

# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents on February 27, 2015

**Niki de Saint Phalle**

## *Niki de Saint Phalle*

- Curators: Camille Morineau and Álvaro Rodríguez Fominaya
- Dates: February 27–June 11, 2015
- **A complete retrospective of the work of Niki de Saint Phalle, the first great feminist artist of the 20th century.**
- **Surveying her paintings, sculptures, prints, performances, and experimental films, this show takes a comprehensive new look at the works of a ground-breaking, multifaceted artist.**
- **The violence, radicalism, and social engagement that characterize her oeuvre coexist with the joyous, colorful tone of some of her most iconic pieces.**

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is proud to present *Niki de Saint Phalle*, a complete retrospective of the work of Niki de Saint Phalle (Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, 1930 –San Diego, California, 2002), member of the Nouveaux Réalistes and known around the world for works like her powerful, exuberant *Nanas*, her impressive *Shooting Paintings – Tirs—*, and emblematic public artworks like the *Tarot Garden* in Tuscany.

This exhibition, organized by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and La Réunion des Musées Nationaux–Grand Palais, Paris, with the participation of the Niki Charitable Art Foundation, is the first major retrospective of Niki de Saint Phalle’s work ever held in Spain and takes a comprehensive and original look at the artist through over 200 works and archive documents, many of which have never been published.

This broad selection faithfully documents the multiple facets—painter, sculptor, printmaker, performer, and experimental filmmaker—of an artist with a singular creative universe and a pioneering worldview, punctuated by screenings that show Saint Phalle talking about her work.

As visitors wander through the more than 2,000 square meters of exhibition space, they will come across the milestones and legends that marked the career of Niki de Saint Phalle, an artist who earned international acclaim and acknowledgment in her lifetime and, like Andy Warhol before her, knew how to attract the media’s interest.

The pieces in the show arranged in the chronological order and according to subjects, address recurring themes in Niki de Saint Phalle’s artistic trajectory, such as the power of the feminine and open defiance of social conventions. In her works, the artist combines her intense political and social engagement and radicalism with color and the optimism of her world-famous *Nanas*.

The retrospective thus reveals a paradoxical, singular creative universe inspired by Gaudí, Dubuffet, and Pollock.

### **A Franco-American Artist**

Niki de Saint Phalle was born and spent much of her life in France, although she grew up in the United States where she chose to remain for the final years of her career. Always with one foot in each world, she was active on the art scenes of both her homelands.

Known as the only woman artist to join France's Nouveaux Réalistes, she has also been linked to the Neo-Dada artists Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg and their "Combines" and is considered one of the forerunners of Pop Art, to which she brought a new slant.

### **The First Feminist Artist**

Niki de Saint Phalle is also regarded as the first major feminist artist of the 20th century. By choosing to represent the female body, eroticism, and great figures of legend in a new way, she challenged the established norms and promoted the power of women and their role in society. Daughter, wife, mother, warrior, witch, and goddess are some of the labels she gave to her famous *Nanas*, imaginative portraits of the artist herself and other contemporary women which she reinterpreted throughout her career.

The series of *Brides, Births, and Goddesses* and —after the *Nanas*— the *Devouring Mothers* form a veritable female mythology that is rounded out in the artist's writings and statements and the contents of her films.

### **Violence and Commitment**

Feminism is only one aspect of her struggle against conventions and rigid mindsets. Niki de Saint Phalle was an artist of profound convictions whose works are infused with intense social and political criticism, often expressed through violence and chaos.

Although she is best known for the more upbeat, colorful side of her work, represented primarily by the *Nanas*, every one of her pieces can be read at different levels and from different angles and have clearly subversive undertones.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in her *Shooting Paintings — Tirs—*, performances in which the artist or members of the audience used a rifle to shoot at and destroy paintings. The *Shooting Paintings*, considered scandalous at the time because of their overt violence and the fact that they were orchestrated by a woman, are now regarded as one of the founding works in the history of happenings.

