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**Author(s)**

Elisabetta Garletti

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**About the author(s)**

is a PhD candidate in the Department of History of Art at the University of Cambridge.

# The skin of things

by Elisabetta Garletti • 28.06.2022

‘Skin is the place where one touches and is touched by others; it is both the most intimate of experiences and the most public marker of raced, sexed and national histories’.<sup>1</sup> In the preface to Sarah Ahmed and Jackie Stacey’s edited volume *Thinking through the Skin*, the body’s largest organ is described as simultaneously private and public, as an inescapable marker of difference, but also as a site of connectedness. Such an understanding of skin as a political terrain resonates across the eclectic, sensuous and playful body of work by Nicola L. (1932–2018) on display at Alison Jacques, London. Spanning fifty years of the French-Moroccan artist’s career, it is the first solo exhibition of Nicola L.’s work in the United Kingdom and anticipates a major survey at Camden Art Centre, London, in 2024. The exhibition joins a series of recent initiatives – such as the 2015–16 Tate Modern, London, group show *The World Goes Pop* and the artist’s institutional survey at SculptureCentre, New York, in 2017 – that have drawn attention to the practice of a significant twentieth-century figure who, like many of her female contemporaries, had fallen through the cracks of art history.<sup>2</sup>

Nicola L. came to prominence in the 1960s, working in Paris, New York and Ibiza, and maintained a tangential relationship to the male-dominated currents of Nouveau Réalisme and Pop art. Aside from her gender, her resistance to reductive stylistic labels resulted in her being side-lined from dominant historical accounts of such movements. The exhibition at Alison Jacques evidences the heterogeneous and provocative nature of Nicola L.’s practice, drawing together emblematic pieces that encapsulate her key motifs – including the materiality of the body as a site of socio-cultural transformation. Inflected by the radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s, the Civil Rights and Women’s Liberation Movements, Nicola L.’s artistic vocabulary centres on the human form. It captures the optimistic utopianism of a bygone era, while maintaining a contemporary relevance in the current political climate, primarily marked by identity politics.



Fig. 1 *Planet Heads #3*, by Nicola L. 1990. Oil, paper and collage on canvas, 124.5 by 94 by 4 cm. (© Nicola L. Collection and Archive; courtesy Alison Jacques, London; photograph Michael Brzezinski; exh. Alison Jacques, London).

Across sculpture, textiles and painting, Nicola L.'s work often involves the simplification of the human body into essential, universal shapes. Her *Planet Heads* [Fig.1](#), for example, are colour-block paintings of rudimentary heads, which stand in as universal signifiers of humanity, rather than as identifiable markers of singularity. At times accompanied by collaged elements and references to the natural environment, these humanist paintings celebrate the mind as a creative force and as the site of connection between the individual and their surrounding ecosystem. Among the latest of Nicola L.'s works on display, these paintings testify to the longstanding centrality that the human form has played in the artist's iconography, which is emphasised here by the positioning of the head motif at both the beginning and the end of the exhibition. In the gallery entrance hall, viewers are welcomed by *The Library Head*, a white, wooden bookshelf in the shape of a stylised human head [Fig.2](#). The understated display of this work, which goes almost unnoticed against the white walls, reflects Nicola L.'s utilitarian approach to sculpture. She famously declared that she 'refused to create sculptures that were not going to be used for something' and designed anthropomorphic pieces of furniture that were intended to be experienced in everyday settings, some of which decorated her own apartment at the Chelsea Hotel, New York, where she lived from 1989 until her death.<sup>3</sup>

More of these functional objects take centre stage in the first room of the exhibition, such as the iconic *White Foot Sofa* [Fig.3](#), a large, vinyl, foot-shaped sculpture as long as the artist, and *Gold*

*Femme Commode* FIG.4, a curvaceous woman-shaped cabinet with suggestive drawers in the place of eyes, mouth, breasts, stomach and vulva. Existing somewhere between sculpture and design, these works speak to the concerns of everyday objects and consumer culture that are so prevalent in Pop art. However, they also introduce a feminist perspective to some of the movement's unreflective objectification of women – Allen Jones's fetish woman-as-furniture sculptures come to mind – ironically literalising and denouncing women's relegation to the domestic sphere. These functional objects were designed to invite interactive encounter. However, presented as they are here, on a platform that separates them from the public FIG.5, they become unapproachable artefacts, which undermines their original anti-elitist sentiment.



Fig. 2 *The Library Head*, by Nicola L. 2013. Wood, 213.4 by 162.6 by 30.5 cm. (© Nicola L. Collection and Archive; courtesy Alison Jacques, London; photograph Michael Brzezinski; exh. Alison Jacques, London).

It is with the *Pénétrables* series FIG.6 – rectangles of canvas adorned with head and limb-shaped protrusions designed to accommodate the human body – that Nicola L.'s interest in the fusion between the viewer's body and the work of art reaches its full potential. Among the colourful ensemble of functional objects, *Screen for 3 (Remembering Alberto Greco)* FIG.7 stands out for its impalpable delicacy. The work is a later version of Nicola L.'s first *Pénétrable*, *Homage to Alberto Greco*, which she made and exhibited in 1966, the year following the suicide of her friend and mentor Alberto Greco (1931–65). It is a folding screen composed of three outstretched rectangles of white canvas with bodily extensions protruding from their surface, inviting viewers to wear it like a second skin. When unoccupied, these empty human shells recall an eerie shroud, at once a ghostly remainder of human

presence, but also an anonymous and anonymising container. Nicola L.'s encounter with Greco in 1964 was a pivotal one and encouraged her to abandon painting and pursue the embodied, performative and politically driven approach to figuration that informed *Pénétrables*. *Screen for 3* is reminiscent of Greco's *objets vivants*, large white canvases onto which the artist would trace the contours of passers-by, establishing a material relationship between living bodies and the static surface of the work.



