

OBJECTIFY ME: FURNITURE, FETISH AND FEMINISM

Lou Stoppard, *Financial Times*, 4 October 2024



Nicola L.'s 'La Femme Commode' (1969) © Nicola L. Collection and Archive and Alison Jacques, London

Can I sit here? It's a question that has plagued the minds of timid gallery-goers for decades, nervous of accidentally undermining "art" by mistaking it for something else entirely. And it's one that female artists have long played with, bringing furniture and other domestic elements into the museum environment as a means of needling expectations and instincts.

Anthea Hamilton's "Leg Chair" series, which she began in 2009, is moulded on her own body, and can be viewed as a concerted effort to insert the black female body into the museum or gallery, and in turn, public space. Each chair has its own offbeat, whimsical theme: Jane Birkin, sushi nori, cigarettes, the phrase "Sorry I'm late".

Sarah Lucas began making her signature chairs in 1992, the year after her solo show *Penis Nailed to a Board* established her as a provocative and unsentimental evaluator of class and gender norms. She furnishes her chairs with cartoonish pastiches of the human body — rotund breasts, crafted from cigarettes — which nod to the lusty visuals of pop culture and tabloid journalism.

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Anthea Hamilton's 'Leg Chair (Sushi Nori)' (2012) © Anthea Hamilton and The Hepworth Wakefield Collection/Doug Atfield

In some of Lucas's works, humans and furniture seem comfortably entwined into a single being. Their posture suggests character, mood; they are proud, nervous, sullen, shamed. In others, it's as if bodies have become subsumed or swallowed. "The Old Couple", 1992, shows two chairs side by side, on the seat of one is a lone pair of dentures, on the other, a wax penis.

Nearly 30 years before, the writer and artist Kate Millett — best known for her 1970 feminist text *Sexual Politics*, which focused on the social constructs that uphold patriarchy — also created sculptures that combine bodies with furniture: beds, stools, chairs, cabinets. As with Lucas, her furniture-people are headless — no brain, no mind. The cage would later become a key motif — she once staged a performance in which a gallery audience was locked in a cage, in order to explore human behaviour during imprisonment — but these early furniture pieces also suggest incarceration: bodies being held captive by the domesticity that is meant to bring comfort and reassurance.

In a 1989 photograph, Laurie Simmons stuck a whole house — procured from a model train set — atop a pair of female legs. Like Millett's forms, the work suggests that the woman is both at one with the home and imprisoned by it. Or, as the artist put it, how a person can be "subsumed by what's around them." Birgit Jürgenssen's famous *Housewives' Kitchen Apron*, 1975, which shows a woman wearing a heavy kitchen stove on the front of her body, makes the same point with droll directness.



Kate Millett's 'Dinner for One' © Kate Millett Trust and Salon 94 Design/Dan Bradica

Together all these works connect furniture with the (often female) body to convey a variety of troublesome norms: the association between women and housework, the undervalued nature of women's work in the art world and beyond, and the general objectification of women across the arts, consumer culture and life in general. They challenge assumptions around status and hierarchy, about what we deem weighty or important in culture: is it art or is it just a chair? Can it be both?

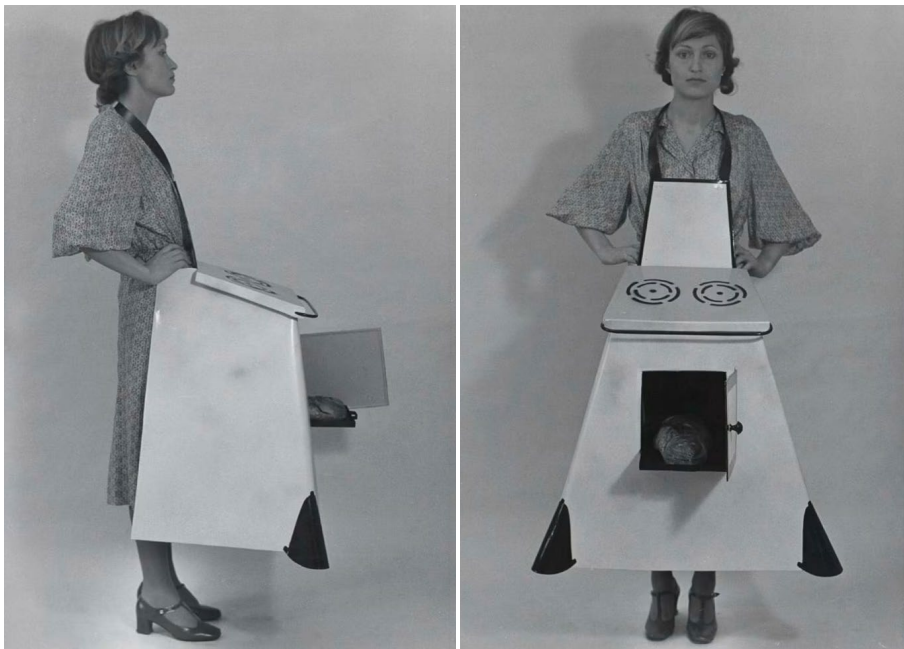
Camden Art Centre's new exhibition: Nicola L: I Am The Last Woman Object, which focuses on the work of the Morocco-born French artist, explores such questions afresh.

