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NICKI  
MARX

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A compelling story has a defined beginning, middle, and end, and a protagonist whose dimensionality and intrigue hooks the reader into the narrative. Cape, Shaman's Robe turned out to be the hook that drew me into the story of Nicki Marx, artist of singular wearables and wall sculptures crafted with feathers and other natural materials. Constructed of feathers, horsehair and leather, it was exhibited in California Design 1976, at the Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles, and subsequently featured in the Chronicle book *California Design: The Legacy of West Coast Craft and Style* (2005). The dramatic, fluttering cloak was cited in the Fiber Revolution chapter of the book as emblematic of the time when artists dared to make body coverings that were highly expressive, larger than life-size, sometimes outlandish, and constructed more as costume than clothing.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the striking, earth-trailing robe made a forceful statement about this explosive period in the fiber/wearable art movement (*page 48*). But this was just

worked on both wearables and wall sculptures, became identified with a close-knit community of artists who were following their own visions in artwear. Wholly self-taught, Marx popularized natural feather-patterning: the process of creating decorative compositions through arrangement of colors and designs inherent in the natural feathers she would glue to a substructure, most often leather. The brilliance of the hues, iridescences and patterns of the feathers are distinctive to their species, and Marx favored peacock, pheasant, rooster, and duck.<sup>2</sup>

During this time, and in this place, Marx was part of a vibrant artistic circle. Artists Marian Clayden, K. Lee Manuel, Gaza Bowen, and Eliot Marshall Smith were also part of the creative community in Santa Cruz. Clayden actively advanced new techniques in textiles, such as silk resist and clamp dyeing; Manuel introduced methods for painting on leather and feathers; Bowen charted new territory in boot and shoe construction infused with content; and Marshall Smith made strides in mask fabrication with alternative materials.

## NICKI MARX

## FEATHERED FANTASIES



the tip of the quill—the beginning of what would reveal itself as a richly woven narrative. Marx's career as an artist took flight when she discovered she could use feathers, shells, seeds, bones, bark, bugs, driftwood, flowers, minerals, and earth as her primary ingredients to make a signature statement in wearable and mixed media artwork.

Living in the coastal town of Santa Cruz, California, in the freewheeling 1970s, Marx, who consistently

Marx and other artwear artists were recognized for creating vanguard works by inclusion in important exhibitions and documentation in publications. "Maximum Coverage, Wearables by Contemporary American Artists," an exhibition at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in 1980, followed by the eponymous publication in 1981, highlighted the works of these Santa Cruz artists, among others, who were influential in the art-to-wear movement. Marx's wearable featured

NICKI MARX in her studio with her dog Buddy, 2014. She is wearing the breastplate shown on the *Ornament* cover. Photograph by Brennan Studio. #38/14 of rooster and Golden pheasant feathers, glued individually feather by feather on backing of deer suede, 2014. Also being worn is a vintage Ring-necked pheasant cummerbund. Photographs by Phillip Dixon, except where noted, courtesy of The Nartonis Project. Model: Fanny Inanga Vega.







in the exhibition and catalog was a collaborative piece (page 48) with artwear designer Ben Compton: A spectacular, shimmering, vicuna leather/rooster-feathered, full-length cape with headpiece, Bruja De Plata (Sorcerer of Silver), appropriately titled the hundreds of rooster feathers—covering the entire surface of the leather cloak—were silvery and reflective as if the feathers had been dipped in liquid silver. More accessible than a museum exhibition, the wearables produced by artwear artists could be viewed, sampled and purchased at Julie Schafler's Julie: Artisans Gallery, a prestigious Madison Avenue emporium in New York City. Marx's capes, vests, collars, and cloaks were shown at, and purchased from this gallery in the 1970s and early 1980s, and consequently have landed in significant collections of artwear.

VINTAGE NECKPIECE of Ring-necked pheasant feathers, circa 1975.



