

Art in America

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NICOLA L.'S BODY LANGUAGE

A sculptor, furniture designer, filmmaker and performance artist who also makes collages and paintings, Nicola L. has, for four decades, brought an anthropomorphic inflection to every medium she employs.

BY GARY INDIANA



AN OVAL TABLE on a metal stand, rows of hollowed eggs on a shelf beneath its transparent surface. A "female" ironing board available in onyx or marble, a cock-and-balls shaped iron. A snail shell of metal rods, like a miniature Ferris wheel, as home for a parrot or mynah bird. Words and images clipped from newspapers, pasted to pilfered hotel bedsheets. A canvas festooned with broken eggs and pictures of little fetuses. These are among recent works by Nicola L., a French-born artist raised in Morocco, Germany and France and long resident in New York who is best known for the functional anthropomorphic objects that she began making in the late 1960s.

Since first exhibiting a giant red vinyl foot at Daniel Templon Gallery in Paris in 1969, Nicola L. has made human-shaped sofas, torso chaises, "femmes commodes," and an androgynous, eyeless human profile that adorns pillows, and crowns standing lamps. She translates into furniture the idea of the body as our instrument for being in the

world—the whole a package we present to one another; the head a structure we store things in. Her sculptures evoke an organic connectedness between our selves and the rest of nature while lampooning the social roles we play. There are heads you can sit on, heads you can use for bookcases, heads that double as fountains, aquariums and planters, and giant eyes and lips that light up. Woman-shaped presences have eyes, mouths, breasts, stomachs and vulvas that open as drawers, soft plastic bodies are "pregnant" with television sets, abstracted male figures function as liquor cabinets.

Working with a limited repertoire of forms for four decades, the artist has brought her vocabulary to a high level of sophistication via nuances of scale and the use of new materials, and added to it when, rarely, an archetypal shape insisted on assimilation, such as the snail's carapace. An instantly recognizable image, it can be flattened into a thin metal sheet, a drawing or an expanse of wool, or expanded in volume into an operatic

Nicola L.: *The Banquet of the Beheaded*, performance at La MaMa, New York, 1999. Collage photos by Emanuela Gardner.

entity; it is a sign whose intrinsic meaning is concealment.

Declamatory, impish, sexually suggestive, ebullient and disconcerting, Nicola L.'s is a tactile art that invites repose and reflection, sociability and meditation, and leaves as an after-imprint a belated sense of its incongruity. Her constructions have a primal, pared-down esthetic that reflects a whimsical sense of the world as an ensemble of repetitions and variations of our habits and habitations, an esthetic that goes against the grain of art-for-its-own-sake's anxiety-making practices. Her *politique* is generative, a feminist-inflected transmutation of the typical that thrives on exaggeration and absurdity.

I'm not much drawn to categorical distinctions between an artist's functional work and what hangs on walls or rests on pedestals. Usable or otherwise, Nicola L.'s objects sug-

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gest secret lives of their own while presenting human forms as generic vessels, abstracted, communalized. If all are shaped by a cohesive sensibility, some filament or magnetic field connects them. If you can serve dinner on a face, perhaps with a collage you ingest the same idea using different sensory equipment. Like her Plexiglas constructions, Nicola L.'s paintings and collages echo elemental nature in their colors, which are those of fire, sunlight, forest, ocean, night and earth. The heads in the collage works are literally stuffed with language, with contradictory commands and pronouncements, words and phrases reflecting the violent, clashing messages we receive from a world so replete with insistent information that the mind becomes numb and hypertrophic.

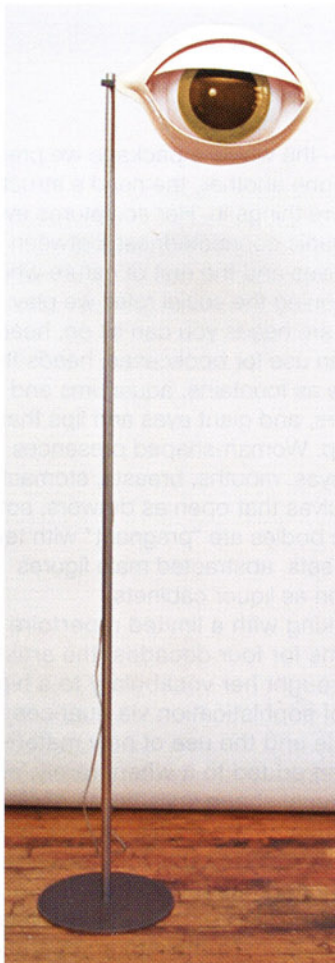
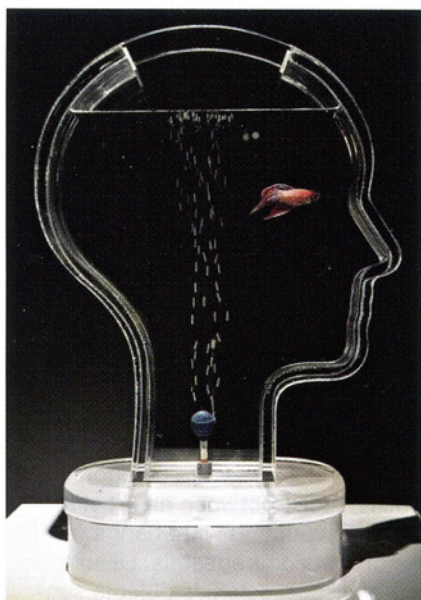
In 1964, her painting evolved into what became known as "Penetrables," painted rectangles of canvas with stitched extremities and head-shaped pouches protruding from their surfaces. As hanging objects, they resemble eerily vacated human skins,