Born Nicole Jeannine Suzanne Leuthe in 1932 to bourgeois parents, the artist began going by Nicola as a teenager when applying to art school in order to confuse the admissions board (Nicola is a common male spelling in Europe). This taste for upsetting gender norms continued until her death in 2018, with many of her works revolving around shared skins that deliberately flatten differences. These take the form of screens, banners or even entire rooms, which people can "enter" via gloves and masks that protrude like flayed skins. Usage, and the encounters between object and human, are a central part of L.'s work.

These works — dubbed "Pénétrables" — will be on display alongside many of L.'s furniture forms from the 1960s and 1970s: lamps in the shape of lips, eyes or heads; sofas shaped like feet or crafted from torsos and limbs, the configurations of which can be arranged as if repositioning a corpse; an ironing board in the shape of a woman; "Femme Fatales" bed sheets featuring images of women who met difficult or violent ends (Joan of Arc, Eva Hesse, Marilyn Monroe).

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The show's title is a reference to L.'s 1969 sculpture "Little TV Woman: I Am the Last Woman Object": an oversized female body with a television monitor for a stomach: "You can take my lips, touch my breasts, caress my stomach, my sex. But I repeat it, it is the last time," read a note L. would leave in the drawers of one of her other pieces: a "Femme Commode", crafted as a rounded female body, with drawers opening to the eyes, mouth, breasts, stomach and vagina. The suggestion of an abrupt end to female objectification exemplifies the giddy, almost goadingly naive simplicity of concept that unites many of L.'s pieces. She saw a power in optimism and joy, and blended wit with sincerity to thumb her nose at the stuffiness and conservatism of the establishment.



Birgit Jürgenssen's 'Hausfrauen — Küchenschürze / Housewives' Kitchen Apron' (1975) © Estate Birgit Jürgenssen/Bildrecht Vienna/Pixelstorm, Vienna © Estate Birgit Jürgenssen/Bildrecht Vienna/Pixelstorm, Vienna

Together, L.'s works speak of a common female understanding — often reached unpleasantly during girlhood — of the power and unwieldiness of the body, and the unsettling sense of one's own female form being some kind of public property, something metaphorizing constantly into an object.

Much like Lucas's later, her pieces capture the troublesome sway of the body between the human and the spectacle, and the lines between a calm surface and bubbling desires or abilities. L was known among her friends for lying: according to her eldest son Christophe Lanzenberg she shifted dates "to suit her fancy" and saw the benefit of exaggeration to both storytelling and self-conceptualism ("I remember as a kid saying, 'That's not what happened, and she'd say, 'Shut up, you idiot','" he once said).

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But her tendency towards the imagined is fitting, given the themes she was exploring: the female experience is being attuned to what people actually do and what they very likely might or could. Her body-furniture sculptures speak of the potential actions of others: they are twisted, penetrated, fragmented. The critic Alan Jones (not to be confused with the artist Allen Jones, whose furniture in the shape of women's bodies has been criticised for objectification) called them 'furniture as psychological warfare'.

L.'s objects are often discussed in relation to Surrealism — which celebrates its 100th anniversary this year. Camden Art Centre's director Martin Clark links L.'s practice to the way surrealist artists explored the "violence of the 20th century" through "the body fragmented...whether it's literally the battlefields of the first world war — people being blown up and coming out without limbs — or fetish and Freud and psychoanalysis and that idea of the body, particularly women's bodies, becoming these part-objects." Many such objects revel in visual spectacle, using female body parts as decoration: see one of the most famous combinations of body and furniture — Salvador Dalí's sofa shaped like Mae West's lips.