The wearables of Marx and Manuel were often exhibited in the same shows and appeared in the same publications, and it has been noted that there is an aesthetic kinship between Marx's feather breastplates and Manuel's feather collars. The two women were friends and lived in the same community, and according to Marx, they may have started making feather collars at the same time and incorporating feathers into other artwear.<sup>3</sup> However, there is one notable, and distinguishing difference: Manuel had studied fine arts in college and considered herself a painter; her impulse was to paint the feathers and have them serve as painted elements of the composition. Marx, an ardent environmentalist who reveres earth and believes nature is sacred, sees beauty in the feather's pristine state. Marx's objective is to make dazzling arrangements, naturally, without alteration; feathers become "her tubes of paint—her palette."

At any rate, it is a moot point to consider which of the two artists arrived first at the idea of making feathered adornments. According to costume and textile curator Dale Carolyn Gluckman, both were building on a longstanding tradition: "Marx's and Manuel's use of feathers on clothing and neckpieces has antecedents in geographically diverse ancient cultures. For example, among the Nazca people in precolumbian Latin America between A.D. 600-800, ceremonial capes, aprons and standards were covered with the intensely colored feathers of parrots, macaw and other tropical birds, many obviously traded long distances."

Further, documented research by Dr. Zvezdana Dode, an authority on the textiles and dress of the Mongols of Central Asia, reveals that robes decorated with feathers were mentioned in the writings of Marco Polo and have been found in Mongol noble burials dating from the second half of the thirteenth century to the end of the fourteenth.<sup>4</sup> Thus proving that the threads of cultures connect through centuries. Suffice to say, Marx and Manuel can lay claim to reviving an ancient tradition, making it relevant to their time, and imprinting it with their personal stamp.

Self-identified as The Feather Lady (announced on her feather-trimmed business card), Marx continued a rich and flourishing production of art-to-wear and performance pieces, and wall compositions (some with feathers, some with encaustic, all with natural materials) from the 1970s through the early 1980s, showing in major galleries nationwide, and building an impressive publication and exhibition record. Along the way, Marx fulfilled several high-profile commissions, most notably Eye Dazzler, a monumental mural comprised of Golden





#37/14 of Lady Amherst pheasant feathers, 2014. #33/14 of striped rooster feathers, 2014. #55/14 of Golden pheasant feathers, 2014. #48/14 of rooster and Lady Amherst pheasant feathers, 2014. Photographs by Faria Raji, courtesy of The Nartoris Project, 2015.







***Living in the coastal town of Santa Cruz, California, in the 1970s, Marx was part of a vibrant artistic circle that included Marian Clayden, K. Lee Manuel, Gaza Bowen, and Eliot Marshall Smith who were following their own visions in artwear. Entirely self-taught, Marx popularized natural feather-patterning with compositions based on colors and designs inherent to natural feathers.***



and Lady Amherst pheasant feathers created for Stanford University's Sherman-Fairchild Science Center in 1976, still on display today.

Other remarkable credits to Marx's name, that shot her into the stratosphere of rock-star-artwear fame, were purchases by celebrated artists Louise Nevelson and Georgia O'Keeffe. This visibility brought production managers from the fashion industry to Marx's studio doorstep; she was approached with the idea of having her designs produced by other artisans. "It's a totally intuitive process," explains Marx. "It's like breathing. Breathe in—select and place the feather; exhale—glue. It's so natural for me. Having other people laboring in my studio would change the meditative quality of the work." Hence, Marx continued along the path of handcrafting each piece, affixing each feather individually, tallying hours of artistic labor.

By 1985, Marx was at a crossroads: primed for a change in both location and creative direction, Marx relocated to Taos, New Mexico, and decided to discontinue making wearables. The remoteness and wildness of the New Mexico landscape had been drawing her to the region; she had lived there part-time for the last fifteen years, and felt "connected to the peace and violence of the natural surroundings" she found outside her door. Evolving out of her wearable work, Marx brought the same skills and intuition to the wall sculptures, which she worked on exclusively through the mid-1990s. Two important series emerged that were politically themed reactions to the horrors and devastation of war: the Gulf War series and the Aftermath series, the latter based on a vision of the world after nuclear destruction. Marx's artistic diligence was rewarded with a twenty-five-year retrospective in 1996 at Sun Cities Museum of Art, Arizona, where all phases of her career were represented, demonstrating the totality of her creative output.

