

Niki de Saint Phalle

Galerie Mitterrand/Grand Palais

Three bright and victorious Nana sculptures—*Baigneuse* (Bathing Beauty), 1967–68; *Nana boule (maillot blanc avec polka dots)* (Ball Nana [White Suit with Polka Dots]), ca. 1966–68; and *Nana fontaine type* (Typical Fountain Nana), ca. 1968—greeted visitors to Niki de Saint Phalle’s recent exhibition at Galerie Mitterrand. For the right collector, the flip of a switch would put the fluorescent-painted *Nana Machine*, 1970, one of the smallest Nanas, made in collaboration with Jean Tinguely, in motion. Painted polyester architectural models; *White Tree*, 1972, a haunting monochrome assemblage on wood; and *Femme Bleue* (Blue Woman), 1984, a sculpture from Saint Phalle’s “Skinny” series of the late ’70s through 1999, reflected the artist’s lifelong inventiveness. The intimacy of the artist’s work was most evident in preparatory sketches such as *We won’t my love*, 1968, a cluster of drawings and rounded script on three wrinkled pieces of tracing paper. It mourns the separation from a lover: WE WON’T HOLD HANDS ANYMORE . . . DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH I MISS YOU? The numerous prints and sculptural editions that were also shown should not be disregarded, as they encapsulate the playful line and colors of her unique works; their sale paid for a large percentage of the artist’s monumental public projects, such as her audacious, Antoni Gaudí–inspired *Tarot Garden*, 1978–98, in Tuscany, Italy.

Vividly represented in videos, photographs, and maquettes, *Tarot Garden* is one of almost two hundred works featured in Saint Phalle’s concurrent retrospective at the Grand Palais. Aiming to reestablish the artist’s key role in twentieth-century art, curator Camille Morineau, who calls Saint Phalle “not just one of the most important, if not the most important, female artists of the twentieth century . . . but one of the most important *artists* of the twentieth century,” brings out the complexity of Saint Phalle’s radical practice—which has sometimes been obscured by her popular image as an apolitical heiress distanced from the progressive formal and social concerns of her contemporaries.

Morineau also believes that “although we know Saint Phalle’s joyful and colorful Nanas, we have forgotten the violence, her political engagement and her radical approach.” A large part of the retrospective is thus dedicated to her *Tirs* (Shootings), first performed in central Paris in 1961. Firing a rifle at canvases layered with cheap found objects and canisters of paint, the artist created works that were simultaneously ruined and renewed by the vivid explosions of paint across the initially pale surfaces. After seeing her perform one of her very first *Tirs*, critic Pierre Restany asked Saint Phalle to join the Nouveaux Réalistes, and it is with this French movement that she is often associated. However, Saint Phalle’s work expands beyond the concerns of this strictly European tendency, and her practice should be considered in relation to not only that of her friends and collaborators Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg but also that of Jackson Pollock. In early 1959, visiting the exhibitions “Jackson Pollock: 1912–1956” and “The New American Painting” at the Musée National d’Art Moderne, Saint Phalle was blown away by the emerging generation of American artists. “I felt a new energy emanating from these paintings,” she stated, and she decided to integrate the “gesticulated energy of paint on the canvas” into her own works. *Sans titre (Abstract à la Jackson Pollock)*, 1959, is a large-scale wood panel spattered with black, gray, white, and red paint and bordered at the edges with an imprecise pattern of affixed buttons, beads, and shells. The exuberance of Saint Phalle’s work is part of what makes it revolutionary. “I used to think that to provoke, you had to attack religion, the generals,” Saint Phalle said at the height of her career. “I realized that there was nothing more shocking than joy.”

