

Niki de Saint Phalle

Tate Liverpool Educators' Pack

"Niki is a special case, an outsider. Most of Niki's sculptures have a timeless quality, are reminiscences of ancient civilisations and dreams. Her work and life is like a fairy-tale full of quests, evil dragons, hidden treasure..."

Niki de Saint Phalle, "Niki on Niki", 1986



Niki de Saint Phalle

Cheval et la Mariée, 1963

© 2007, NIKI CHARITABLE ART FOUNDATION, All rights reserved.

Photographer: Laurent Condominas

The artist

Born in France, Catherine Marie-Agnes Fal de Saint Phalle, Niki – her preferred name - was brought up and educated at convent school in New York. In her early career, she modelled for Vogue, Life and other magazines while experimenting with different art-forms and media. She returned to France at the age of twenty-two with her writer/musician husband and young daughter, and studied theatre and acting. Travelling around Europe, she developed an interest in sculpture and architecture - particularly the work of Gaudi and Le Facteur Cheval. Whilst in hospital recovering from a serious nervous breakdown, she started making collages from pebbles, leaves and found materials. A friend brought her some assorted gouaches and brushes and she began to develop her own style through the combination of painting and assemblage.

Following a series of gouaches she experimented with oils and various commercial paints, addressing a range of subject matter and enthusiastically studying the work of twentieth century masters, such as Miro, Klee, Leger, Picasso and Matisse for inspiration. Her highly original form of self-expression helped her to overcome her personal crisis and health problems, and throughout her life, art became her means of coming to terms with feelings, emotions, dreams and nightmares.

Early works

"My early paintings contain many of the ideas I have spent the rest of my life working on"

The early paintings of Niki de Saint Phalle reveal the artist's lack of technical training in their child-like simplicity and naïve treatment of her subject matter. In works such as *Entre la ville et la fleur, c 1956-58*, she created colourful, interlocking scenes featuring motifs that recurred throughout her career – fantastic creatures, monsters, fairytale landscapes and real life images such as cars, planes and sky-scrappers. She drew on her own environment, mythology and her imagination for inspiration.

Her collages became increasingly sculptural as she embedded everyday objects, such as kitchen implements and tools in a thick layer of plaster. *Broken Plates, c 1958* is a richly textured landscape of ceramic fragments and jig-saw shapes that invite the viewer to reassemble the pieces. As with many of her works from this period, there is a sense of optimism – a suggestion that creativity can emerge from destruction

- **Look** at other artists whose work imitated the art of children eg Dubuffet, Constant, Appel, Picasso, Klee, Miro
- **Study** the work of other self-taught artists eg Rousseau, Alfred Wallis
- **Discuss** the characteristics of children's art, eg flatness, use of primary colours, strong line etc. Why would an adult choose to paint like a child?
- **Re-invent art!** Find new materials for painting, collage and sculptures. Break the rules!
- **Create a monster!** First make a list of all the things that you dislike. Make up a monster with all of these characteristics
- **Collect** fragments of broken or damaged objects and use them to make an assemblage

Nouveau Réalisme and the Shooting Paintings

In 1955 Niki de Saint Phalle met sculptor Jean Tinguely, who was supportive of her work and introduced her to the Nouveaux Réalistes, a group of young artists around critic Pierre Restany.

They abandoned traditional painting and sculpture in favour of a two-dimensional art that represented objects in their intrinsic "reality". Tinguely constructed kinetic sculptures from junk, Arman exhibited assemblages of debris, César displayed crushed car-parts and Spoerri "trapped" the remains of meals on trays and table-tops. These artists were concerned with obliterating the traditional barriers between art and life, operating, in Restany's words, "Forty degrees above Dada".

Some of Niki's works of this period, such as *Toy Yellow Car*, c1960-61 and *Two Cowboys*, c1960-61, incorporate small plastic toys which add both colour and an element of fun to the compositions.

Other works include gloves, ribbons, brooches, cards and dice usually fixed to a board backing with plaster and loosely applied paint in the manner of American artist Robert Rauschenberg, another key influence on her work.

Work in Focus: *Shooting Picture*



Niki de Saint Phalle
Shooting Picture, 1961

© 2007, NIKI CHARITABLE ART FOUNDATION, All rights reserved.