abandoned costumes, ashen ghosts. They can also be worn, inhabited, animated; to slip into one is to acquire the strange freedom of disguise—to assume a second skin that might release its occupant from an inhibiting, habitual repertoire of movements, or induce a liberating clumsiness or a womblike repose. Larger "Penetrables" propose the idea of "the same skin for everybody." Nicola L. has constructed, for example, a "fur-lined room" in which up to 15 people can be conjoined by inserting themselves into the hollows of a continuous expanse of fabric, thus becoming the room itself.

A single skin for many people has been the animating principle of most of Nicola L.'s performance work. Like her sofas of piled-up limbs and torsos, it has a long history. In 1970, while living in Ibiza, she was invited to a Brazilian music festival on the Isle of Wight. She made a communal coat of red vinyl for 11 people, as protection from cold and rain; packing it in a big metal suitcase, she set off for England.

It didn't rain. In fact it was rather hot on the Isle of Wight. Nicola and friends were naked inside the "same skin"; they were invited onstage. She reports in an artist's statement of 2008, "the heat inside the coat becomes unbearable. . . . I end up getting sick and have to leave the Coat before the end of the performance. The crowd is delighted, thinking it is part of the show." The artist's account sheds light on an increasingly distant moment when everything seemed possible. "The festival ends. We all leave in different directions. We don't know at that moment that it is the last big rock festival of its kind. The end of a certain dream of a non-materialistic life, of a desire for freedom of existence, of love, of sex, and of all sorts of experiments, the end of the sixties. . . ."

For a time, Nicola L. unpacked her suitcase on the streets of London, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, Barcelona and New York, encouraging passersby to enter a common skin, often succeeding. The Red Coat made an appearance in 1973 at the 12th Annual Avant Garde Festival in Brooklyn, and scattered presentations in European museums and galleries followed. Finally, in 1979, Nicola L.





moved to New York and retired the coat to its metal valise.

From the mid-1970s into the early 1980s, her object-making and performance work were largely preempted by filmmaking. An uncompleted film shot in Ibiza in 1977, *The Heads are Still on the Island*, was followed by a sequence of documentaries: *Eva Forest* (1979), an hour-long portrait of a Spanish woman jailed under Franco for her work in the Basque underground; *Bad Brains* (1980), a 20-minute film, shot at CBGB, of the eponymous punk-reggae band; and *My Name Is Abbie . . . Orphan of America* (1981), a 30-minute interview with Abbie Hoffman. The films articulate an idealism unreconciled to

the dark subsequent history that has obscured and all but eradicated the social experimentation of the '60s, though they were made in full awareness that a curtain had fallen. The optimism of Nicola L.'s work is the kernel of a utopianism that persists, as Ernst Bloch has argued, in dreams and wishes, against the inexorable reduction of human life to the mechanized and the statistical—against the monadic pursuit of self-interest. The communitarian thread that runs through her work might be dismissed as nostalgia for a vanished time, but nostalgia is not really its source or intention. Playfulness and a delight in the uncanny return to us every night when we go to sleep; Nicola L.'s work



Above left, *Red Coat* street performance, Amsterdam, 1970.

Above right, *Red Coat* performance at La Galerie Favardin & du Verneuil, Paris, 2008.

manifests the infinite pliability that connects us all in dreams.

During the early 1980s, Nicola L. tried to raise money for a feature film, *The Movement*, a chronicle of the Left and its haunting afterlife in the '70s. In this difficult period, she made music videos for the Bad Brains, revived the Red Coat for a film by Fernando Arrabal, and, in 1995, directed a 20-minute, 16mm film, *Sand Sea Sky*, recording a "tribal gathering" on a beach at night, with music, torches and bodies in joyous motion. This brief film is a poem about our connection to nature and to each other, as well as the pathos and trauma of our individuation; about music that connects through the millennia to the pulses in our blood, which existed even before we crawled out of the ocean; about the primeval world from which we've been forever banished.

Sand Sea Sky marks the close of a strategy, and a return to object making and performance. Nicola L.'s new work has taken the form of homage to cinema and its innovators, to famous women in history and to artists whose lives and works have deeply affected her. At a 1999 performance at Lara Vincy gallery in Paris, the Red Coat reappeared as *An Ephemeral Monument for Ten Artists*: Pino Pascali, Piero Manzoni, Yves Klein,



Opposite, left to right: *Fishtank*, 2005, Plexiglas and aquarium filter, 20 inches high.

