



NIKI
DE
SAINT
PHALLE
IN THE
1960s

In her highly experimental works from the 1960s, Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002) addressed themes of violence, joy, and women’s empowerment. To the shock of many at the time, and in defiance of the traditional imagery and techniques found throughout the history of American and European art, she used a gun to make her paintings and created colorful sculptures of the female body. The artist was a participant in several important avant-garde circles in Paris and New York in this pivotal decade, and in the late 20th century her prescient works stand as harbingers of feminist art to come in the 1970s.

THE SHOOTING PAINTINGS

The exhibition begins with Saint Phalle’s early “shooting paintings,” also widely known by the French word *tir*; meaning “shooting.” In 1961 she set up a gun range outside her Parisian studio. The artist handed a .22-caliber rifle to attendees and asked them to shoot at compositions she had created with a variety of found objects and plastic bags of paint covered in white plaster and attached to a wood support. The concealed pockets of pigment burst open upon the bullet’s impact, dripping and splattering. The artist explained that, through this violent process, she wanted to make the paintings bleed. It was only through acts of destruction, she insisted, that there was life.

Saint Phalle produced the *Tirs* following such works as *Hors-d’oeuvre, or Portrait of My Lover*, 1960, on view in the first gallery. When this series of painted assemblages was exhibited in 1960, she invited visitors to throw darts at the targets-turned-faces that she based on the physical attributes of her former romantic partners. Inspired by the audience’s involvement, she continued, during the more than twenty-five shooting sessions that she held over the next three years, to invent ways for attendees to complete the painting process. For instance, at her first solo art gallery exhibition in 1961, guests could briefly check out Saint Phalle’s rifle to shoot the works on display. The artist extended her participatory process in *Tir de Jasper Johns*, 1961. As intimated by the title, the work is an homage to Johns, her close friend and fellow artist who took a shot at the target.



Niki de Saint Phalle atop a ladder aiming at *Tir-tableau Sunset Strip* during the March 4, 1962, shooting session in Los Angeles. Courtesy of Demont Photo Management. Photo: William Claxton

As the *Tirs* increased in size, Saint Phalle began to arrange found objects to tell stories. In two works from 1962, *Gorgo in New York* and *Pirodactyl over New York*, a prehistoric beast on roller skates aims a destructive path towards modern, phallic-shaped American skyscrapers. This narrative continues in a group of works that addresses organized religion, yet another symbol of patriarchal power for the artist. In *Reims* and *Cathédrale*, both from 1962, black and blue paints are splattered on representations of Gothic cathedrals.

THE NANAS

In 1964, after only a few years of creating the *Tirs*, the artist turned to the representation of the female body. Her initial large, figural assemblages are concerned with the traditional and contradictory gender roles that she believed confined and endangered women. Her creations include goddesses, monsters, a fated Hollywood starlet, a black widow spider, and a larger-than-life sculpture of a bride immobilized by a voluminous dress and veil. The massive *Crucifixion*, often called *Leto*, is an example of a work that defies categorization (the name *Leto* refers to the Greek goddess of motherhood, impregnated by Zeus and subsequently exiled). It depicts a maternal figure in curlers provocatively posed as a sex worker. As with many of Saint Phalle's shooting paintings, the

surfaces are encrusted with a wide array of objects to explore conflicting ideas surrounding femininity: plastic toys, small guns, baby dolls' limbs, and synthetic flowers.

In 1965 Saint Phalle's figures developed into the *Nanas*, a series that would dominate her career for decades to come. Taking their name from a French slang term for "girl," the *Nanas* were inspired by the artist's pregnant friend, Clarice Rivers, the subject of the drawing and first known representation of a *Nana* that Saint Phalle made in collaboration with the sitter's husband, Larry Rivers. Adorned with kaleidoscopic collaged elements and calligraphic drawings that fill the graphite contours, Clarice's body appears as a fertile universe, teeming with flowers, butterflies, and decorative flourishes.



