

Niki de Saint Phalle: Masterworks 1959 to 1970

Galerie Georges-Philippe & Nathalie
Vallois

sept 7 to nov 22, 2023



I started making imaginary landscapes in relief using objects and I stopped painting in oils to use gouache and lacquer. I bought toys in stores and scoured flea markets for items. They were mainly objects associated with violence, such as a hatchet, knives, and rifles. It was fun exciting, I liked this new immediate way of expressing myself.

-Niki de Saint Phalle



Martyr Nécessaire/Saint Sébastien/Portrait de mon Amour/Portrait of Myself, 1960-61

In 1961 I shot at Daddy, all men, small men, tall men, big men, fat men, men, my brother, society, the Church, the convent, the school, my family, my mother, all men, Daddy, myself, men. I shot because it was fun and gave me a great feeling.



Le Château de Gilles de Rais, 1962

Niki de Saint Phalle began her *Tirs* performances in 1961 (from the French, "tirer": to shoot). Preparation involved constructing relief panels with a variety of objects including dolls, religious items, fragments of crockery, toy cars and aeroplanes, and flowers, into which she fastened bags of paint. For the performance, she would shoot at the panel, causing the bags to burst and allowing their contents to spray and spill over the white surface. She explained that she shot because it was fun and it made her feel good. 'Men with their rockets, their atomic bomb, and all that filth they've dumped on us', she said. 'Only a woman could use those destructive contraptions that man has imagined for a constructive end, and that's beautiful'.

She had been taken aback when the painter Joan Mitchell seemed to dismiss her ambitions since she did not have commercial gallery representation and could therefore not be taken as a serious artist. Saint Phalle's position was perhaps also made more difficult by the fact that she had not been to art school. Jean Dubuffet had coined the term *Art Brut* to refer to art made by those outside the established context provided by art schools, galleries and museums, but Saint Phalle, for all that she lacked a formal art education, was very much an insider. When she showed the *Tirs* in New York, she involved her friends Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg in the exhibition. Resonances with the work of both can undoubtedly be seen in the assemblage-like reliefs she constructed and her use of strong colour. There is, too, an affinity with the drip technique of Jackson Pollock, and some criticism of her New York exhibition emphasised the view that her work was derivative. Donald Judd, for example,

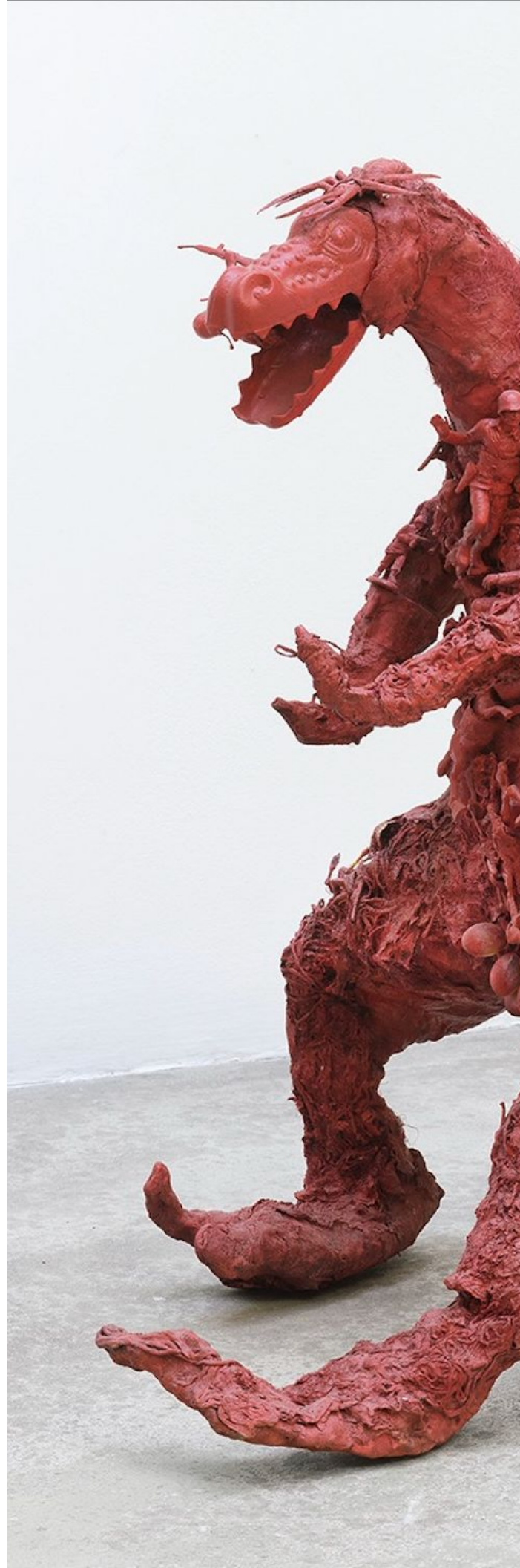
reviewing in *Arts* magazine, saw it as betraying the 'prevalent European failing' of mixing 'novel devices with very naive ideas about ... past culture'. But Saint Phalle was clear, both that her work was distinct, and that it arose from a quite different motivation: 'I wanted the world and the world then belonged to MEN. ... I felt jealous and resentful that the only power allotted to me was the power of attracting men' (she had worked as a model in the 1950s, appearing on the cover of *Vogue* in 1953).



Niki shooting at *Old Master*, Paris, 1961

After the *Tirs* Saint Phalle began making the large, exuberant sculptures which she collectively referred to as *Nanas*. These were initially inspired by the sight of her friend, Clarice Rivers, in the last weeks of pregnancy, and by Neolithic figurines of the fertile female form, such as the *Venus of Willendorf*. With small heads, tapered limbs, and rounded torsos, the *Nanas* are the antithesis of the slender, gamine look then coming into favour for fashion models. The brightly coloured patterning of their surfaces is a further contrast with the standards of beauty provided by Classical Greek statuary which, although originally coloured, was now valued in its white marble state, an absence that characterises much modern architecture, and establishes the pretend purity of the white cube gallery. Saint Phalle had visited Barcelona's Park Güell, and had been impressed with the ceramic mosaics decorating the features designed there by Antoni Gaudí. Where we can see Gaudí's embedding of fragments into the surfaces to create the colourful results seized upon in the construction of the *Tir* panels, the all-over, fractured colour is a feature of the *Nanas*.

Catherine Francblin is a French art historian; she is member of the International Association of Art Critics and was the editor of Art Press magazine from 1975 to 1992. She has published numerous texts and books about contemporary art including: Daniel Buren (Art Press/Flammarion, 1987); The New Realists (ed. du Regard, 1997), Bertrand Lavier (Flammarion, 1999). She is also the author of several biographies: Niki de Saint Phalle. La révolte à l'œuvre (Hazan, 2013) the first French biography of the artist; Jean Fournier, un galeriste amoureux de la couleur (Herman, 2018) and recently, Bernar Venet. Toute une vie pour l'Art (Gallimard, 2022).



SAINT PHALLE

My work and life are like a fairy tale full of quests, evil dragons, hidden treasures, devouring mothers, witches, the bird of paradise, the good mother, glimpses of paradise, and descents into hell.



Le Dragon Rouge (The Red Dragon), 1964

The Nanas, which put everyone in a good mood. The Nanas, which are the opposite of the coin to the white reliefs. The Nanas, some of whose forms come from the most ancient antiquity.



Mini Nana Maison (Mini Nana House), 1968-1969