

Media release

Zurich, 1 September 2022

Kunsthhaus Zürich presents 'Niki de Saint Phalle'

From 2 September 2022 to 8 January 2023, the Kunsthhaus Zürich presents a retrospective of ca. 100 works showcasing the exceptional oeuvre of Niki de Saint Phalle, including early assemblages, action art and graphic works, the Nanas, the Tarot Garden and large, late sculptures.

Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002), a leading female artist of the 20th century, gained worldwide fame with her 'Nanas', which exemplify the seemingly carefree cheerfulness typically associated with the artist. Yet there is much more to her than that.

Her output is surprisingly multifaceted – eccentric, emotional, dark and brutal, humorous, enigmatic and often challenging. Its remarkably broad spectrum ranges from painting and drawing to assemblages, actions and large-format sculptures, and even theatre, film and architecture.

She was intensely concerned with social and political issues, challenging institutions and established societal roles in ways that give her work an enduring and contemporary relevance. With her legendary 'Shooting Paintings', created in provocative actions as far back as the 1960s, Niki de Saint Phalle made a pivotal contribution to the art of performance that is so topical today. Against this backdrop, retracing her artistic career casts a different light on many of her works, especially the 'Nanas' and the large installations in the public space. The selection of works for this exhibition offers an insight into the complex and highly interesting career of this exceptional artist – and, of course, a colourful and diverse visual treat that Christoph Becker has curated as his final exhibition for the Kunsthhaus.

ART AS SAFETY VALVE AND AUTOTHERAPY

For Catherine Marie-Agnès Fal de Saint Phalle, the daughter of an American mother and a French aristocrat father, art was an escape. It was a form of therapy after a difficult childhood and became a driving force and safety valve for a deeply creative personality who, after moving from France to the US, adopting the name 'Niki' and marrying Harry Mathews, in 1956 presented her paintings in public for

the first time – in St. Gallen. The focal point of her life shifted constantly between France, the US, Italy and Switzerland.

In Paris, her actions, which involved shooting at reliefs made of plaster and bags of paint, led to her joining the Nouveaux Réalistes, making her the group's only female member. She was influenced by artists such as the Spanish master architect Antoni Gaudí, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, Jean Dubuffet and Yves Klein, and of course Jean Tinguely, whom she had known since 1956 and with whom she completed many projects.

COLLABORATIVE WORKS ON A LARGE SCALE

Niki de Saint Phalle achieves true international fame in 1966 at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, when she exhibits her first accessible sculpture: 'Hon' weighs six tonnes and is some 25 metres long. Passing between the thighs of the stylized recumbent woman, more than 100,000 visitors find themselves inside what the artist herself called 'the biggest whore in the world'. At Expo 1967 in Montreal, de Saint Phalle's dazzling, voluminous 'Nanas' appear alongside Tinguely's machines. Collaborative works remain a favourite form of practice in the decades that follow. One example is the extensive 'Tarot Garden' project, created in Tuscany from 1978 onwards. It would be impossible to separate out pieces of this total work of art for display in an exhibition. However, the Kunsthhaus will be showing models and photos that reveal the magnitude of the project and the ambition of its creator. To fund her work, de Saint Phalle has furniture and decorative artefacts produced in large numbers. The 'Tarot Garden' takes two decades to complete.

MOVING BETWEEN THE OLD AND NEW WORLDS. BUT NEVER ENTIRELY AT HOME

Niki de Saint Phalle makes repeated visits to Switzerland, for exhibitions and to create her art. Thanks to public commissions, her works are now present in urban centres, especially in France. In the mid-1990s, San Diego becomes her principal residence. She designs large installations for the Kit Carson Park in Escondido between Los Angeles and San Diego, though they are not completed until 2003, after her death. Niki, who lost her gallerist Alexander Iolas and her close co-worker Ricardo Menon to HIV-related illnesses, becomes a knowledgeable and creative campaigner against the spread of AIDS. It is not until late in life that she reveals she had been sexually abused by her father. Against this backdrop, it becomes clear to the public how important – albeit in no way liberating – her relationship with her mother had been. Niki loved to write letters. Much of what we know today about her relationships is thanks to her almost writer-like compulsion to put pen to paper.

IMMORTAL

Around the turn of the millennium, she donates several hundred works to the Sprengel Museum in Hanover and the Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain in Nice. She is also honoured with the Praemium Imperiale, the world-renowned art prize awarded by the Imperial family of Japan. By the time Niki de Saint Phalle dies on 21 May 2002 – an underlying illness and the use of toxic materials such as polyester and glass fibres over many years having caused fatal emphysema – her 'Nanas' have become her trademark.

