor luminaries at Nina Johnson's Miami gallery for a show that opens December 4.

"I posted a photo of this on Instagram like two years ago," says Stout of the Last Woman. Notably, she has never met Nicola (who is currently living in Los Angeles) and didn't encounter her work while studying at RISD: "I learned about all of those midcentury-modern men and they, like, tossed in Charlotte Perriand." But she devoured what images of Nicola's oeuvre she could uncover at design dealer Patrick Parrish's gallery and obsessed over pieces owned by some of her friends—"Jim [Walrod] had this cabinet [the La Femme commode]; Adam [Charlap] has the eye."

Organized by curator **Ruba Katrib**, the SculptureCenter show is the first comprehensive museum exhibitions to date on Nicola L., whose work has been lumped in (but only ever tangentially) with movements ranging from Pop and Nouveau Realisme to the downtown New York punk scene of the '80s. Aside from a few appearances in shows like the 2015 Tate exhibition *The World Goes Pop* or the odd eye at auction (her famous *Oeil* lamp—which you've surely seen without knowing its maker—went for nearly \$5,000 at Christie's in 2009), her oeuvre has gone largely unnoticed.

"The works have become iconic, but she hasn't always gotten credit for them," explains Katrib, who has researched Nicola L. for several years. "Female artists who were dealing with gender and sex during the Pop era simply didn't become as famous as the men who depicted women as pop objects."

Born in Morocco and raised across Europe, Nicola—after getting divorced and dropping her last name



Photo: Courtesy of the Sculpture Center

entirely—moved to New York, where she set up residence in the Chelsea Hotel and ran around with superstars from Andy Warhol’s Factory and the punk band Bad Brains. Her work—in which she explored two often came together with her famous fabric skins, called penetrables, that could alter a single body or unify several) to the more photogenic “functional sculptures,” a.k.a. furniture, for which she became more widely known.