

ENTER NICOLA L.'S MYSTERIOUS FUR ROOM

With this 1960s installation on view at the Frac Bretagne, the French artist invites visitors to a collective experience freed from social norms

Ingrid Luquet-Gad, *Art Basel*, 6 February 2025



Nicola L. with the work *The Giant Foot*, 1968 © Nicola L.
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In 1970, Milan's artistic circles buzzed with anticipation over an installation at the Galerie Apollinaire that promised to challenge boundaries. Visitors attending the exhibition encountered a striking sight: a large, penetrable structure lined with violet-colored fake fur. At once enigmatic and provocative, the artwork left an indelible mark on all who experienced it.

The cubic installation, reinforced with metal for stability, stood upright at the center of the gallery. Oval openings punctured its walls, allowing glimpses of the interior, while numerous zippers hinted at the possibility of interaction – a veiled invitation to a still-mysterious communal action. This plush, immersive work was *La Chambre en fourrure* [*Fur Room*, 1969] by Nicola L.

ALISON JACQUES



Installation view of *La Chambre en fourrure* (1969) in the exhibition 'Nicola L., I am the Last Woman Object', Camden Art Centre, London, 2024. Photo: Rob Harris.

The installation was to become one of the most emblematic works of the Moroccan-born French artist's career. Speaking with the journalist Jean-Pierre Van Tieghem, she described it as 'a house made of empty figures that you can enter, envelopes of empty human bodies that you can penetrate.' What made *La Chambre en Fourrure* particularly distinctive was the element of activation. Visitors were invited to unzip the structure and wear one of the 14 purple fur garments integrated into its walls. Hanging limply, looking like protective suits, they seemed akin to characters waiting to be brought to life – characters that have been stripped of common societal markers such as gender, race, or social class.



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The work made its debut in a gallery with its own subversive history, for it was here in Milan that Nouveau Réalisme was born in 1960, as defined by the critic Pierre Restany and the artist Yves Klein. A decade later, it would be Restany once again who would coin the term 'pénétrables' to describe the interactive works Nicola L. had been developing since the late 1960s.



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By this time, the artist had relocated to New York, drawn to the city's vibrant creative scene. In America, where she would remain until her death in 2018, she encountered Pop Art and created works such as *La Femme Commode* (1969), a wooden 'furniture sculpture', and *Brown Foot Sofa* (1969), a playful vinyl-covered foam piece shaped like an oversized foot. Her collaborations with figures like Carolee Schneemann and Claes Oldenburg helped sharpen her anti-patriarchal ethos, and infuse her work with a subversive energy that balanced whimsy with eroticism.