In any story, this would be considered a happy ending; but the narrative has only reached the end of the second act. Marx's life took a sharp left turn when a car crash sent her into disability and forced her into a challenging time of survival. Unable to produce work of scale due to injuries caused to her arms and neck, Marx turned to making jewelry from precious metal clay and minerals. The necklaces and pendants that she made from her Taos home and sold locally sustained her

**BRUJA DE PLATA**, a collaboration by Nicki Marx and Ben Compton of vicuna, rooster feathers, metallic fabric, sheared sheep skin, woven fiber strap with metal hardware, leather, 1976. *Photograph by Robert Mertens.* **CAPE, SHAMAN'S ROBE** of feathers, horsehair and leather, worn by Nicki Marx, and exhibited in "California Design '76," 1975. *Photographer unknown.*



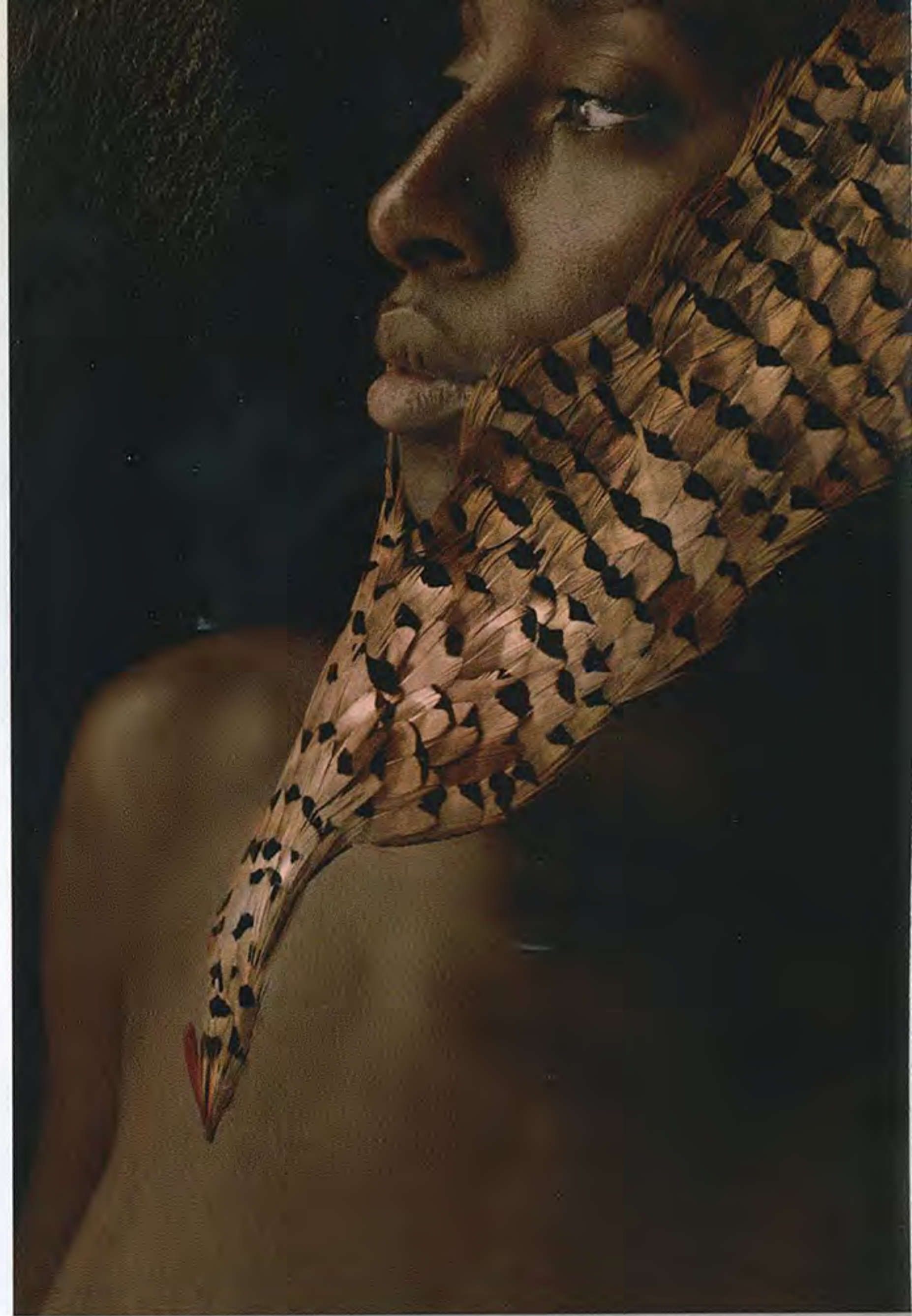
during this period of time—more than a decade—that she spent recovering from the injury and regaining her mobility.