"I had the idea of putting some bottles of paint behind a plaster form, these would be fired on with a gun and the paint released; the idea of destruction being one of construction"

- Niki de Saint Phalle, 1987

The artist describes how *Shooting Picture* was made:

"I started working on a piece of wood. Jean Tinguely made a metal container underneath, so that the drips of paint would not go all over the floor, and then I added lots of nails, some wire mesh, some plaster and then some small bags of plastic paint inside it all. The whole effect was then re-covered with plaster to give a totally white surface that was not smooth but textured. The spectator was invited to shoot at the painting to release the colour and make it come alive. It was very exciting to see the red, blue, green coming out and dripping down the picture"

The influence of the radical French artists combined with the impact of an exhibition in Paris of American art that included Pollock, de Kooning, Rauschenberg and Johns, culminated in her own experimental work of the early 1960s and the famous *Shooting Pictures*. Combining action, performance and spectacle, this new art form led to exhibitions world-wide for de Saint Phalle and an invitation from Pierre Restany to become an official member of the *Nouveau Réalistes*. She also became friends with the artists whose works had influenced her own development, such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns who actually shot at this particular *Shooting Picture*.

This relief was one of a series of works created for an exhibition of "*Shooting Pictures*" at the Galerie J in Paris during the summer of 1961. Visitors were invited to pick up a rifle and fire at the art. In doing so they released a trickle of paint and thus contributed to the creative process. The moment of action and the element of chance were as important to the artist as the end product. She enjoyed the unpredictability and excitement generated by these spontaneous works.

She continued making and performing *shooting pictures* for three years until she decided that the activity was perhaps becoming obsessive. She said:

"I decided to stop, to pass on to something else. It was difficult. I missed the spectacle and the excitement and I missed the miracle of the exploding paint."

Activities

- **Make** a shooting picture! Cover bags of paint with plaster or papier maché and then puncture them to allow the paint to drip down the picture surface. You can use the end of a pencil or a stick to release the paint rather than a gun!
- **Create** a painting by dripping paint rather than applying it to the surface with brushstrokes. Build up webs of different colours.
- **Experiment** with different types and consistency of paint. How does it feel? Is it easier or more difficult to control the material by dripping rather than painting? What does it

look like? Is it abstract or can you create shapes and forms that resemble landscapes or figures?

- **Explore** other ways of using gestures to create art (eg blowing on wet paint, punching clay, throwing paint onto a surface, allowing it to run by tilting the paper... be creative!
- **Look** at the work of other artists who have made paintings with different methods and materials eg Pollock, Hartung, Dubuffet (You can see their work in *The Twentieth Century: How it looked and how it felt* display at Tate Liverpool)
- **Research:** The architecture of Gaudi, Dada artists, American Abstract Expressionism and Performance Art. How you think these artists influenced Niki de Saint Phalle?
- **Compare** the targets of Jasper Johns, Peter Blake and the Shooting Pictures of Nike de Saint Phalle. What materials have been used? Would you describe them as sculptures or paintings..or something else?
- **Make** your own target painting/sculpture/collage/installation...
- **Find out** about Nouveau Réalisme Yves Klein, Jean Tinguely, Arman etc. How would you describe their art? What materials did they use? When did they make their art? Where? How was it different to traditional art? Can you think of any other artists who have used real objects in their art?

Brides, Nanas and other sculptures

"My first exhibition with Nanas I called 'Nana power! To me they represented happy, liberated women'".

The early works represent the artist's attempt to re-build her life following her hospitalisation – destroying her past and creating something new from the fragments. She was also trying to redefine and reconcile her own roles as a woman - a wife, a mother and an artist. If the early works demonstrate an aggressive approach to material, her later sculptures and paintings reveal a more relaxed, playful attitude and the artist appears comfortable in her new-found freedom to create.

Between 1963 and 1964 she created a series of brides, mothers, hearts and heads. The brides were sometimes seated, sometimes on horseback and constructed from small objects and toys bound by chicken wire. They are beautiful, passive and detached from real life – more like fairy-tale princesses.

In contrast, the *Nanas* are loud, brash and bursting with energy! The inspiration for these larger than life characters was a drawing made by her friend, artist Larry Rivers of his wife Clarice whilst heavily pregnant. The first sculptures were made from cloth, yarn and papier maché over a wire base. Those meant for outdoor settings were made from stronger materials such as polystyrene, plaster and cement, with a metal frame.

Niki said,

"I dreamt of huge colourful Nanas that could stand outside in the middle of a park or a square – I wanted them to take charge of the world"



Niki de Saint Phalle
Nana Noire Upside-down, 1965-66
© 2007, NIKI CHARITABLE ART FOUNDATION, All rights reserved.

The next stage in the development of her art was to construct sculptures that were not only physically imposing and dominating their surroundings, but also contained expansive interior space that people could enter. The largest of the *Nanas* was "*Hon*", an architectural sculpture built with the aid of Jean Tinguely for an exhibition at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1966. This massive woman contained a series of rooms inside her limbs and colossal body, including a twelve seat cinema, a planetarium, a mini- art gallery and various facilities for visitors such as a payphone and vending machine.

