

ARKEN

PRESS RELEASE

Niki de Saint Phalle – performance pioneer and seductive feminist

From wild ‘shooting actions’ to sensual, dancing sculptures of female figures and exuberant sculpture parks, French-American Niki de Saint Phalle was one of the most radical and visionary artists of the 20th century. In February she can be experienced at ARKEN.

Dragons and demons, heroines and plump ladies in big flowery bathing suits. Niki de Saint Phalle’s universe is at once violent and colourful, sombre and humorous. In her art Saint Phalle combines strong attitudes to gender roles and equality with universal themes like love, *joie de vivre* and personal liberation. She broke through on the international art scene in 1961 and became famous – indeed notorious – for her sensational ‘shooting actions’ and exploratory depictions of women. Yet at first it was not in the cards that this girl, brought up a Catholic with aristocratic forebears, would become an anti-authoritarian feminist, *femme fatale* and acclaimed artist.

Niki de Saint Phalle (1930-2002) was born near Paris, the daughter of an American mother and an aristocratic French father. She grew up in the USA, and when young worked as a photo model for *Vogue*, *Elle* and *LIFE magazine*. By the age of 18 Saint Phalle was married and soon afterwards she had two children. But she had difficulty with the bourgeois family life and suffered several mental breakdowns. Art became her therapy and tool for survival, but at the same time it meant a painful rupture with her family. Saint Phalle then devoted herself entirely to art – as when, over the course of 20 years, she realized her life’s work in the ‘Tarot Garden’ in Tuscany.

Fighting spirit and zest for life

Female existence and identity is the main theme in Niki de Saint Phalle’s art. As a critical commentary on the usual prejudices about female roles, she depicted ‘the Bride’, ‘the Woman Giving Birth’, ‘the Whore’, ‘the Witch’ and ‘the Heroine’. In 1965 Saint Phalle introduced her ‘Nana’ sculptures. The festive, seductive sculptures acclaim the female body and express joy, self-assurance and fertility. But beneath the powerful aura the Nanas also problematize the rigid female roles and ideals of beauty that Saint Phalle herself embodied as a young photo model and later struggled against.

Sharpshooting performance pioneer

Dressed in a tight-fitting white suit, shiny black leather boots and armed with a gallery rifle, Niki de Saint Phalle was battle-ready. She fired away at her pictures, which concealed pockets of paint that exploded when she hit the

spot. The results were powerful and colourful. With this feminist act she was first and foremost shooting at the male-dominated structure of society, but also at 'the patriarch', with a personal reference to her own father. Saint Phalle was among the very first to privilege the artistic process over the finished work, and was a pioneer in performance art. For Saint Phalle art and her self-staging were two sides of the same coin. As a former photo model she had deep insight into the power of the mass media and knew how to use the media in her self-presentation. In public Saint Phalle assumed the role of the sensual, explosive, adventurous *femme fatale*.

Biggest Niki presentation in recent times in Denmark

Niki de Saint Phalle stands today as one of the most important female artists of the 20th century. ARKEN's exhibition tells the whole story of the feminist pioneer who with uncompromising dedication created a whole world of her own. With a good 100 works, photographs and documentary film clips, *NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE* will be the biggest presentation of Saint Phalle's art in recent times in Denmark. The exhibition can be experienced from 13 February until 12 June 2016.

NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE has been realized in collaboration with the Niki Charitable Art Foundation, MAMAC and the art historian and curator Camille Morineau - responsible for the award-winning Niki de Saint Phalle exhibition at Grand Palais in 2014.

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