

HYPERALLERGIC

The Feminist and Critical Pop Art of Nicola L.

By Emma Ng — December 4, 2017



Left: Installation view, Nicola L.: Works, 1968 to the Present, SculptureCenter, New York (photo by Kyle Knodell)
Right: Nicola L., “Little TV Woman: ‘I Am the Last Woman Object’” (1969), vinyl, wood, television. 43.9 x 19.7 x 17.7 inches, installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, (Collection of Xavier Gellier, photo by Kyle Knodell)

The SculptureCenter is hosting Nicola L.’s first institutional survey, cementing her reputation and oeuvre as thoroughly feminist.

Nicola L. says she abandoned painting after the artist Alberto Greco asked her, “How can you paint in the 1960s?” Soon after, she began to create playful sculptures that doubled as furniture, later moving into performances and films imbued with an equally exuberant spirit. She came up alongside other artists who were teasing out the conceptual knot of Pop and performance art in the 1960s and ’70s, but it’s only now, as she enters her 80s, that Nicola L. has received her first institutional survey, **Nicola L.: Works, 1968 to the Present** at the **SculptureCenter** in Long Island City, New York.

Her late-in-life consideration could be considered part of the current swell of attention being bestowed on the women that art history forgot. Sentiments lavished upon other “rediscovered” female artists of her generation, like Marisol, could equally apply to Nicola L.. Moroccan-born, she arrived in New York by way of France and Germany in the 1970s. Her trajectory follows a familiar pattern: an active and productive youth, a muted mid-career, and a period of renewed interest, prompted by inclusion in attention-grabbing group shows. Last year, Nicola L. was featured in *The World Goes Pop*, the Tate Modern’s reappraisal of Pop Art, and *A Modest Proposal*, staged by Hauser & Wirth in New York. On the occasion of this year’s exhibition at the SculptureCenter, fellow artist Carolee Schneemann said to the *New York Times*, “We have been friends from our first years in New York City, now celebrating the current acceptance of art by women.”



Left: Installation view, Nicola L.: Works, 1968 to the Present, SculptureCenter, New York (photo by Kyle Knodell)

Right: Installation view, Nicola L.: Works, 1968 to the Present, SculptureCenter, New York (photo by Kyle Knodell)

Nicola L.'s works are forceful and appealing, with their bright colors, stylized representations of the human body, and humorous applications of faux fur, perspex, and vinyl. At the SculptureCenter a curvaceous yellow commode features cheekily placed drawer knobs, and a calico screen beckons you to insert your limbs into limply hanging sleeves and voids (even if the rules of the institution do not allow you to actually do so). The exhibition includes many of Nicola L.'s greatest hits: a vinyl sofa in the shape of a foot, furniture that plays on the openings and closings of the human body, an egg-shaped glass table, filled with more eggs, and a woman-shaped ironing board, topped with an iron in the shape of male genitalia.

In the introduction to the *World Goes Pop* catalogue, curator Jessica Morgan noted that, "Pop's criticality was often misconstrued as it was first developing [...] This was particularly true of women pop artists who withstood the double exclusion of the movement's almost exclusively male terrain and a rejection by other women artists for working in a mode that appeared contrary to feminism's concerns." If that exhibition was issuing a call, this exhibition responds from across the Atlantic — cementing Nicola L.'s reputation and oeuvre as thoroughly feminist (not just proto-feminist), with the feminist tendencies of her early works borne out by the explicitly feminist concerns of her later ones.

The show's layout drives this message home. On entry, the viewer is grabbed by a series from the mid-1960s sometimes called *Nine Historic Hysterical Women Collages*, but here called *Femmes Fatales* (perhaps because only four of the nine have been included). Bedsheets fixed to painted wooden boards are stenciled and collaged with different types of information, so that each comprises a portrait of a woman now remembered for facing social and political injustices — often related to their gender. Featured here are Joan of Arc, Billie Holiday, Ulrike Meinhof, and Marilyn Monroe. The tension between the modes of information that Nicola L. combines — hand-painted lyrics and poetry, alongside typewritten encyclopedic biographies and reworked photographs on crumpled bedsheets — charges these works with a political energy that skewers the historical representation of these women and their reduction to cultural icons of tragic womanhood.

Coming upon her earlier "functional art" (the corporeal furniture pieces) and "Penetrables" (the limp fabric works designed to sleeve the body) later in the show, it's easy to see the feminist ideas stirring within them. Even so, Nicola L.'s early engagement with feminism was likely not entirely conscious. This exhibition includes "Little TV Woman: I am the Last Woman Object" from 1969, a cross-legged vinyl woman pregnant with a small television set, which she described as "probably inspired by the new feminist movement," when interviewed in 2015. By fusing the female body with domestic objects, Nicola L. plays with the construction of both the social skins (that we present to others) and the interior spaces that condition female lives. She does this by deconstructing and reconstructing the female body with glee

— limbs are dismembered and entwined, a woman-shaped coffee table is dissected, as if by a magician, and a perspex suitcase is stuffed with squidgy vinyl body parts. Here, the body of woman is modular, adaptable, and capable of trickery.

But for works that play on domesticity — works that the artist describes as her “enfants terribles” — this exhibition’s treatment of them is oddly cool and institutional. Many of the pieces are backed-up against a wall, emphasizing their qualities as “art” over the “functional.” One approaches them from a distance, diminishing the chance to encounter them at a scale that relates to the body. It seems a missed opportunity to tempt the viewer to imagine inhabiting or lying against them — or perhaps even hiding behind them, as Nicola L. did, naked, with one of her vinyl foot sofas in 1967. Similarly, in photographs the “Penetrables” are shown inhabited, with bodies straining against fabric. On display here, they are limp and wrinkled, like a used condom.

Without the invitation to truly enter into their universe of subverted domesticity, these works come across as static, zapped of the freewheeling joy that shines in the exhibition’s smaller room, which contains video documentation of the 1970s performances of “The Red Coat.” The red coat is a raincoat that Nicola L. made for 11 people, conceived of as “a piece of art where everyone shares the same skin.” In the compilation shown on a small television at the SculptureCenter, the coat moves like a single organism through the streets of Brussels and Brooklyn in the 1970s, surprising passers-by and struggling to board a bus.

With her interest in skins — that one can shed, exchange, and co-inhabit — Nicola L.’s work offers new dimensions to Pop’s obsession with surface. This is another way that this exhibition responds to Jessica Morgan’s call to reappraise the criticality of Pop. Restoring artists such as Nicola L. to the movement’s history isn’t just about ensuring their presence in those histories, but is meaningful for the way they bolster our understanding of Pop’s capacity for cultural critique.

Nicola L.: Works, 1968 to the Present continues at SculptureCenter (Long Island City, New York) through December 18.