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NEWS

Pop Artist Nicola L Wants Us to Wear Her Skin and Younger Artists Are Into It



Nicola L's "Library Head," 1994 (courtesy the Sculpture Center and the estate of Nicola L).

Nicola L was making art around the same time as other household pop art names like Andy Warhol. But while Warhol has a huge exhibition at the Whitney right now (with a [sick gift shop](#)), Nicola L didn't get her first major retrospective until last year.

Nicola L is retired and lives in California now, but there's a new exhibition of her work opening tomorrow at Arsenal Contemporary at 214 Bowery. The show, called

CHÈRE, will feature several of the artist's "furniture-sculpture amalgams" — sculptures that work as furniture and look like people. *Library Head*, for example, resembles a human head in profile, and also has bookshelves.

"I don't like to think of her as a forgotten artist," said Loreta Lamargese, the gallery director, noting that Nicola L's work has influenced artists for decades.

"Not a lot of female pop artists got their due—and there were a lot working in the '70s," she said.

The work of three newer artists — Nadia Belerique, Ambera Wellmann, and Chloe Wise— will appear beside Nicola L's. Their pieces pick up on the themes Nicola L spent her career exploring, like objectification, sexuality, and personhood. Toronto-based artist Nadia Belerique's installations look like tall coffee tables, with flowers and other things on top; viewers can look up at the objects through scanner-like translucent surfaces. The *Toronto Star* said in 2016 that Belerique's installations work "strange magic: of freighting cool objecthood with the weight of emotional intelligence." Ambera Wellman, who won the 2017 RBC Canadian Painting Competition, will have her wet, plastic-looking paintings on display. "Her work looks like an object and a person and both at once," Lamargese said.

Some pieces engage with the artist's work more literally. Wise has been described by *New York* magazine as "a kind of 'It' girl, part of a group of mostly female artists who are taking the concept of downtown scenester to a larger audience, mainly through social media." One of her works features a model posing with a foot-shaped couch Nicola L made.

The newer artists demonstrate "what pop would look like in 2018," Lamargese said. Several of their works have a digital quality that points to the ways humans are objectified now that didn't exist in the '70s (think selfies).



Nicola L's "La Femme Commode," 1994/2013 (courtesy the estate of Nicola L).

One of Nicola L's most famous works is *Red Coat*; it's designed to be worn by multiple people at once, who then give a kind of performance, moving around in the coat in a public space with live music. "*Red Coat* invites the desire to share a collective skin," notes the Tate Modern, where the work is exhibited.

"Nicola was interested in the world as a shared skin, and that shared skin had a utopian potential to bring us together as one group of people," Lamargese said. The new exhibition echoes that idea of

communion, she said, by bringing Nicola L's work into conversation with other artists.

But the retired artist's work calls out her peers, too. Pop art's concerns with commodification, the body, and human versus object make it a natural realm for artists to explore feminine experiences, but the movement's most prominent figures are men. Nicola L's work illuminates the violence embedded in other (male) artists' work, Lamargese said.

"Nicola's work was undercutting the violent current and also speaking directly to it."

Are we human, or are we dancer? Ponder it in good company tomorrow through January 13 at *CHÈRE*.