The *Shooting Paintings* aimed an attack at the traditional views of art, religion, and patriarchal society as well as at the political situation that entwined the Cold War and the war in Algeria in a country—the United States—where carrying guns is legal. This *Shooting Paintings* are representative of her earlier work, which was almost always inspired by social issues. In fact, Niki de Saint Phalle was one of the first artists to tackle racial discrimination and defend civil rights and multiculturalism, and in her final years she also pioneered the use of art to raise public awareness about the devastating effects of AIDS.

### **In the Vanguard of Public Art**

In yet another example of her ground-breaking tendencies, Niki de Saint Phalle was the first woman to make her mark on the public space on a global scale, as she soon felt compelled to address everyone in the world, not just museum visitors. Her early decision to make public art should be seen as a political choice, and she made it a central focus of her research in the mid-20th century. A succession of architectural projects and monumental sculptures marked her entire career: fountains, playgrounds, esoteric gardens, and habitable houses. The majestic *Tarot Garden* is a major work funded entirely by the artist herself, in part by devising and marketing a perfume, jewelry, prints and art books.

### **Overview of the exhibition**

#### **Painting Violence**

*"Painting calmed the chaos that shook my soul. It was a way to tame those dragons that have appeared throughout my work."*

The exhibition begins in Gallery 305, which contains the early works of a young Niki de Saint Phalle who had decided to devote her life to art and educating herself. On her frequent trips to Europe, she plunged into Paris's art and literary scene and fraternized with American expatriate artists.

In this context, in the late 1950s she created a series of large-format paintings that reflect the influence of both old Europe and bold new American art. The wide, flattened perspectives of her large paintings seem inspired by the Italian Trecento; their rough surfaces recall the work of Jean Fautrier and Jean Dubuffet; their black-and-white skies sprinkled with drops of paint are a nod to Jackson Pollock's drip paintings; and the objects affixed to their surfaces seem to echo the "Combines" of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.

Even in her earlier creations, Niki de Saint Phalle reflected a contradiction that would remain a constant throughout her career: the juxtaposition of violence and chaos with playfulness and *joie de vivre*.

## Rifle Art

*"I was lucky to encounter art, because I had, on a psychological level, all it takes to become a terrorist. Instead of that I used the rifle for a good cause—that of art."*

The show continues in Gallery 306 with her impressive *Shooting Paintings* series. Over nearly ten years, from 1961 to the early 1970s, Niki de Saint Phalle held more than 20 shooting sessions which combined performance and body art, sculpture and painting, most of which were filmed or photographed.

They all follow a certain ritual. Prior to the event, carefully chosen objects were filled with bags of paint, attached to a flat surface, and covered with white plaster. Once the session began, the artist, other participants, or any willing bystander would shoot at the piece, producing explosions of color that brought the artwork into existence before their very eyes.

The shock factor of these pieces and the fact that they were staged quite early in the history of performance art—thanks to the first *Shooting Painting*, the art critic Pierre Restany invited Niki de Saint Phalle to join the Nouveaux Réalistes—have overshadowed their complexity. These paintings can actually be construed in multiple ways, from a "murder" or social and political criticism to a feminist statement.

## Napoleon in Petticoats

*"Very early I decided to become a hero. Who would I be? George Sand? Joan of Arc? Napoleon in petticoats?"*

Gallery 307 features a final selection of the *Shooting Paintings* and a series of assorted works the artist grouped under the title *Feminine Roles*. Faced with a lack of equal opportunities for women and the absence of female role models she could identify with, Niki de Saint Phalle decided early on that she would "be a heroine".

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) made a profound impression on her, and Niki de Saint Phalle decided to break the mold—several years before the women's rights movement took off—by making women a central theme of her art and exploring it in all its complexity.

The artist depicted women as victims of the limitations of their female identity, but also as potential heroines of a brave new world yet to be created. Her assemblages, with evocative titles like *Brides*, *Births*, *Prostitutes*, *Witches*, and *Goddesses*, today remain as strikingly radical and ambivalent as ever.