Her art career having faded from view, but not ready for it to “fade to black” (as when the screen goes dark; the end), Marx was yearning for a comeback. Then, in 2014, opportunity came calling, literally: a phone call exchange ended with an offer to re-enter the art scene, via a Los Angeles gallery that specializes in craft and design. Katie Nartonis, twentieth-century design specialist, had been on the other end of the phone.<sup>5</sup> The outcome was a solo exhibition of wearables and feather-based wall sculptures, “Marx: Rising,” co-curated by Nartonis and Gerard O’Brien. Presented were vintage feathered artwear along with recently crafted versions of collars, breastplates and vests, and feather wall compositions hung on three contiguous walls.


Shown at The Landing at Reform Gallery, in Los Angeles, the 2014 opening produced a powerfully intoxicating effect, as viewers were surrounded by the sumptuous body adornments and wall ornaments, and further, were tantalized by models wearing the collars and breastplates created from the brilliantly hued feathers of many species of birds. These neckpieces, some with vertical extensions of suede and braided leather, fell gracefully at the chests, shoulders and backs of the models as they strutted through the aisles, mimicking the proud birds whose feathers they fluttered with every pivot. By all accounts, Marx had a rousing re-discovery.

During the run of the exhibition, there was excitement over, and purchases of, the wearables and wall sculptures. A vintage 1970s breastplate of peacock feathers was acquired for the permanent collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art for inclusion in a major exhibition in 2016, demonstrating that Marx’s body adornments were signifiers of their time. Additionally, famed fashion photographer Phillip Dixon was inspired by Marx’s feathered fantasies. Dixon’s visionary approach resulted in photographs of a nude model wearing only a collar or breastplate. These photographs present the opportunity to see Marx’s body adornments with great clarity and raw energy as they function as true body coverings, skimming over skin without the mediation of clothing.

Her art career once again soaring, Nicki Marx is taking advantage of the momentum. She is back at work in her Taos studio, creating new bodies of artwork. Recently ten of her wall sculptures went on view at the Gallery at the El Monte Sagrado Resort, Taos. But Marx, who just turned seventy-one, knows the power of pause and contemplation. Marx reflects on her re-launch and renewed popularity. “I’m very grateful that I’ve been



NECKPIECE of Ring-necked pheasant feathers, circa 1975.

able to pick up the thread and continue the tapestry of my life. I’ve hung on to my inspiration; I’ve stayed the course. My work was part of the zeitgeist of the ‘60s and now it’s timely again. I feel very fortunate that I’ve been able to manifest my vision all these years.” 

#### NOTES

1. Suzanne Baizerman and I co-wrote this book, and during the research phase, we sifted through all the archives of the California Design exhibition series at the Oakland Museum of California. This is when I first encountered photographs of Marx’s wearables and learned of her work. Baizerman, an expert in textile history, wrote the chapter in which Marx’s Cape, Shaman’s Robe was reproduced and discussed.
2. For the past forty years Marx has purchased her feathers from the same dealer who legally imports them from Southeast Asia and India. Marx believes her art is “ecologically sound” since all the feathers come from birds raised for food, and are thus a by-product, or are gathered when the birds molt or shed. Likewise for the leather she uses; it is one of the products derived from animals raised for food.
3. Interviews with the artist, through phone conversations and emails, September through December 2014.
4. Email exchanges with Dale Carolyn Gluckman and Dr. Zvezdana Dode, September through November 2014.
5. Formerly with Bonhams Auctions (now with Heritage Auctions), Nartonis had learned about Marx from researching California craftspeople of the 1970s in the 1978 seminal book, *Craftsman Lifestyle: The Gentle Revolution*, by Olivia H. Emery, with photographs by Tim Andersen, and introduction by Eudorah M. Moore.