

frieze

Nicola L.
SculptureCenter, New York, USA
By JOSEPHINE GRAF — October 23, 2017



Nicola L., Little TV Woman: 'I Am the Last Woman Object', 1969, installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2017, vinyl, wood and television, 112 x 50 x 45 cm. Courtesy: Xavier Gellier and SculptureCenter, New York; photograph: Kyle Knodell

Anthropomorphic sculptures form a mute receiving line along the central wall of Nicola L.'s retrospective at SculptureCenter. Each suggests a body but doubles as a piece of furniture: drawer handles mime nipples, plastic lips glow, lamp-like, and a foot of shiny white vinyl offers itself as a sofa. Dating from 1968, White Foot Sofa is among the earliest of the French-born artist's 'functional sculptures', as she terms them, which is also the year this wide-ranging exhibition (encompassing collages, paintings, films and interactive sculptures) takes as its starting point. It's a year to keep in the back of your head while viewing the show, which evokes a libidinal, fragile utopianism.

Nicola L. began her functional sculptures in 1967, while on a trip to New York, and a relationship to pop – as well as its French counterpart *nouveau réalisme* – is immediately evident in their lacquered and vinyl-sheathed surfaces. Parallels to Claes Oldenburg's soft sculptures are inescapable (also César's 'seins' and 'pouces'), but the artist insists, in contrast, on the workaday utility of these pieces, which are meant to be opened up, sat on and set upon. This is a consumer-grade marriage of art and life, seeking to infiltrate do-



Nicola L, 'Works, 1968 to the Present', 2017, installation view, SculptureCenter, New York. Courtesy: SculptureCenter, New York; photograph: Kyle Knodell

mesticity rather than blow it up. There's a hint of Bauhaus here, too, but 'less is more' is clearly not her motto. An embrace of excess instead anticipates the postmodern kitsch of the Memphis Group (the concurrent Ettore Sottsass show at the Met Breuer offers an interesting comparison), the streamlined biomorphism of Gaetano Pesce and even the recent fantastical constructions of Jessi Reaves.

One wonders what it would be like to actually live with one of these oversize characters, with their unsettling power dynamic between object and user in which the latter holds all agency. L. parlays this discomfort into a feminist politics, coyly materializing the objectification of feminine bodies (those suggested by her functional sculptures are often though not always female) in order to better address it. In contrast to work by her bra-burning contemporaries, seduction (even a certain passivity) here seems posed as power. A 1969 bureau, for example, has padded drawers for breasts, a slip of fake fur for pubic hair, and a belly pregnant with a small television. This is the only piece that does talk back, broadcasting a voice (presumably the artist's) that repeats 'I am the last woman object' – a phrase encapsulating the play between ingratiation and resistance that characterizes the show at large.

A bureau, of course, is a vessel meant to be opened and closed – a banal action, but here made political insofar as it determines access to, and between, bodies. I would hesitate to invoke penetration, but the artist herself deploys the term in her 'Penetrables', soft, sewn sculptures with pockets sized for human limbs, meant to be entered and activated by bodies. (Shown here limp and empty, they provide a counterpoint to the obstinate physicality of the functional sculptures.) Some, such as *Red Coat Same Skin for Everyone* (1969–92), an early iteration represented here in documentary footage, accommodate more than one person. The artist travelled the world with this raincoat for ten years, orchestrating impromptu performances that invited unsuspecting strangers into its amoeba-like embrace.

As second skins, there is something thoroughly erotic to the 'Penetrables'. They offer an orgiastic loss of individuality, in which penetration is reclaimed as a collective act. But this dream of communion is tempered by a simultaneous prophylactic function: they also sheath the body, armouring it from the world, admitting defeat in their very form. This dark undertone is foregrounded in the more recent 'Femme Fatale' paintings from 1995 that line one wall of the exhibition. Each commemorates an iconic woman (Joan of Arc, Marilyn Monroe) with pithy biographies written atop rumped bed sheets: at once post-coital and shroud-like, these too proclaim a sexuality both optimistic and elegiac.