

**THE SCHIRN IS PRESENTING NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE'S RADICAL AND VISIONARY WORK IN A COMPREHENSIVE SURVEY EXHIBITION**

## **NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE**

**FEBRUARY 3 – MAY 21, 2023**

**PRESS PREVIEW: THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2023, 11 A.M.**

Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002) is one of the most famous women artists of her generation and is deemed a main representative of European Pop Art and a cocreator of the Happening. From February 3 to May 21, 2023, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is presenting the wide-ranging oeuvre of the French-American visionary in a comprehensive exhibition that, through around one hundred works, offers an overview of all of her practice's phases.

In the five decades of her creative work, Saint Phalle developed an unmistakable language of form and a multifaceted oeuvre. The *Nanas*, her colorful large-format sculptures of women, laid the foundations for her international success and are regarded to this day as her trademark. However, Saint Phalle was an autodidact whose artistic spectrum also extended far beyond these pieces. She focused on different techniques, topics, and working methods and created ambivalent and subversive works full of joy and brutality, humor and waywardness. For Saint Phalle, art was more than a mere means of expression: it was a personal necessity that could be used to challenge social conventions. In her work, she repeatedly articulated a plea for women and the feminine. She criticized institutions and conventional models and addressed social and political issues in her work, including war and violence as well as the stigmatization associated with AIDS, the right to abortion, gun laws, and climate change. Early in her career, Saint Phalle departed from painting and managed to establish herself in the male-dominated art scene. Her early paintings were followed by assemblages, and by the 1960s she was creating her legendary *Shooting Pictures* or *Tirs* in spectacular performances, in which she involved the audience. Her drawings, writings, and large-scale sculptures, as well as plays, films, and installations in public space, bear witness to the transformative power of her art, which reached its climax in her architectural life's work, the *Tarot Garden* in Tuscany.

The extensive exhibition at the Schirn illuminates the breadth of Saint Phalle's artistic spectrum, from her early paintings to her large-scale sculptures. The Schirn was able to secure important loans for this exhibition from German and international museums, as well as public and private collections, and bring them together in Frankfurt—including the Sprengel Museum Hannover; Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, Nice; Musée d'art et d'histoire, Fribourg; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien; Museum Tinguely, Basel; and Kunsthau Zürich.

The exhibition "Niki de Saint Phalle" is supported by the Dr. Marschner Stiftung.

Dr. Sebastian Baden, director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, explains: "With our exhibition 'Niki de Saint Phalle,' we are showing at the Schirn how the creator of the globally popular *Nanas* was a visionary and politically minded artist. She consistently saw her work as directly situated within life and connected to social discourses. Through her collectively produced works, in which she also allowed viewers to take part, and her monumental sculptures in public spaces, she created new forms of participation. She initiated a public dialogue through her art on socially relevant issues that are still pressing today. With this in mind, I am pleased to be able to present the radical as well as humorous work of the artist, in all facets of her five-decade oeuvre, to a broad audience in Frankfurt."

Katharina Dohm, curator of the exhibition, remarks: “Niki de Saint Phalle continues to fascinate us today with her enormous creative power and the broad spectrum of her artistic expression. She uncompromisingly defied the rigid social conventions of her time and the prevailing rules of the art world. Her artistic urge to create was fed by her rage against a society permeated by patriarchal structures, which she challenged with her openhearted, provocative work. Both joyful and macabre depictions and a keen sense of the ambiguity of good and evil permeate her entire oeuvre.”

## TOUR OF THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition at the Schirn illuminates the different phases of Saint Phalle’s artistic oeuvre in six thematic groupings, presented in an exhibition layout designed by Adrien Rovero Studio.

Saint Phalle first became known in the early 1960s with her *Shooting Pictures (Tirs)* series. In provocative performances that took place in front of an audience, she shot with a rifle at packets of paint embedded within white plaster reliefs, causing the works to literally begin to bleed. In 1961, these actions led to her inclusion as the only female artist in the Nouveaux Réalistes group, which centered around Pierre Restany; these artists rejected the abstract art of the postwar period and demanded a new alliance between art and reality. Essential to *Shooting Pictures* is the dissolution of the strict separation between artist, audience, and artwork. Visitors—as well as fellow artists such as Pierre Restany, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Edward Kienholz—actively participated in these happenings by shooting at the pictures. In turn, they became participants in a destructive and simultaneously creative act of social criticism. In 1963, Saint Phalle stopped making her *Shooting Pictures* series. The Schirn presents, among others, two works from the series *Old Masters*, which Saint Phalle showed in 1961 in her first solo exhibition “Feu à volonté” (“Fire Away”) at Galerie J in Paris. Large-format works such as *King-Kong* (1962/63) and *Heads of State (Study for King-Kong)* (1963), which feature satirical depictions of male protagonists of world politics, underscore the political dimension of the *Shooting Pictures*.

