

Kunsthalle Wien
Museumsquartier

EN

Nicola L.
27.6.-14.9.2025

From the early 1960s, the French artist Nicola L. (b. 1932, El Jadida, as Nicole Jeannine Suzanne Leuthe; d. 2018, Los Angeles) produced an important body of work addressing diverse subjects from sexuality, activism and political resistance to environmental concerns, cosmology and spirituality. Various celebrated in relation to pop art, nouveau réalisme, the applied arts and design, her expansive practice defies categorisation, spanning multiple disciplines and encompassing sculpture, performance, painting, drawing, collage and film.

This exhibition brings together works produced over a fifty-year period (1964 to 2014), on loan from public and private collections in Europe and the United States of America. *Nicola L.* is organised in collaboration with Camden Art Centre, London; Frac Bretagne, Rennes and Museion – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Bolzano/Bozen. It is the first survey of her work in Europe and the first monographic exhibition devoted to her work in Austria.

Pénétrables

The first work in the exhibition belongs to an iconic series of fabric sculptures by Nicola L. that became known as *pénétrables*. These large-scale textile works sewn with heads, sleeves, gloves and occasionally trouser legs can be seen as skins or performative 'paintings' with apertures for a body to inhabit. While many of these works are designed to host one or several human bodies, *Atmosphere* (2005, suspended from the brick ceiling at the entrance to the exhibition) is one of a number of giant *pénétrables*. Together with *Sun & Moon Giant Pénétrables* (ca. 1996, displayed on the first wall inside the gallery), these works can be seen to invoke the elements and celestial bodies. Other *pénétrables* were scaled for human bodies to be inserted into, thus forming one entity united by the same 'skin'. The artist explains:

'When a PENETRABLE LANDSCAPE is made to fit a body (yours or mine), then the body can inhabit it and brings the empty skin to life. If the PENETRABLE is on a different scale to the human body (either infinitely smaller or much bigger) then the penetration is only visual. While the small ones challenge our perception of inside/out, the larger ones take on the divine qualities of gods.'

Lamps & Furniture

From the late 1960s, Nicola L. produced a series of lamps and sculptural works that draw directly on the form and utility of furniture and interior décor. A series of lamps in the exhibition describe giant eyes and lips. Elsewhere dismembered bodies, a giant head and a number of enormous feet supply the form for a series of 'sofas'. First exhibited in 1969, Nicola L.'s foot sofas were made in various colours (brown, orange, yellow, green, black and white) and populated her own apartment in New York's Chelsea Hotel, exemplifying the way in which she connected art and life. Like the eye lamps, they were produced as multiples, blurring the boundary between the work of art and the mass-produced design object. The bold colour palette, use of modern, synthetic materials such as vinyl and other plastics and the playful approach to fragmenting and enlarging bodies also connects these works to surrealism and pop art, while her wry take on female sexuality and domestic labour (particularly in works such as *Woman Ironing Table #1*, 2005) have drawn associations with feminist art.

Two giant heads, *Fire* (1992) and *The Library Head* (1994/2013) respectively provide candlelight or shelving while a series of lacquered wooden cabinets are equipped with drawers. These *Femmes Commodes* exemplify Nicola L.'s playful yet confrontational approach to challenging the objectification of women's bodies with the suggestive placement of drawers and knobs. Similarly, the sculpture *Little TV Woman* (1970–71) displays and recites a poem (read in French by Nicola L.). The text on screen addresses the viewer with a gentle yet determined resistance:

'I am the last woman object
You can take my lips
Touch my breasts
My Stomach
My Sex
But I repeat it, it is the last time.'

Banners & Activism

Activism is a recurrent theme in the practice of Nicola L. Various films and two-dimensional works pay tribute to female activists or figures of resistance from different periods in history while her performances often resembled urban protest or a form of collective political action. *Same Skin for Everybody* (1975) and *We Want to Breathe* (1975) belong to a series of *pénétrables* that take the form of banners, displaying text across a ribbon of canvas with wooden handles at either end. 'Same skin for everybody' was Nicola L.'s mantra for her utopian idea of making a shared body, regardless of class, ethnic background, gender or other factors that all too often result in social exclusion. It was manifested in many of her *pénétrables* that took the form of coats and capes designed to be worn by several individuals. The text was also written on violet gloves that were distributed to the audience during the performance with the *Red Coat* at the Isle of Wight festival in 1970 (documented in the film *The Red Coat For 11 People 70-09*, 2009).

Moving between Paris and New York in 1968, Nicola L. participated in protests against the Vietnam War in both cities. Her anti-war stance – articulated in works such as *We Don't Want War* (ca. 1974/1995) – can be seen to be grounded in her early life and experiences during the Second World War. She later recorded her childhood memories of bandaged refugees returning from the Spanish Civil War (in 1937–38) and her own family fleeing Sedan, France, following the National Socialist invasion in 1939.

La Chambre en Fourrure [Fur Room]

La Chambre en Fourrure (1970/2020), also known by its English title *Fur Room*, is one of Nicola L.'s largest *pénétrable* installations. Speaking in 1970, she described it as a 'house made up of empty figures that you can enter, envelopes of empty human bodies that you can penetrate'. When viewed from outside, these 'envelopes' for the body appear like a series of hazmat suits and masks. From the inside, the plush purple bodies arranged around the perimeter with two bodies in the centre of the floor evoke a secret, ceremonial circle. Participants are invited to penetrate the walls and thus become a part of the work. In Nicola L.'s words, 'a person enters an empty body with their flesh.' Once inside this second skin, they are exposed to interaction from people on the other side of the partition – a playful and subversive allusion to anonymous sex acts or BDSM subculture while also representing a more naïve or utopian evocation of 'free love', unity and community.