Niki de Saint Phalle, *Madame, or Green Nana with Black Bag*, 1968. Painted polyester resin, 101 1/2 x 60 5/8 x 25 1/2 in. (258 x 154 x 65 cm). Private collection, courtesy of Galerie Georges-Philippe & Nathalie Vallois, Paris. © Niki Charitable Art Foundation. Photo © Andre Morin

The first group of sculptural *Nanas* made their debut later that year at Galerie Alexandre Iolas in Paris where the free-standing figures were dynamically arrayed: they hung from the ceiling, sat on the floor, and perched on metal rods, seeming to leap and to dance in improbable ways. Together, the athletic and buoyant women conjure a striking all-female scene, unhindered by laws of gravity. Saint Phalle claimed that they represented "a new matriarchal society." The artist named many of the *Nanas* in honor of women she loved and admired. "They are like goddesses to me, even superwomen," she remarked.

Saint Phalle created these early curvaceous forms with an armature of chicken wire, which she wrapped with wet strips of linen and often sheathed in dense skeins of yarn to produce swirling striations. Toward the end of the decade, the artist painted some of them with graphic patterns and sealed their intricate surfaces with resin, occasionally installing them outdoors.

The scale of the *Nanas* was important for Saint Phalle. In *Madame, or Green Nana with Black Bag*, 1968, she shrank the head's size in order to exaggerate the perspective. She wanted [the viewer to feel small while gazing up at the monumental body. Her largest figure was *Hon—en katedral* [*She—A Cathedral*], represented here by archival images and a model in the last gallery of this exhibition. This colorful sculptural environment in the form of a recumbent pregnant woman was created with the help of artists Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvedt for the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, where it was on view for just a few months in 1967. Approximately eighty feet long and twenty feet high, the structure could accommodate 150 people, who entered through a portal between the figure's giant, spread thighs. Not surprisingly, the scandalous choice of passageway became a media sensation and appeared in newspaper headlines throughout the world. From the viewer platform on *Hon's* belly, visitors could survey the vast *Nana*, the ultimate symbol of female power and freedom in Saint Phalle's work.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born into an aristocratic family in France, Saint Phalle was raised in New York City. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which she called her “first teacher,” was a few blocks from her home. After she moved back to France as an adult, the self-taught artist became part of an influential community at the Impasse Ronsin, where several generations of writers and artists had lived and worked. An active participant in international dialogues focused on assemblage, painting, and sculpture, Saint Phalle was the sole female member of the Paris-based Nouveaux Réalistes, and she also collaborated with American artists such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. In the 1960s, Saint Phalle and her partner, Jean Tinguely, were close to the de Menil family, who collected their work and supported many of their projects.

Written by Michelle White and Jill Dawsey, this essay was adapted from the publication produced in conjunction with this exhibition. It is on sale at the Menil Collection Bookstore and online at menil.org.

This exhibition was cocurated and co-organized by Michelle White, Senior Curator, The Menil Collection, Houston, and Jill Dawsey, Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.

Major funding for this exhibition is provided by Cecily E. Horton; a gift in memory of Virginia P. Rorschach; Bettie Cartwright; and the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional support comes from Eddie Allen and Chinhui Juhn; Suzanne Deal Booth; Dragonfly Collection, Garance Primat; Clare Casademont and Michael Metz; Cindy and David Fitch; Barbara and Michael Gamson; Janie C. Lee; Susan and Francois de Menil; MaryRoss Taylor; Carol and David Neuberger; Julie and John Cogan, Jr.; Robin and Andrew Schirrmeister; MCT Fund; Niki Charitable Art Foundation; UBS Financial Services; and the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance.

Support for this exhibition at both the Menil Collection and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego is provided by Christie's.

Research for this exhibition was supported by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Please visit menil.org for up-to-date information about public programs and events organized in conjunction with this exhibition.

The Menil Collection
September 10, 2021–January 23, 2022

FRONT Niki de Saint Phalle, *Pirodactyl over New York* (detail), 1962. Paint, plaster, and objects on two wood panels, 98 3/4 × 122 × 11 3/4 in. (249.9 × 309.9 × 29.8 cm). Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. © Niki Charitable Art Foundation. All rights reserved. Photo: André Morin