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Pretty Fly

The rediscovery of Nicki Marx's exquisite feathered works has captured the attention of the L.A. art community

BY CATHERINE ELSWORTH

When I wear one, I can't get through a crowd," says Katie Nartonis, owner of three of Nicki Marx's densely meshed feather creations and co-curator of "Marx Rising," a new exhibition of the artist's work currently on display in Los Angeles. "These are objects of desire. Powerful. Thrilling," adds the specialist in 20th century decorative arts at auction house Bonhams.

Featuring both new and vintage creations, the exhibit is co-curated by Gerard O'Brien of The Landing at Reform Gallery, where the show is staged. It marks a dramatic return for the 70-year-old artist, who shot to national prominence some 40 years ago, but has not exhibited this type of work since the late 1990s, having taken a 13-year hiatus following a traumatic car accident.

It was only when Nartonis rediscovered the artist at her Taos, N.M., studio, after being introduced to her oeuvre in a period book, that Marx threw herself back into the signature wearable work that once attracted fans including artists Louise Nevelson and Georgia O'Keeffe.

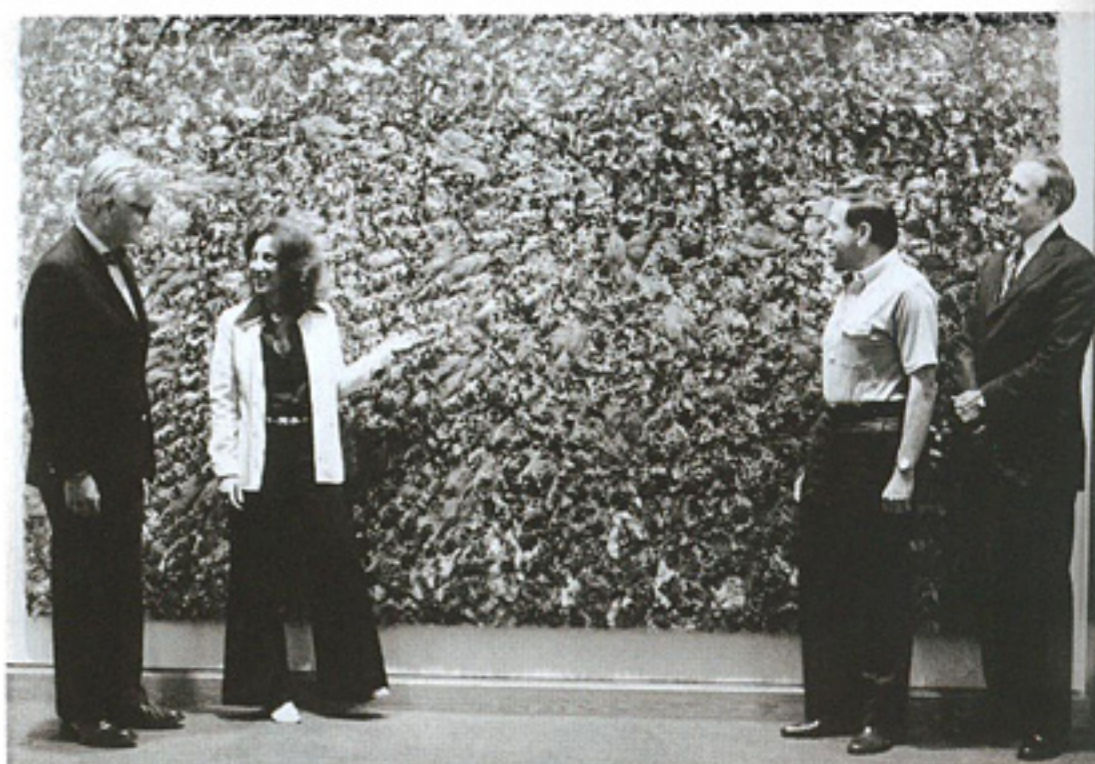
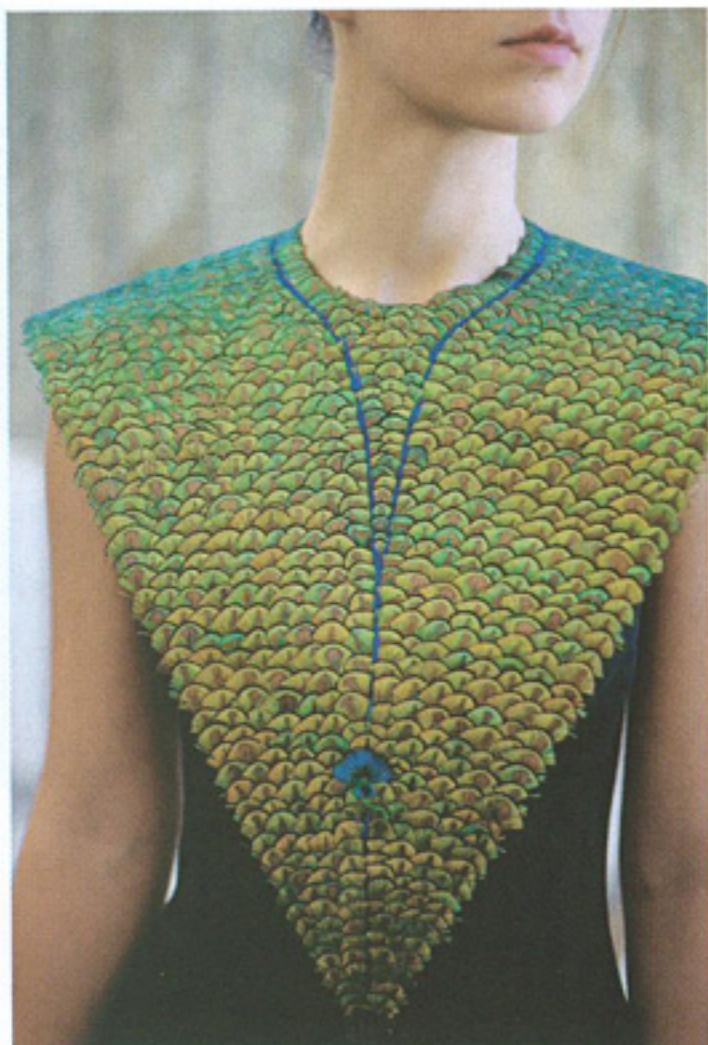
Her monumental feather wall pieces or "assemblages," painstaking pictures made with hot wax and pigment, will also feature in the new show. "There's a real mastery to them," says O'Brien, a champion of the postwar California Design movement of which Marx was a part.

