

QUEENS Chronicle

An Eclectic Presentation of Nicola L. in LIC By Neil Chiragdin — October 5, 2017



Photo by Neil Chiragdin

They hang, limp and lifeless, limbs dangling. Nothing behind their eyes — no animus to activate them — you become aware of their emptiness. Such are the wearable sculptures of Nicola L., now on display. “Nicola L.: Works, 1968 to the Present” at SculptureCenter in Long Island City reviews multimedia artist Nicola L.’s work from 1968 to the present.

When the artist’s career began, she was splitting her time between Ibiza and Paris, but by the end of the 1970s she had put down roots in New York City’s Chelsea Hotel, which she eventually went on to direct a documentary about in 2011 at a pivotal turning point in that building’s history. She seems to hold a special reverence for physicality, both of bodies and objects — the things they have in common, the shortcomings or special features of either.

Through her work, spanning the conceptual and functional, and borne out as collage, painting, installation, video, performance and, of course, sculpture, the line between the two becomes more and less blurred, depending on the piece.

The exhibition at SculptureCenter claims to be the artist’s “first institutional survey,” and offers glimpses at a huge collection of L.’s work.

One of her earliest works on display is also one of her most emblematic. “Little TV Woman: I Am the Last Woman Object” dates back to 1969, and blends the form of a woman with an entertainment center of sorts. Within the “belly” of the piece, a small television displays the same words that emanate from the sculpture’s mouth, which houses a speaker.

“I am the last woman object. You can take my lips, touch my breasts, caress my stomach, my sex. But I repeat it, it is the last time,” declares the work.

The timing of the piece and its explicit message point to L.’s influences at the time, evidencing how a growing feminist movement and larger countercultural movement trickled into her work.

“As a young female artist of the ’60s, it was all about breaking free,” wrote L. in an artist statement accompanying the show.

The exhibition includes tables that offer visitors a look at old plans and scripts for performances or sculpture pieces whose components are on display throughout the show’s main floor.

In one room, a television plays a documentary compilation of L.’s “The Red Coat: The Same Skin for Everyone,” a performative sculpture first staged at a music festival in 1970, and here shown at happenings throughout the world.

The piece shows up to ten people at a time stepping into full-bodysuits that all connect to each other within the same piece of fabric. Literally cut from the same cloth, the wearers must stand and move as one, and can be seen frolicking through festival grounds, stepping down the street and wading into the water at the beach.

This type of wearable art piece is common within L.’s work, and she has even created her own term for them: a “penetrable.” The penetrables that hang in SculptureCenter are haunting at times, appearing, without wearers, to resemble molted human skins, hollow and unfeeling. The fabrics range from natural canvas, to silver vinyl to gauzy threadbare cotton. Their sizes are occasionally overly large for any wearer, but those meant for human bodies seem to cry out to be filled. Documents from previous shows featuring penetrables are on display.

Also on display are a number of collages from different points throughout the artist’s career. The largest four feature Marilyn Monroe, Joan of Arc, Ulrike Meinhof and Billie Holiday and were created in the ’90s. Besides depicting the figures they speak of, each frame offers a perspective from the woman in question. Further text examines the social and political circumstances that lead each of these women to face injustice, and in doing so, pointedly calls into question the modern world’s sociopolitical climate — which of these injustices still stand today?