BIG AND BRIGHT, RESTRAINED AND SUBTLE

This exhibition makes clear that Niki de Saint Phalle remained innovative, courageous and independent throughout her life. Half-open spaces, their interiors sometimes lined in dark blue, sometimes in white, are distributed freely around Switzerland's largest column-free exhibition gallery. Between them, visitors move around a square, as if in a village. Large ribbon windows create a link between the art and the outside world, just as the artist herself liked to when choosing locations for her works. Countless photographs show Niki de Saint Phalle, who also worked as a model, looking out at the viewer. The exhibition opens up unfamiliar perspectives on her work: much of what Niki de Saint Phalle created was neither superficial, nor big and brightly coloured. In this artfully staged presentation, there are many hidden treasures waiting to be discovered.

INTROVERTED AND EXHIBITIONISTIC

De Saint Phalle reveals much about herself – even highly personal things. The traumatic experience of sexual violence from her own father, the fraught and problematic bond with her mother, and her own role as a woman are all present in her work; and many pieces are her way of engaging directly and coming to terms with her experiences and the people involved. An outwardly elegant woman, she was also a standout figure in an art world still dominated by men and in which she occupies an immovable and important place – in Nouveau Réalisme and conceptual art through interaction with the world, and in a very private oeuvre comprising countless letters and drawings. She oscillates between grand, inviting gestures such as 'Nana Mosaïque Noire' (1999), adorned with glittering mirror fragments and shiny ceramic, and introverted love of detail, as with 'L'accouchement rose' (1964), representing a birthing mother with almost monstrous features.

BRAND NIKI

'Aggressive' and 'emotional' are the words that best sum up Niki de Saint Phalle's work today. The vivacious artist's 'brand' is one of the most conspicuous in existence, far beyond the art scene. We encounter her in railway stations, boutiques and stationery shops. A key international artist of the 20th century, Niki de Saint Phalle turned navigating the path between art and commerce to her

advantage like no artist before her. Her legendary perfume has still not been reissued. Perhaps that is a good thing, inasmuch as it allows us to concentrate on the soft tones in her overall artistic oeuvre. Marvels such as this, and much more besides, await visitors to this presentation at the Kunsthhaus.

An exhibition in cooperation with the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt.

Supported by Credit Suisse – Partner Kunsthhaus Zürich – and La Prairie Switzerland.

CATALOGUE

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with contributions and statements by Christoph Becker, Bice Curiger, Sandra Gianfreda, Margrit Hahnloser-Ingold, Cathérine Hug, Monster Chetwynd, Mickry 3, Shana Moulton and Nicolas Party, along with transcripts of conversations between Laure Prouvost and Katharina Dohm as well as Seppi Imhof and Rhiannon Ash. Published in German and English by Hatje Cantz, it contains 208 pages and some 170 illustrations. It is available at the Kunsthhaus shop for CHF 48 and at bookstores.

EVENTS PROGRAMME

Guided tours

Public guided tours in German take place at 6 p.m. on Wednesdays, 3 p.m. on Fridays and 11 a.m. on Sundays. Each lasts one hour.

Guided tour in English: Saturday 1 October, 1 p.m. Guided tour in French: Saturday 15 October, 1 p.m. The Kunsthhaus will be happy to organize private guided tours at a chosen timeslot as well as tours in other languages. Please contact kunstvermittlung@kunsthhaus.ch.

Workshop

A chance for families with children aged 5 and over to explore the work of Niki de Saint Phalle in depth and design their own creations. The family workshops, where participants can paint, draw, glue, cut and experiment to their hearts' content, take place on Sundays 25 September and 30 October, from 10.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. Tickets cost CHF 10 for adults and CHF 5 for children. Register via the online events calendar at www.kunsthhaus.ch.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Kunsthhaus Zürich, Heimplatz, CH-8001 Zurich

Tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 84, www.kunsthhaus.ch

Fri-Sun/Tue 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Wed, Thu 10 a.m.–8 p.m. For public holiday opening see www.kunsthhaus.ch.

KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH

Admission: CHF 23 / CHF 18 (concessions and groups). Admission free to visitors under the age of 17.

Advance ticket sales: www.kunsthaus.ch

Zurich Tourism, tourist information office in Zurich main railway station, tel. +41 44 215 40 00, info@zuerich.com, www.zuerich.com.

CONTACT FOR THE MEDIA

Media releases and images to download as well as an overview of dates for further media briefings can be found at www.kunsthaus.ch/en/medien-bereich/media-corner.

For further information, contact: Kunsthaus Zürich, Kristin Steiner, kristin.steiner@kunsthaus.ch, tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 13