Having grown up in L.A. and Palm Springs, Marx began producing art made from natural materials in the early 1970s. Entirely self-taught, she started incorporating feathers after chancing on a small packet of fly-fishing tackle in a hardware store. "I had a vision," she says.

The shamanistic pieces that followed—jewelry, robes, capes, collars and dramatic canvases of feathers, earth, bark, shells and bones—were bought and exhibited over the decades at major institutions across the country. Marx describes her art as "a ritual, a dance, a prayer of thanksgiving and a plea for survival," and a way to "communicate how precious the natural environment is and that we need to celebrate and save it."

Her message seems to resonate: there has already been interest in the rediscovered Marx. After a preview, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art acquired one of her pieces for its permanent collection and for inclusion in a major 2016 show.

The demand only fuels the artist's desire to supply: "Each piece I make suggests 20 more," she says. "There aren't enough hours in the day." *Through Nov. 15; The Landing at Reform Gallery, 6819 Melrose Ave., L.A., 323-938-1515; reform-modern.com.* •



Marx (second from left) presents *Eye Dazzler* in the 1970s, which is still on display at Stanford's Sherman-Fairchild Science Center.



FROM TOP Peacock Feather Breastplate, 1974/75 (recently acquired by LACMA). Chicken Feather Breastplate, 2014. Silver Pheasant Breastplate, 2014. RIGHT Detail of a feather canvas.