Eye Lamp, 1969, Plexiglas, metal and mixed mediums, approx. 6 feet high.

The Woman Chest Safe, 1969/2004, steel, 71 inches high.

Left, *Little Penetrable "Forest,"* 2000, mixed mediums, two panels, each 14 by 10 inches.

Gina Pane, Marcel Broodthaers, Meret Oppenheim, Robert Filiou, Alberto Greco, Joseph Beuys and Copi.

Generally unabrasive and bemusing, Nicola L. usually avoids the assaultive extreme of seduction where Bataille locates the beginning of horror. There are exceptions. In certain of her performance works—for example, *The Banquet of the Beheaded* (1999) at La MaMa theater in New York, featuring “decapitated” historical figures who are served both as guests and as the meal—the frisson of the ghostly haunts the ceremonial.

More characteristic is the Blue Cape, a sky-colored penetrable canopy that she introduced for such manifestations as *The Blue Cape of Cinema* on the Lido in Venice (2003) and the *Blue Cape of Human Rights* at the European Parliament in Brussels (2008). In Venice, the cape’s inhabitants wore masks bearing the names of films, actors and directors; in Brussels they carried political banners. In Havana, in 2002, the Contemporary Ballet of Cuba choreographed a stunning performance inside the cape at the Plaza de Armas. In 2005, Chinese artists filled the cape and improvised a spontaneous, distinctly unmilitary march along the Great Wall.

Nicola L.’s recent painting/col-lages and sculptural objects continue the theme of homage, or elegy. The “Ceramic Cinema Plates” (2007) feature varicolored profiles inscribed with the names of film directors; a series of paintings on canvas or bed linen,

begun in 1997 as “femmes fatales,” evolved into “Nine Historic Hysterical Women Collages”—Jeanne d’Arc, Cleopatra, Mona Lisa, Billie Holiday, Marilyn Monroe, Frida Kahlo, Eva Hesse, Madame Bovary and Ulrike Meinhof. These figures have also been incarnated in a Black Cape, which has travelled from La MaMa to the Musée d’Art Moderne et d’Art Contemporain de Nice in 1997 and the Galerie Patricia Dorfmann in Paris in 2006.

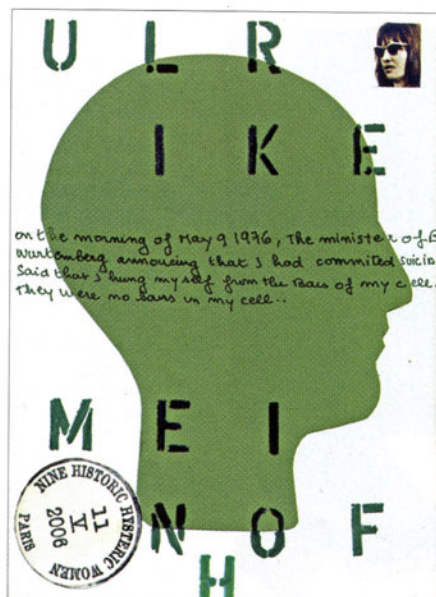
Nicola L.’s projects seem never to become dated or passé. Perhaps the calm progression of her work and the long, deliberative refinement of her preoccupations situate her art outside the frenzied quest for renown and the desperate needs of the marketplace. And perhaps its appeal is precisely its discreet yet persistent signaling to us from a deliberately ambiguous territory. “This woman who resembles no one, not even herself,” Pierre Restany wrote of Nicola L. in 1968, “restores the skin’s sensuality before our very eyes. It’s not true that appearances are deceiving: they’re the skin of things . . . you have to penetrate them to experience them, and life is no more than that.”

Restany was simply prefiguring the activity of an artist who has, in the ensuing decades, rubbed



Blue Cape performance at the Great Wall, Beijing, 2005. All photos this article courtesy the artist.

away the differences between functional and conceptual art, performance and sculpture, “the skin of things” and their psychological reverberations. A feminist utopian who has slipped in and out of conventional positions, she has made work that has assumed the matter-of-fact demeanor of domestic paraphernalia and the drama of street theater. A literal and metaphoric travelogue, it is marked throughout by spontaneous reinvention of the ordinary and effusions of the unpredictable. ○



Far left, view of the installation “Nine Historic Hysterical Women,” 2006; at Galerie Patricia Dorfmann, Paris.

Left, *Ulrike Meinhof*, from the series “Nine Historic Hysterical Women Collages,” 2006, mixed mediums on paper, 8½ by 11 inches.

An exhibition of Nicola L.’s work, “Body by Nature,” curated by Corey Barr, will be on view at Twentyfirst/ Twentyfirst, New York, Apr. 16-May 17.

GARY INDIANA’s seventh novel, *The Shanghai Gesture*, will be published this month by Two-Dollar Radio.