## A New Matriarchal Society

*"Communism and Capitalism have failed. I think the time has come for a new Matriarchal society. Do you think that people would continue to die of hunger if women got involved? Women who give birth, who have the function of giving Life — i can't help but think that they could make a world in which I would be Happy to live."*

The exhibition continues in Gallery 303 with Niki de Saint Phalle's first productions of the series she called *Nanas*. Initially made of *papier collés* and wool, and later of resin, the *Nanas* were a natural extension of the idea of fertility goddesses and births. According to the artist, these women, often portrayed with distended wombs, were inspired by a drawing she did with Larry Rivers of his pregnant wife, Clarice.

At once joyous and powerful, the *Nanas* are the manifestation of a new world where women hold the reins of power. The *Nanas'* generous, colorful bodies were soon transformed and expanded to become "Nana houses", which suggested a different way of living. The first and largest of these "Nana houses" was *Hon (She)*, an enormous temporary sculpture that visitors could step inside, created in 1966 at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm.

### **Nana Power**

*"For me, my sculptures represent the world of women amplified, women's aspiration of greatness, women in the world today, women in power."*

Frolicking and athletic, large and even gargantuan, imposing yet sexy, the *Nanas* symbolized the hope for a new world where women would occupy their rightful place. Freed from the stereotypical dictates of fashion, their bodies express a smiling, boundless femininity. In the artist's words, *"I want to be superior: to have the privileges of men and, what's more, keep those of femininity, all the while continuing to wear pretty hats."*

The *Nanas* have been reproduced many times in the form of inflatable balloons, silkscreen prints, jewelry, and various publications. They are the warriors in the feminist battle that Niki de Saint Phalle spearheaded in the art world. Many of them are also standard bearers for civil rights, a cause Saint Phalle joined at a fairly early date. *"Me? Wild? She finally found a response; that a woman in a civilization of men is like a Negro in a White civilization. She has the right to refuse, to revolt. The bloody flag is raised."*

The selection of *Nanas* is rounded out in the terrace of the Museum Atrium, where the group of sculptures *The Three Graces (Les Trois Grâces)* will be shown. Their installation outdoors will allow all passers-by to contemplate this piece and thus fulfil a fundamental aspect of Saint Phalle's work, i.e., the connection between the city and her work.

### **Diana's Dream**

Gallery 302 includes a large sculpture entitled *Diana's Dream* as well as the series *Devouring Mothers* and her pioneering film *Daddy*.

Much of Niki de Saint Phalle's work expresses a manifestation of the universe of her imagination, a fantastic microcosm that resulted from her dreams and nightmares. She believed that dreams were our personal mythologies, revealing each person's most profound archetypal images.

In *Diana's Dream*, the artist shows us the enchanted theater buried in the head of the sleeping warrior-goddess: monsters and menacing beasts mingle with positive symbols like hearts and suns. A two-faced Janus expresses the duality of the world and the polarity within us.

### **Devouring Mother, Predatory Father**

*"In our lives we all know of the good and the bad mother. In other words, I have represented the good mother with the Nanas; from now on I will devote myself to her antithesis, to this mother that we would not wish to be."*

In the early 1970s Niki de Saint Phalle created her first feature-length movie, *Daddy*, an experimental film co-produced with Peter Whitehead that openly addressed the sexual abuse she had experienced with her father and the dynamics of power between the sexes.

At the same time, she was working on a new series of sculptures she called *Devouring Mothers*. Staged in different situations, with different accessories or accompanied by secondary characters, these mature women seem to be a blend of the horrifying and the grotesque. After her cheerful *Nanas*, Niki de Saint Phalle turned to *Devouring Mothers* to conduct an inexorable exploration of women's roles.

### **The General Public Is My Public**

The artist's public art is explored in Galleries 301 (devoted to her *Totems*) and 304, the last stop on the tour.

For Niki de Saint Phalle, one of the fundamental reasons she created art was to bring joy, humor, and color to others. The major architectural projects she began in the 1960s reflect this perspective of art: they appeal to everyone and simply try to make people happy.

Her most important and ambitious work of public art is the *Tarot Garden* (Tuscany, Italy. 1978-1998). Each of her pieces offers several levels of interpretation, the complexity of which is often omitted in favor of a more decorative, superficial reading. One of the interesting things about this project is that the artist funded it entirely on her own by selling products and limited editions related to the work but not always—yet another example of Niki de Saint Phalle's innovative, pioneering approach to art and independence.