The body cut in pieces

Géant coupé en morceaux [Giant cut in pieces] (1970), Canapé Homme Géant [Giant man sofa] (1970/2013) Géant coupé en 6 morceaux [Giant cut into 6 pieces] (1973) and Woman Cut in Pieces (1968) variously represent male and female bodies as an assemblage of parts. This motif in Nicola L.'s work adopts a modernist trope, familiar from cubism and surrealism; a conscious reminder of the traumatic legacy of two world wars. On a more personal level, it speaks to the artist's fascination with horror and crime fictions, particularly Alfred Hitchcock's films *Psycho* and *Rear Window* and 'The allusion of a body cut in pieces in the film ...' The violence implicit in these works was something that she remarked upon after taking the sculpture Woman Cut in Pieces through customs at the France-Spain border, recalling how the police 'took a knife and started to open the body' in order to search for drugs.

Snails and Heads

'The contour-profile – always the same – of a giant head started being my obsession in 1986. It came after a drama in my life (probably the only positive thing about crises is that they make you come out of yourself) ... The Snail came recently, maybe two years ago, slowly, almost stealthily.'

In the work of Nicola L., the body can be seen as a vessel or host, something that we occupy, inhabit or drag around like the shell on a snail. This spiral motif can be associated with both ornament and nature; it represents infinity, repetition and renewal. In Nicola L.'s work, it is recurrent from the 1970s, and for the artist was intrinsically connected to her use of the head, invariably pictured in profile and often at a monumental scale: 'The snail exists inside the head, they talk to each other as in a duo-duel.' Yet the heads embodied a certain hermeticism that Nicola L. enacted with symbolic offerings – heads with flames inside, or vegetal fragments collected from the forest. The outline of the face is a cartography of sorts, and for her it 'became the coastline of the map of an imaginary country'.

Femmes Fatales

This series comprises nine works made on bed sheets incorporating portraits of Joan of Arc, Madame Bovary, Cleopatra, Eva Hesse, Billie Holiday, Frida Kahlo, Mona Lisa, Ulrike Meinhof and Marilyn Monroe; women whose (real or fictional) lives bear tragic associations. The three works displayed here represent Madame Bovary, a character from a 1856 novel by Gustave

Flaubert; Ulrike Meinhof, a left-wing militant and founder of the Red Army Faction and the artist Eva Hesse. Nicola L. wrote in a notebook:

'My Femmes Fatales are only fatal to themselves and to their own destiny. Carried by their passion, the course of their lives rapidly goes toward the extreme, toward death, which they themselves cause or which is inflicted upon them ... Each of them is represented in her sheet – shroud. Isn't the sheet the tie between Love – Birth – and Death?'

Films

A film programme presented in the studio on level -1 presents Nicola L.'s moving image works in three programmes that are played in a continuous loop. From 1977 Nicola L. released a series of narrative, documentary and experimental films which are influenced by the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Often shot intuitively, they explore themes that characterise her work, such as equality, collectivity and activism. Films such as Blue Coat (2002–2008) document activations of her *pénétrables* over the years, while other films, such as Bad Brains 1980 CBGB's (1980), Abbie, Orphan of America (1981), New Yorkers with a French Accent (2010) or Doors Ajar at the Chelsea Hotel (2014), represent her engagement with political, art-historical or subcultural subjects.

Biography

Nicola L. (b. 1932, El Jadida, as Nicole Jeannine Suzanne Leuthe; d. 2018, Los Angeles) held solo exhibitions at the Sculpture Center, New York (2017); Frost Art Museum, Florida International University, Miami; MHKA, Antwerp; MAMAC, Nice; Le Magasin, Grenoble (all 1986) and Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Ibiza (1976). Her work has also been presented within group surveys at Museum Brandhorst, Munich (2022); Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Nice (2021); Tate Modern, London (2015); Liverpool Biennial (2014); Centre Pompidou, Paris; Secession, Vienna (both 2009) and Musée d'Ixelles, Brussels (1975). She lived and worked in Paris, and periodically in Brussels and Ibiza. Nicola L.'s work is held in public collections including Centre Pompidou, Paris; Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York; Design Museum Brussels; Frac Bretagne, Rennes; Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow; MHKA, Antwerp; MAMCO Genève and Museion – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Bolzano/Bozen.

Exhibition Publication

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated monograph with new texts in English, French, Italian and German by Gina Buenfeld-Murley, Martin Clark, Géraldine Gourbe, Leonie Radine and Arese Uwuoruya. *Nicola L.: I Am The Last Woman Object* is available from the Kunsthalle Wien store for € 40.

Public Programme

- 26.6. 19:00 ... Opening (DE/EN/ÖGS)
- 28.6. 17:00 ... Curator's Tour with Anna Marckwald (EN)
- 10.7., 14.8., 28.8., 11.9.
↳ 17:30 ... Guided Tours (DE)
- 24.7. 17:30 ... Guided Tour (EN)
- 9.9. 18:00 ... Talk by Lisa Ortner-Kreil:
Nicola L. meets Kiki Kogelnik (DE)
- 13.9. 17:00 ... Curator's Tour with Anna Marckwald (DE)

The full programme details for the exhibition are available online:



All works are Courtesy of Nicola L. Collection and Archive and Alison Jacques unless stated otherwise. We are grateful to Alison Jacques; Christophe and David Lanzenberg, Nicola L. Collection and Archive; the Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody; the Collection of Donald Porteous; Design Museum Brussels; Galerie Pierre-Alain Challier, Paris; Museion – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Bolzano/Bozen and XXO Collection for generously lending works for this exhibition.

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