



The Menil Collection and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego announce *Niki de Saint Phalle in the 1960s*

Houston museum debuts first major U.S. exhibition to focus on the radical work of Niki de Saint Phalle during the 1960s—from the artist’s shooting paintings to her exuberant sculptures of women



HOUSTON—*January 26, 2021*—The Menil Collection and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego are pleased to announce *Niki de Saint Phalle in the 1960s*. The exhibition, which will debut in Houston, is the first show to focus on the experimental and prolific work of French American artist Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002) during this pivotal decade, featuring numerous works from European collections that will be displayed in the United States for the first time. *Niki de Saint Phalle in the 1960s* will be **on view at the Menil from September 10, 2021–January 2, 2022**, and will open spring 2022 in San Diego.

The exhibition explores a transformative ten-year period in Saint Phalle’s work, when she embarked on two significant series: the *Tirs*, or “shooting paintings,” and the powerful *Nanas*, lively sculptures of the female form. Affirming the artist’s place in postwar art history, this show highlights these prescient works of performance, participatory, and feminist art, as well as her transatlantic projects and collaborations. *Niki de Saint Phalle in the 1960s* brings together major paintings, assemblages, and sculptures from this prolific chapter in the artist’s career, as well as extensive film and photographic documentation from the Menil Collection Archives.

Rebecca Rabinow, director of the Menil Collection, said: “*Niki de Saint Phalle in the 1960s* is the latest in a group of exhibitions organized by the Menil Collection that calls attention to groundbreaking women

artists, including our current exhibition *Virginia Jaramillo: The Curvilinear Paintings, 1969–1974*; *Roni Horn: When I Breathe, I Draw* (2019); *Mona Hatoum: Terra Infirma* (2018); and *Lee Bontecou: Drawn Worlds* (2014). The show will include work by Saint Phalle that has never before been displayed in the United States, shedding light on the artist's experimental processes, radical vision, and key role in contemporary art."

Niki de Saint Phalle in the 1960s opens with the artist's *Tirs*, which she created using a .22 caliber rifle. Often standing in front of an audience, Saint Phalle and invited participants would shoot at white plaster surfaces that concealed imbedded bags of pigment or cans of paint, which would explode spectacularly upon the impact of the bullets. Saint Phalle explained that her intention was "to make a painting bleed." Her paradoxical method of creating a work through destruction was intended as commentary on the ingrained violence of the culture, as well as a feminist assault the tradition of modern painting.



The exhibition continues with Saint Phalle's explorations of gender identity through figural assemblages representing female archetypes, such as brides, mothers, goddesses, and monsters. Evolving from wall-bound reliefs to colorful and freestanding sculptures, these increasingly monumental, liberated, and curvaceous female forms—with outstretched arms and powerful poses—developed into what Saint Phalle referred to as the *Nanas*, French slang for "girls." These sculptures were begun in the mid and late 1960s, heralding the rise of an international feminist movement.



Michelle White, Senior Curator at the Menil Collection, said: "During the 1960s, Saint Phalle—the only female member of the French avant-garde group, the Nouveaux Réalistes—also collaborated with innovative American artists of her generation, such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Within the male-dominated artistic circles on both sides of the Atlantic, her place in art history has been hard-fought. Her artwork from this time constitutes some of the most advanced work being done around emergent ideas of participatory art and was prophetic of feminist concerns related to the critique of painting and the representation of the body that will drive art in the decades to come."

Jill Dawsey, Curator, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, said: "Saint Phalle's performances and sculptural work of the 1960s put into circulation strikingly original representations of female agency and volition that resonate strongly in our own moment. With their rambunctious life force, the *Nanas* became a vehicle for the artist's exploration of women's freedom and mobility in the public realm. Saint Phalle continuously experimented with their scale, using her figures to envision how women might, quite literally, take up more space in the world. Her trailblazing work presaged ideas and modes of making that would be elaborated by feminist artists in the in the 1970s and beyond."

Niki de Saint Phalle in the 1960s is co-curated by Michelle White, Senior Curator, the Menil Collection, and Jill Dawsey, PhD, Curator, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. A catalogue for the exhibition will be available September 2021.

About the Menil Collection

Houston philanthropists and art patrons John and Dominique de Menil established the Menil Foundation in 1954 to foster greater public understanding and appreciation of art, architecture, culture, religion, and philosophy. In 1987, the Menil Collection's main museum building opened to the public. Today, the Menil Collection consists of a group of five art buildings and green spaces located within a residential neighborhood. The Menil remains committed to its founders' belief that art is essential to human experience and fosters direct personal encounters with works of art. The museum welcomes all visitors free of charge to its museum buildings and surrounding green spaces. menil.org

About the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego

Founded in 1941, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (MCASD) is the preeminent contemporary visual arts institution in San Diego County. The Museum's collection includes more than 5,500 works of art created since 1950. In addition to presenting exhibitions by international contemporary artists, the Museum serves thousands of children and adults annually at its varied education programs, and offers a rich program of film, performance, and lectures. MCASD is a private, nonprofit organization, with 501c3 tax-exempt status; it is supported by generous contributions and grants from MCASD Members and other individuals, corporations, foundations, and government agencies. Kathryn Kanjo is The David C. Copley Director and CEO at MCASD. Institutional support for MCASD is provided by the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture.

Funding

Major funding for this exhibition in Houston is provided by a gift in memory of Virginia P. Rorschach; and Bettie Cartwright. Additional support comes from Julie and John Cogan Jr.; Robin and Andrew Schirrmeyer; Niki Charitable Art Foundation; and the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance.

Research for this exhibition was supported by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Image Captions

1. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Pirodactyl over New York*, 1962. Paint, plaster, and various objects on two wood panels, 98 3/8 x 122 x 11 3/8 in. (249.9 x 309.9 x 28.9 cm). Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. © Niki Charitable Art Foundation / ADAGP, Paris, 2021
2. Niki de Saint Phalle taking aim during a shooting session at the Impasse Ronsin, Paris, 1962. Photo © André Morain.
3. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Madame ou Nana verte au sac noir*, 1968. Painted polyester, 101 9/16 x 60 5/8 x 25 9/16 in. (258 x 154 x 65 cm). Private collection, Switzerland; Courtesy of Georges-Philippe & Nathalie Vallois Gallery, Paris. © Niki Charitable Art Foundation / ADAGP, Paris, 2021. Photo: André Morin

Press Contacts

The Menil Collection
Sarah Hobson, Assistant Director of Communications
shobson@menil.org

Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego
Chris Cloud, Director, Communications and Marketing
ccloud@mcasd.org

Polskin Arts & Communications Counselors
Tommy Napier, Senior Account Supervisor
tommy.napier@finnpartners.com