### **Didactic Area**

The exhibition didactic area offers complementary information on Niki de Saint Phalle's enduring commitment on such issues as gender, violence, and AIDS. Among other objects on view, the book *AIDS: You Can't Catch it Holding Hands* (1987) illustrates the artist's support to various campaigns for raising awareness about the disease.

The space also provides insight about Saint Phalle's public art projects by presenting the perfume and jewelry collections she edited to help her finance them—notoriously the *Tarot*

*Garden* in Tuscany, but also *Queen Califia Magical Circle* in California—. Saint Phalle's public art gathers together her feminist, political, and social ideas and vindications in an architectural context filled with fantastic constructions and creatures.

## **Activities**

### **Lecture and talk: *Niki de Saint Phalle, vie privée / vie publique* (Niki de Saint Phalle, private life/public life)**

Wednesday, February 25

Camille Morineau, exhibition curator, will deliver a lecture about Niki de Saint Phalle and will talk with Bloum Cardenas, trustee of the *Niki Charitable Foundation* and granddaughter of the artist. French-Spanish simultaneous translation.

Venue and time: Auditorium, 6:30 pm.

Free admission (at the admission desk or on the website).

### **Lecture: *Niki de Saint Phalle: A Female Artist Shooting***

Thursday, March 5

Patricia Mayayo, Art History Professor at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and women history, feminist historiography, and contemporary art investigator, will give a lecture on the role of women in 20th century art by analyzing Niki de Saint Phalle's oeuvre.

Venue and time: Zero Espazioa, 6:30 pm.

Free admission (at the admission desk or on the website).

### **Unique visits. Shared Reflections: Niki de Saint Phalle**

Wednesdays, March 4 and 11

Curatorial and Education staff will unveil the exhibition highlights, the behind-the-scenes work, and curious details about the installation in two unique visits.

- *Curatorial Vision* (Wednesday, March 4)  
Guided by: Álvaro Rodríguez Fominaya, Exhibition Curator, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
- *Key Concepts* (Wednesday, March 11)  
Guided by: Luz Maguregui, Education Coordinator, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

Venue and time: meet at information desk, 6:30–7:30 pm.

Tickets: 2 € Museum Members / 3 € general public (Museum admission not included). Minimum 8 people per group. Purchase only on the website.

Sponsor: Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre.

### **Creative Sessions: *Do It Yourself***

Thematic workshops for young people and adults linked to the exhibition key ideas and works.

- *Fashion and Design Workshop*. 14 or over. (Thursdays, March 19 and 26)



Led by: Itxaso Torrontegui, textile designer and author of *Pattern Design, Estampados y Superficie* postgraduate studies at INEDI in 2011.

Niki de Saint Phalle was part of the fashion industry in New York in the 1940s, when she modeled for *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Time Magazine*. In this workshop, participants will design their own pattern inspired by the art world.

Venue and time: new educational space, 6 to 7:45 pm.

Tickets (for the two sessions): 24 € Museum Members and 30 € general public. Minimum 8 people per group; maximum 20. Advance reservations required. Visit the website to register.

- *Terminology, Simbology, and Cards Workshop*. 18 or over. (Thursday, April 6)

Led by: Mabi Revuelta, artist whose most recent work delves into alphabet production and decks of cards related to her unique graphic art and imagery.

Niki de Saint Phalle's work was filled with symbols: she included them in her public art (Tarot Garden) and drew them in letters and cards addressed to her close ones. She also published a brief dictionary of 49 symbols. In this workshop, participants will create their own symbolic alphabet or deck of cards inspired by Saint Phalle's work.

Venue and time: new educational space, 6 to 7:45 pm.

Tickets (for the two sessions): 12 € Museum Members and 15 € general public. Minimum 8 people per group; maximum 20. Advance reservations required. Visit the website to register.

## **Gallery hosts**

Gallery hosts are available to further explain details about the artist and her oeuvre. The museum offers this free service daily from 11 am to 2 pm.