Nicola L. at Galerie Pierre Alain, with her 'Eye Table Lamp'© Michel Lunardelli / Leemage, 2008

L. herself called Surrealism "a meeting, an anchorage, not a parentage." A crucial difference is the engagement with reality. While much Surrealist work is about emphasising the bizarre or irreconcilable — a sewing machine clashed with an umbrella — works by women artists that combine the female body with chairs or other domestic staples play on existing societal associations. Unlike the chimeras of male Surrealists, these unions are not illogical at all: in the eyes of some, a woman's place is in the home, and she herself is already a furnishing.

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In the 1970s, Dorothea Tanning, whose early work was directly influenced by the Surrealists, created her own body furniture: the “Table Tragique” and the “Rainy Day Canapé” sofa. With their warped forms, and vaguely monstrous mounds and undulations, they use the female body to unsettle, as well as entice, and can be read as a retort of sorts to the pure sensual appeal of Dali’s sofa.



Green Head Sofa, 1992 Courtesy: Nicola L. Collection and Archive and Alison Jacques, London

Some have associated L.’s work with that of feminist artist Niki de Saint Phalle, who also probed society hierarchies, and created various seats and sculptures in the shape of women. But L. rejected the association, and also claimed that de Saint Phalle had blocked her from working with a buzzy gallerist in the 70s.



Green Head Sofa, 1992 Courtesy: Nicola L. Collection and Archive and Alison Jacques, London

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L. tended to exist at the peripheries of movements, her son acknowledges: she was not a Surrealist, not a pop artist, and she could be ambivalent about some aspects of the women's movement: "she was not an active feminist" he has said.



Red Lip Lamp, 1969, Courtesy: Nicola L. Collection and Archive and Alison Jacques, London

As a student, she rubbed shoulders with Yves Klein and the Nouveau Realists, but she was never a true part of the group, and dismissed them as "machos, much more likely to look at my legs than my canvases."



Little TV Woman: I Am the last Woman Object, 1969, Courtesy: Nicola L. Collection and Archive and Alison Jacques, London

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Camden's director, Clark hopes the new display will raise L.'s profile as a "serious" artist, rather than a maker of fun usable design objects, as some see her. Across the exhibition, usage is out, touching forbidden. The "Pénétrables" shall not be penetrated: when not inflated by a person their limbs hang limp, recalling the slump of a chastised teenager. No drawers can be opened, no sofas sat on. This contrasts with the works' original intentions, and L.'s rejection of a commonly-accepted hierarchy within the art world which equates usage with a supposedly lesser visual output: design. "I refused to create sculptures that were not going to be used for something. I did not want to make decor," she wrote.



Dorothea Tanning's 'Table Tragique (Tragic Table)' (1970-73) © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2024

L.'s gallerist Alison Jacques explains that the strategy is to reposition the work from "furniture" to "functional sculptures." Partly, this is pragmatic — essential to their preservation and potential price — and yet it also proves the hardness of the very codes that L. was addressing in the first place. That the objects' furniture-like forms have rendered the artist, in the minds of some, less serious, because of the association with the domestic, fulfils their original aims: to rib hierarchies and to question the perception of women and their work.

To those who have lived with L.'s pieces, the formality of their display in art spaces has always been amusing. L.'s son, Lanzenberg, recalls how as a teenager, he used to keep his dirty dishes in the titular "Little TV Woman" cabinet, for his mother to clear up later.

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Omar Sosa, co-founder of interiors magazine *Apartamento*, and one of the editors of a 2023 book on L. recalls becoming aware of her work in 2012 when he dispatched a photographer to shoot design doyen Jim Walrod's apartment. When the pictures came back Sosa was struck by "a horrible orange woman-shaped cabinet that I thought was one of the ugliest objects I've seen in my life." He found the image — Walrod fiddling with knobs on the breasts — disturbing. But to him it summed up something integral — the quest to surround oneself with objects that challenge, and to think carefully about the politics of interiors — so he made it the magazine's cover.

When Walrod died in 2017, Sosa bought the cabinet at auction. He enjoys the unsettling presence it has in his homes. "I use it," he says. "That's the point." He stores his passport in one of the breasts. "Right now, my girlfriend has put condoms in the mouth," he says. People's interactions with the sculptures can be seen as essential to the artwork.

Sosa imagines that some visitors to the Camden show may well try to touch the work, confused or ambivalent about their new static guise, to the frustration of museum invigilators. "She'd love that," he says of L. "She didn't like rules."

'Nicola L. I Am The Last Woman Object' is at the Camden Art Centre, London until December 29; camdenartcentre.org