Even prior to her *Shooting Pictures*, Saint Phalle had devoted herself entirely to art. After treatment for a nervous breakdown in 1953, she initially focused on painting. In order to be able to work as an artist, she eventually separated from her husband Harry Mathews and their two children in 1960. In Paris she met her artistic companion and longtime partner Jean Tinguely, with whom she subsequently realized numerous projects. Beginning in 1963, they lived together in France and the United States. After her early paintings, the self-taught artist worked from 1958 onwards on assemblages and landscapes, into which she integrated found broken crockery and everyday objects such as razors, gloves, and plastic objects (including toy guns). Inspired by contemporary art, she experimented with different techniques, such as in *Nightscape* (1959), where she used both a dripping technique influenced by Jackson Pollock and the ancient Moorish mosaic technique used by Antoni Gaudí. She also drew on influences from Jean Dubuffet, Surrealist collages, Neo-Dada, and naïve painting.

Beginning in 1963, Saint Phalle’s assemblages became more figurative and explored female identity. Although the artist did not actively participate in the emerging second-wave women’s movement, her works anticipated central aspects of the feminist art movement. With works such as *Femme nue (Figure) (Naked Woman (Figure))* (1963/64), *L’accouchement rose (Pink Birth)* (1964), or *Autel des femmes (Altar of Women)* (1964), she created imposing yet also quite monstrous female figures. Emphatically feminine and covered with plastic toys and found objects, these sculptures ambiguously illuminate the power of female virility while critically challenging women’s traditional roles as wives, mothers, and sexualized bodies in postwar Western society.

# SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

In 1965, Saint Phalle debuted her new *Nanas* series in Paris, which she described as a “jubilant celebration of women.” Unlike her early assemblages, the voluptuous and often pregnant female figures—painted in bright colors and featuring plump breasts, large buttocks, and small heads—embody joie de vivre and strength, proclaiming a matriarchy liberated from oppression. Following this, the *Nanas* were created in many iterations: in different materials, sizes, and colors, and as sculptures in public spaces and walk-in *Nana houses*. For the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the artist realized the large sculpture *Hon – En Kathedral (She – A Cathedral)* in 1966, in collaboration with Per Olof Ultvedt and Jean Tinguely. This work consisted of a *Nana* that could be entered through the vagina, inside of which was an amusement park for adults complete with a milk bar, a cinema, and exhibitions, among other things. The Schirn is presenting a model and a sketch as well as documentary material of the figure, which measured twenty-five meters in length, nine meters in width, and six meters in height; only the figure’s head has been preserved. As a counter to the liberated *Nanas*, the artist conceived the series *The Devouring Mothers* in the 1970s, which depicts aging women bound by social conventions. In the exhibition works such as *Tea Party, ou Le Thé chez Angelina (Tea Party, or Tea at Angelina’s)* (1971) and *La Toilette (The Grooming)* (1978) are on show. This series, in conjunction with the illustrated *The Devouring Mothers, Storybook* (1972), and the film *Daddy* (1973), addresses the difficult relationship with her mother and the abuse by her father during her childhood. A film program accompanying the exhibition presents *Daddy* as well as Saint Phalle’s film *Un rêve plus long que la nuit (A Dream Longer Than the Night)* (1976).

Saint Phalle’s fascination with architectural sculptures emerged at the very beginning of her artistic career. As early as the 1950s, visits to Antoni Gaudí’s *Park Güell* in Barcelona and Ferdinand Cheval’s *Palais idéal* in Hauterives, France, among others, left a lasting impression on her. The desire to integrate art into people’s lives manifests in her work through various ways: from a motif in her early paintings to her sculptural buildings, children’s playhouses, and sculpture parks. After 1975, she began to focus her attention on the *Tarot Garden*, which eventually became her artistic legacy. She worked for over twenty years on this large-scale project, which she financed herself. A number of artists, including Jean Tinguely, Seppi Imhof, and Rico Weber, participated in its creation. The garden was opened on May 15, 1998, and includes twenty-two monumental sculptures, some enterable and inhabitable, which are covered with mosaics of colored stones and shards of ceramics and mirrors. The Schirn presents models of some of the structures, including *Sphinx* (n.d.) and *Magician – House of Meditation* (1978), as well as of projects that could not be realized, such as *Temple of All Religions* (1974–1988).