Fig. 3 *White Foot Sofa*, by Nicola L. 1968. Vinyl, 76.2 by 170.2 by 88.9 cm. (© Nicola L. Collection and Archive; courtesy Alison Jacques, London; photograph Michael Brzezinski; exh. Alison Jacques, London).

Affixed to the wall, *We Want to Breathe* FIG.8 and *Same Skin for Everybody* FIG.9 are perhaps the most noteworthy pieces in the exhibition, which put the logic of *Pénétrables* to a more political use. If skin is often fetishised as a marker of identity and therefore difference, these works provide a unifying membrane that fuses a multiplicity of bodies into a single organism, concretising Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of intercorporeal subjectivity – an understanding of embodiment that necessarily entails a physical relation with the other.<sup>4</sup> Realised in the form of banners with multiple head-shaped extensions and wooden handles attached to their sides, these works were intended to be activated by their audiences and paraded in the streets. The block-letter slogans that appear at the top of the banners are startlingly resonant in a political climate marked by the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 and the Black Lives Matter protests that ensued. Realised in the 1970s, the banners were an experiment in the potential of art to facilitate collective mobilisation – as demonstrated in other works of the time, such as Lygia Clark's relational objects and Hélió

Oiticica's *Parangolés*. Although the decision to show a variety of works that belong to different phases of the artist's practice in one room allows the viewer to forge connections across what might at first glance appear as fragmented and disparate, it also prevents the intimate encounter with the works that Nicola L. originally intended. Relying on traditional modes of display, the exhibition presents the artist's functional objects as inanimate sculptures and paintings, which evades their participatory and anti-institutional function and ultimately compromises their playfully political ethos.

The mantra 'same skin for everyone', which echoes throughout the selection of works on display, may appear naive in light of the present emphasis on politics of location and intersectionality – a focus that was aptly summed up by Rosi Braidotti in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic: 'we are all in this together but we are not one and the same'.<sup>5</sup> However, the hopeful message of connectedness that permeates Nicola L.'s exhibition testifies to the continued importance of initiatives that showcase the work of underrepresented artists. Nicola L.'s artistic vocabulary still has something to say to contemporary audiences, offering an invitation to find points of encounter in an increasingly fragmented political arena.



**Fig. 4** *Gold Femme Commode*, by Nicola L. 1969/1993. Painted birch, 171.4 by 63.5 by 31.8 cm. (© Nicola L. Collection and Archive; courtesy Alison Jacques, London; photograph Michael Brzezinski; exh. Alison Jacques, London).





Fig. 5 Installation view of *Nicola L.* at Alison Jacques, London, 2022. (Courtesy Alison Jacques, London; photograph Michael Brzezinski).



Fig. 6 *Flower*, by Nicola L. 1974. Ink, cotton and wood, 160 by 83.8 cm. (© Nicola L. Collection and Archive; courtesy Alison Jacques, London; photograph Michael Brzezinski; exh. Alison Jacques, London).





**Fig. 7** *Screen for 3 (Remembering Alberto Greco)*, by Nicola L. 1975/2014. 3 cotton and wood panels, each 200.7 by 100.3 cm. (© Nicola L. Collection and Archive; courtesy Alison Jacques, London; photograph Michael Brzezinski; exh. Alison Jacques, London).



**Fig. 8** *We Want to Breathe*, by Nicola L. 1975. Ink, cotton and wood, 110 by 255 by 14 cm. (© Nicola L. Collection and Archive; courtesy Alison Jacques, London; photograph Michael Brzezinski; exh. Alison Jacques, London).



**Fig. 9** *Same Skin For Everybody*, by Nicola L. 1975. Ink, cotton and wood, 102.5 by 271 by 14 cm. (© Nicola L. Collection and Archive; courtesy Alison Jacques, London; photograph Michael Brzezinski; exh. Alison Jacques, London).

**Exhibition details**     Nicola L.  
 Alison Jacques, London  
 13th May–23rd July 2022

## Footnotes

- 1** S. Ahmed and J. Stacey, eds: *Thinking Through the Skin*, London 2001, p.i.
- 2** See J. Morgan *et al.*: exh. cat. *The EY Exhibition: The World Goes Pop*, London (Tate Modern) 2015–16; and R. Katrib and E.F. Battle: exh. cat. *Nicola L.: Works, 1968 to the Present*, New York (SculptureCenter) 2017.
- 3** Nicola L. quoted from A. Jones: 'Nicola: the profile of a moment' in D. Benaym: *Profile Nicola L.*, New York 2005, available at <https://alisonjacques.com/uploads/files/2005-10-NL-NYC-Nicola-The-Profile-of-a-Moment-Alan-Jones-interactive.pdf>, accessed 28<sup>th</sup> June 2022.
- 4** See M. Merleau-Ponty: 'The philosopher and his shadow', in *idem: Signs*, Evanston 1964, transl. R. C. McLeary.
- 5** R. Braidotti: "'We' are in 'this' together, but we are not one and the same", *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 17 (August 2020), pp.465–69.

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