## **Exhibition catalogue**

The exhibition catalogue pays homage to Niki de Saint Phalle's vibrant, colorful oeuvre. Fifteen essays by internationally renowned scholars track her whole career and offer new insights into Saint Phalle's position in the history of art. A thorough chronology—rich in documentary material and artist's quotes—, a bibliography, and the full list of exhibited works complete the 370-page volume. In France, the book was awarded the prestigious CatalPa Prize for the best Parisian exhibition catalogue 2014.

## **Cover image:**

*Gwendolyn* 1966–90

Painted polyester on metal frame

252 x 200 x 125 cm

Sprengel Museum, Hanover, Gift of the artist, 2000

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**For further information:**

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Press Images for  
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Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

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For further information, please contact the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Press Department: tel. +34 944 35 90 08 and email: [media@guggenheim-bilbao.es](mailto:media@guggenheim-bilbao.es)

Niki de Saint Phalle pointing her gun, 1972  
Black and white photograph with color retouching, still from the film *Daddy*  
Photo: © Peter Whitehead  
© Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA



Niki de Saint Phalle in Deià, 1955  
Color photograph  
Niki Charitable Art Foundation, Santee, USA  
© Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA



*Night Experiment*, ca. 1959  
Paint, plaster, and various objects on plywood  
130 x 196 x 13 cm  
Sprengel Museum, Hanover, Gift of the artist, 2000  
© Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA  
Photo: © Laurent Condominas



*Grand Shoot - J Gallery Session (Grand Tir – Séance galerie J)*, 1961  
Paint, plaster, and various objects on conglomerate panel  
143 x 77 x 7 cm  
Private collection, Courtesy Galerie G.-P. & N. Vallois, Paris  
© Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA  
Photo: © Laurent Condominas



*Heads of State (Study for King Kong)*, spring 1963  
Paint and masks on wood panel  
122.5 x 198 x 21 cm  
Sprengel Museum, Hanover, Gift of the artist, 2000  
© Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA  
Photo: © BPK, Berlin, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Michael Herling / Benedikt Werner



*Pirodactyl over New York*, 1962

Paint, plaster, and various objects on two wood panels

249.9 x 309.9 x 29.8 cm

Guggenheim Abu Dhabi

© Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA

Photo: © André Morain, Courtesy Niki Charitable Art Foundation and  
Galerie GP & N Vallois, Paris



*Skull (Meditation Room)*, 1990

Glass and mirror mosaic, ceramic, and gold leaf

230 x 310 x 210 cm

Sprengel Museum, Hanover, Gift of the artist, 2000

© Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA

Photo: © Michael Herling



*The Horse and the Bride (Cheval et la Mariée)*, 1963

Fabric, toys, various objects, and wire mesh

235 x 300 x 120 cm

Sprengel Museum, Hanover, Gift of the artist, 2000

© Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA

Photo: © BPK, Berlin, dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Michael Herling / Aline  
Gwose



*Madam or Green Nana with Black Bag (Madame ou Nana verte au sac noir)*,  
1968

Painted polyester

250 x 160 x 50 cm

Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA

Courtesy Galerie G.-P. & N. Vallois, Paris

© Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA

Photo: © André Morain



*Dolorès*, 1966–95

Painted polyester on wire mesh

550 cm high

Sprengel Museum, Hanover, Gift of the artist, 2000

© Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA



*Gwendolyn* 1966–90

Painted polyester on metal frame

252 x 200 x 125 cm

Sprengel Museum, Hanover, Gift of the artist, 2000

© Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA



*The Toilette (Make Up or Mirror of Life) (La Toilette), 1978*

Painted papier collé and various objects (dressing table)

Woman: 160 x 150 x 100 cm

Dressing table: 126 x 92 x 80 cm

Collection MAMAC, Nice, Gift of the artist, 2001

© Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA

Photo: © MAMAC / Muriel Anssens



*Diana's Dream (Le Rêve de Diane), 1970*

Painted polyester

280 x 600 x 350 cm

Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA

© Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA

Photo: © Laurent Condominas



*Long Live Love (Vive l'Amour), 1990*

Felt-pen and gouache on Bristol paper

45 x 55 cm

Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA

© Niki Charitable Art Foudation, Santee, USA

Photo: © Ed Kessler



*View of the Tarot Garden*

Garavicchio, Italy

Photo: © Laurent Condominas

