

MATERIAL GIRL

Amy Sherlock, *World of Interiors*, November 2024



Nicola L., 'Little TV Woman: 'I Am the Last Woman Object'', 1969 © Nicola L. Collection and Archive and Alison Jacques, London

It's been half a century since Nicola L.'s art was first shown at Camden Art Centre, but her playfully, politically pop work feels as fresh as ever. In 1974, her *La Chambre en Fourrure* (1969) was included in a group exhibition; this October, the institution will host her first major European show.

A free-standing room into whose purple fur walls visitors can insert themselves by means of stitched-in bodysuits, this work caught the mood of the swinging decade's participatory art 'envi-ronments, from the fun-house chambers of the Stedelijk Museum's 1962 *Dylaby* show, to Andy Warhol's drifting *Silver Clouds* (1966), and Yayoi Kusama's first Infinity *Mirror Room* (1965). It also tingles with a summer-of-love erotic static – heir, with its Venus in Furs overtones and raw-dry boudoir sensuality, co the sexy-surreal of Meret Oppenheim's famous follicled teacup.

Born in colonial Morocco, trained in Paris and based there, in Ibiza and in New York – where she lived for many decades at the legendary Chelsea Hotel – Nicola valued freedom in all its forms. *La Chambre* is the largest in a long-standing series of inhabitable works made between the mid-1960s and her death in 2018. The critic Pierre Restany, on whom the works' latent eroticism was not lost, called them *pénétrables*. Many, including a remake of *La Chambre*, will be on show in

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the gallery. The origin of these pieces is intensely personal, first conceived to commune with a lost friend, but their steel was tempered in the political heat of late-1960s New York. Free love, civil rights and antiwar protest coalesce in these skins-in-common, which express a humanity that transcends visible difference. (And, in their shedable nature, evoke the napalm-flayed victims of the Vietnam War.)

'I have an obsession about the human body, Nicola told a reviewer from the *New York Times* in 1973. Her best-known works are her body/objects: eye lamps, head planters, foot and hand sofas, and wardrobe women (*femmes commodes*: a play on the double sense of commode as cabine? and also 'comfortable' and 'convenient' *easy women*). The Camden show takes title from a 1969 work, 'Little TV Woman: I Am the Last Woman Object', a vinyl woman-cabinet with yogic legs and TV screen on a belly. It is a comment, of course, on the object status of the female form and the way women are often ventriloquised. But it's witty rather than chastising. You open the top set of drawers using the nipples and the bottom ones via the pudenda; it makes prigs or perverts of us all.

It was also well used, having lived for many years in the bedroom of Nicola's teenage son, where it was desired above all for its TV screen and its capacity for storing dirty plates. Likewise the *femme commode* that stood sentinel in the living room of her apartment at the Chelsea Hotel, and the large white foot sofa on her Ibiza terrace. Nicola was not afraid of function, nor of her artworks being trivialised as mere 'design'. (Her former husband, Alfred 'Fred' Lanzberg, who was instrumental in the realisation of many of Nicola's pieces was, after all, the nephew of design doyen Henri Samuel.)

There is something irresistibly direct about Nicola's output that - to me - makes it more compelling than much overtly 'political work' being made today. But then, as a curator of the artist's pieces put it as early as the 1970s: It's a fact that many trips, today, are no longer the adventures they once were. Whose fault is that?