

The extraordinary and enigmatic art of Niki de Saint-Phalle

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On one of the terraces of the Olympic Museum in Lausanne there is a sculpture of two footballers playing on the grass. One is white and the other black, and they are both wearing different coloured kits. One is lying down in a defensive position while the other is standing up and attacking. There is also a white ball with a red geometric design between the two of them. This project called *The Footballers* (acrylic on polyester resin, [1993]) is a unique work of art, produced by the artist Niki de Saint-Phalle, a sports-themed creation that introduces our discussion about the rich and varied life

and artistic career of this enigmatic woman and her extraordinary creations.

Catherine Marie-Agnès de Saint-Phalle was born on 29 October 1930 in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, where her American family, who were bankers by profession, found themselves following the financial ruin caused by the Great Depression at the end of the 1920s. She lived with her paternal grandparents for 3 years until she returned to Greenwich, Connecticut, with her parents in 1933. She began her education and artistic training in New York, where she lived until 1951. From 1937 onwards she was known as Niki de Saint-Phalle. During

Figure 1

The Footballers, large-scale (1994).



Figure 2 Niki de Saint-Phalle. Shooting (1961).



Figure 3 Shooting painting (1961).



Figure 4 Shooting painting (1961).



this period she graduated from Oldfield School, worked as a fashion model, appearing in magazines like *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and on the cover of *Life* magazine, and painted her first oil and gouache paintings in a style that was surrealist and completely self-taught. Meanwhile, in 1948 she married Harry Mathews, a music student at Harvard. After her daughter Laura was born in Boston in 1951, the couple moved to Paris where Harry continued to work as a musician and Saint-Phalle studied drama. In the early fifties they made several trips around the south of France, Spain and Italy.

1955 was a crucial year both in terms of Saint-Phalle's personal life and her artistic development. Her son Philip was born. She visited Madrid and Barcelona where she discovered the work of Antonio Gaudí. She later went on to explain that after she visited Park Güell, created by the Catalan artist, she felt the need to create "her own garden", which is something that she finally managed to do twenty four years later. She met Jean Tinguely (Fribourg, 1925-Berne 1991), a sculptor famous for his mechanistic constructions, and soon they began to

work together. She frequently visited the Louvre and studied the works of Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Henri Rousseau. She was deeply impressed by *Le Palais Idéal* in Hauterives, by Ferdinand Cheval (Chaines, 1836-Hauterives, 1924.) Cheval, who was known as *le facteur* [the postman], built the palace by himself between 1879 and 1905. He had been inspired by ideas from books and dreams and used stones and other materials he found on his daily rounds. Once his creation was finished, Cheval devoted his final years to building his own tomb. Her varied life experiences, coupled with her infantile and extravagantly feminine perspective, formed the basis of her enigmatic, intuitive, unique, obscure, and, at times, delirious works of art.

She divorced her husband in 1960 and began experimenting artistically, transforming herself into a "professional artist". In 1961 she worked on different plaster nudes, including the *Vénus de Milo*, in which she placed plastic bags full of paint. She then destroyed her

creation by firing at it and letting the contents of the broken bags leak all over the white plaster, creating a bleeding effect. Her *shooting paintings* were famous and involved embedding plastic pockets of different coloured paints arranged on a canvas in plaster, which Saint-Phalle and her invited collaborators would then shoot at. When the paint began to leak out, it produced amazing and varied colourful effects on the white surface. The *shooting paintings* gained her access to the Nouveaux Réalistes, a group that included Pierre Restany, Arman, César, Christo, Gérard Deschamps, François Dufrêne, Raymond Hains, Yves Klein, Martial Raysse, Mimmo Rotella, Daniel Spoerri, Jean Tinguely and Jacques de la Villeglé.

She then moved on from the shooting paintings to producing the assemblages in the form of pagan alters that included contradictory objects like revolvers, rats, dinosaurs and even crucifixes.

The *Nanas* appeared in 1965, inspired by an academic drawing by Larry Rivers of his pregnant wife. These *Nanas* were voluptuous large women

Figure 5

Nana,
small-scale
(1999).

**Figure 6**

Nana,
large-scale
(Hannover, 1974).

**Figure 7**

The Skaters,
medium-scale
(1975).



with generous curves, hand painted in bright colours. At the beginning they were made with wool and paper mâché, but later Saint-Phalle began to experiment with polyester resin and even inflatable material. By using polyester resin it was possible to paint colourful, decorative motifs on the

figures. However, polyester gives off toxic gases that in some cases can kill, and although Saint-Phalle knew that this material could be fatal, she continued to use it throughout her whole life. The figures were of different sizes, some were very large, like the one in Hannover, and even gigantic, like the one in the

Moderna Museet in Stockholm (28 metres long, 9 metres wide and 6 metres high) called *Hon* ("She" in Swedish.) The latter, a sculpture that the spectator could walk through, received 100,000 visitors who passed through its vaginal canal and across the whole of its stomach before it was destroyed 3 months later.