A concern with political themes is present in each of the artist’s creative phases. Her *Shooting Pictures* were made amidst the Algerian War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the nuclear threat of the Cold War. In the 1980s, she was one of the first artists to participate in the fight against AIDS through educational campaigns. It was in this context that she realized the sculptures *Trilogie des obélisques (Trilogy of Obelisks)* (1987), and *Skull, Meditation Room* (1990), both on view at the Schirn. In 2001, the artist made a series of prints in the US that continued a long series of pictographic letters she had begun in the 1960s. In these works, the artist negotiates public discussions in the U.S. and elsewhere that are still relevant today, such as the lack of regulation of the arms industry and the debate over abortion and a woman’s right to bodily autonomy and self-determination. In *Global Warming* (2001), Saint Phalle criticizes the then Republican president George W. Bush, whose policies she sees as embodying environmental neglect.

An exhibition in cooperation with Kunsthau Zürich.

**SCREENINGS OF *UN RÊVE PLUS LONG QUE LA NUIT* (1976) AND *DADDY* (1973)**

# SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

As part of the exhibition, the Schirn, in cooperation with Arthouse Kinos Frankfurt, is presenting two film productions by Niki de Saint Phalle at the Cinéma am Roßmarkt: *Un rêve plus long que la nuit* (1976, 120 min.), on Friday, February 3 at 6:30 p.m., with an introduction by Dr. Beate Kemfert (director of the Kunst- und Kulturstiftung Opelvillen Rüsselsheim); and *Daddy* (1973, 120 min.) on Saturday, February 4 at 12 p.m., with an introduction by curator Katharina Dohm. Tickets via [arthouse-kinos.de](http://arthouse-kinos.de), €11 per person.

**CATALOG** *Niki de Saint Phalle*, published by Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft / Kunsthaus Zürich and Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, with contributions by Rhiannon Ash, Christoph Becker, Monster Chetwynd, Bice Curiger, Katharina Dohm, Sandra Gianfreda, Margrit Hahnloser-Ingold, Cathérine Hug, Seppi Imhof, Mickry 3, Shana Moulton, Nicolas Party, and Laure Prouvost, as well as a foreword by the director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Sebastian Baden, German and English editions, 207 pages, 195 illustrations, 23.5 x 29 cm, softcover, gatefold brochure, Hatje Cantz Verlag, ISBN 978-3-7757-5299-2 (German edition), 978-3-7757-5300-5 (English edition), €35 (Schirn), €44 (bookstores).

**DIGITORIAL®** The Schirn offers a Digitalorial® to accompany the exhibition. The free digitally mediated offer will be available in German and English from the end of January 2023 at [www.schirn.de/digitalorial/niki](http://www.schirn.de/digitalorial/niki).

**LOCATION** SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt am Main

**DURATION** February 3 – May 21, 2023 **INFORMATION** [www.schirn.de](http://www.schirn.de) **E-MAIL**

[welcome@schirn.de](mailto:welcome@schirn.de) **PHONE** +49.69.29 98 82-0 **TICKETS** in the Schirn online store and at the Schirn box office **ADMISSION** on weekends €14, reduced €12; on weekdays €12, reduced €10, free admission for children under 8 **GUIDES BOOKING** Individual guided tours for groups can be booked now at [fuehrungen@schirn.de](mailto:fuehrungen@schirn.de) **INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR VISIT** All information about your visit and the currently valid hygiene measures can be found at [www.schirn.de/en/visit/faq](http://www.schirn.de/en/visit/faq) **CURATORS** Katharina Dohm, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, and Christoph Becker, Kunsthaus Zürich **CURATORIAL ASSISTANT** Marie Oucherif **MEDIA PARTNER** Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, VGF **CULTURE PARTNER** hr2 **SUPPORTED BY** Dr. Marschner Stiftung

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