Figure 8

Stravinsky fountain
(1982).

**Figure 9**

Stravinsky fountain (1982).



Inside this *meganana* there was a “milk bar”, a small cinema, a planetarium, an aquarium and an art gallery full of copies of modern works of art.

Niki de Saint-Phalle created several works with Jean Tinguely, who she married in 1971. She incorporated the Swiss sculptor’s ingenious mechanical elements in her sculptures and gave them the power of movement. Good examples of this are: a work called *The Skaters* (acrylic on resin, on a plinth by Tinguely, 1975); the set and costumes for the Roland Petit ballet *Eloge de la Folie* in 1966; *Le Paradis Fantastique* for the French pavilion at Expo’67 in Montreal, that included 9 paintings by Saint-Phalle and 6 kinetic works of art by Tinguely; the *Stravinsky Fountain*, that included 16 sculptures inspired by the music of the composer and was located next to the Pompidou Centre in 1982; *La fontaine Château-Chinon* in 1988; and *Espace Jean Tinguely - Niki de Saint-Phalle*, in Fribourg, the birthplace of the Swiss artist.

In 1983, the Stuart Foundation commissioned the *Sun God* for the University of San Diego in California. This was the first large outdoor work done by Saint-Phalle in America. This creation which subsequently became the symbol for the UCSD was a huge bird

painted with bold shapes and vivid colours. It was 36 metres high and stood on top of a 45 foot concrete arc (now covered in ivy.) The architectural structure for children created in Rabinovich Park in Jerusalem, inspired by the story of Noah’s Arc, is also very interesting.

Niki de Saint-Phalle collaborated artistically in different films. She joined the fight against AIDS and collaborated on an animated film by her son Philip, based on a book by the artist herself entitled: *AIDS: You can’t catch it holding hands*, which was published by the *Agence Française de lutte contre le sida* and distributed to all the schools in the country.

In 1982 an American company invited Niki de Saint-Phalle to create a new perfume (*Perfume 4 You.*) It was a success and allowed her to finance her dream that started in Park Güell in Barcelona: her *Tarot Garden*. At the time she said “I have found both my master and my destiny.” It took over 10 years to

Figure 10

Sun God. University of San Diego (1983).



build (it was opened in 1998), and is situated on a small mountain near Garaviccio, a small coastal town in Tuscany. It is a huge garden with 22 colossal house-figures based on the Tarot’s major arcana. The sculptures are inspired by the world of fantasy and sensual, rounded shapes. They are covered with drawings and fragments of mirrors, glass and brightly coloured ceramic mosaics, similar to Gaudi’s

Figure 11

Tarot Garden.
The Empress (1998).



Figure 12

Tarot Garden.
The wheel of fortune
(1998).



Figure 13

Tarot Garden. *Mosaics*
(1998).



Figure 14 *Golfer.*
Nice (2002).



Figure 15 *Baseball player.*
Nice (2002).



Figure 16 *Basketball players.*
Nice (2002).



“trencadis”. For several years, Saint-Phalle lived in one of these outrageous constructions (called the Empress), stating that she was “the mother inside the mother.” The *Tarot Garden* is surrounded by wild plantlife and rocks and was described by Simon Vernon as “the largest sculpture garden after Gaudí’s.” This work probably symbolises the peak of this enigmatic and hugely imaginative woman’s artistic career.

In 1996 Saint-Phalle began building *Gila* in San Diego, a play house for children, which may be also inspired by Gaudí and shaped like a dragon that was 3.63 metres high, 9 metres long and covered in a mosaic of mirrors, stones and ceramic pieces. Interestingly, she used a computer programme to create this monumental work.

In 1998 she produced a series of sculptures called *Black heroes* that included famous African Americans like Michael Jordan, Joséphine Baker and Louis Amstrong, and was dedicated to their mixed-race grandchildren.

In 2001, Saint-Phalle donated a significant number of her creations to the city of Nice. She organised a large retrospective exhibition at the Musée d’Art Moderne et d’Art Contemporain in Nice, that ran from 17 March to 27 October 2002. During this period many monumental sculptures inspired by jazz

musicians, sportsmen and totems were exhibited in the streets of the city. One of these, the *Loch Ness Monster* that let out an endless stream of water from its jaws, was permanently placed in front of the museum in a square named after the artist herself. However, as a result of her continued use of polyester the artist began

Figure 17 *Loch Ness Monster (1993).*



to suffer from severe respiratory problems and died in San Diego on 21 May of that same year from severe emphysema.

Niki de Saint-Phalle was undoubtedly an extraordinary and enigmatic artist

whose ingenuity and imagination knew no bounds.

Useful Information

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niki_de_Saint_Phalle

<http://stuartcollection.edu/phalle/index.html>

<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/0,1518,113673,00.html>

<http://mosaicartsource.wordpress.com/>