Make your own papier maché Nanas!

You can create your own Nanas (or a male version...maybe Papas?) and decorate them however you choose

You will need –

Newspapers, flour, water, a mixing bowl or bucket and a variety of materials for your base (see below)

Process -

- Create a base for your figure using whatever objects you like – cardboard boxes, tubes, paper cups, screwed up paper, plastic food trays, juice cartons etc. Chicken wire is best for larger projects. Masking tape is useful for holding the objects together before covering with pasted strips.
- Prepare a paste (there are numerous recipes but this is the simplest to prepare). Use a simple mixture of one part flour and two parts water until you get a thick gluey consistency. Mix thoroughly to remove all lumps. Add a few spoons of salt to help prevent mould.
- TEAR newspaper into strips (do not cut it)
- Dip one piece of paper at a time into the paste
- Squeeze out excess paste before smoothing the strip with your fingers over the form you wish to cover
- Completely cover your form with overlapping strips, letting each layer dry for 24 hours before repeating the process
- Continue to add layers until you achieve the desired effect
- Paint and decorate your creation!

Graphics

Niki wrote many imaginary letters to her friends that were never posted, nor were they ever intended to be. In them she relates her feelings, dreams and stories from her life and many of these “letters” were illustrated or accompanied by graphics.

The exhibition features a number of these, such as “Dear Laura” and “Dear Diana”

- **Illustrate** a dream or story from your own life in the style of Niki de Saint Phalle (you can make it up if you like)
- **Write** a letter to a friend with illustrations

Tarot Garden

Niki has created numerous outdoor works in various settings throughout the world, many of which can be explored internally such as *Golem* in Rabinovich Park, Jerusalem, which is a monumental walk-in sculpture with a slide for children to play on.

Her most ambitious project was the Tarot Garden in Tuscany.

It follows the tradition of fantasy gardens such as the Villa d’Este, Parco dei Mostri in Bomarzo, Central Italy, and Gaudi’s Parc Güell in Barcelona

Niki’s sculptures are based on different images featured in the tarot pack which includes characters such as the King and his court along with symbolic or allegorical figures representing traits and virtues. This project occupied Niki for over two decades and she was still working on it when she died in 2002. Many of the figures contained rooms where she lived with her assistants while working on the garden.

Activities

- **Deal** out a pack of tarot cards and give your group a card each to interpret as an artwork. You could also write a short verse on your card and combine everyone’s lines to create a poem.
- **Design** a sculpture to live in! How would the rooms fit together? What materials would you use? What would you put in each room?
- **Look** for other outdoor sculptures by Niki de Saint Phalle on the internet.
- **Find** out about public sculptures in your town? Talk about some of the problems an artist might have to consider when creating art for a public space.



Niki de Saint Phalle
Nana Santé, 1999

© 2007, NIKI CHARITABLE ART FOUNDATION, All rights reserved.
Photo: Michael Herling

Notice: Niki de Saint Phalle, Daddy

The video work, *Daddy* is a psychological exploration of a relationship between a father and daughter, merging autobiography and fiction. It deals with complex issues of sexual abuse and incest, and some scenes may offend visitors.

Tate curators feel that the inclusion of this video is crucial to an understanding of the artist's oeuvre as it informs and explains many images and references of works featured in the exhibition. Art provided Niki with a means of overcoming the psychological damage inflicted by her childhood experiences.

It is important to note that the film itself takes a negative position on sexual abuse and incest.

Signs are displayed prominently at both the entrance to the exhibition and the video room in order to warn visitors of the nature of this particular work. Staff will also be on hand to ensure that unaccompanied children will not be allowed to enter this part of the exhibition. They will also provide information to all visitors to allow them to make informed decisions about viewing this work.

Tate takes its responsibilities to all visitors seriously. Group leaders are encouraged to visit the exhibition or to speak with any of our staff if they have any concerns about this exhibit.

Niki de Saint-Phalle Glossary

Assemblage – art made by assembling different materials – a form of 3D collage

Collage – technique and resulting work of art made by sticking materials onto a supporting surface

Lithograph – print produced by rolling ink over a greased surface. The colour only sticks to the non-greased areas. Paper is then placed against this surface and the plate run through a press.

Nana – French slang for female (equivalent to “lass” or “chick”)

Skinnies – linear sculptures, described by the artist as “drawings in space”

Tarot – a pack of 78 playing cards decorated with allegorical pictures, originally used as a game, now used mainly in fortune-telling

Tirage – French word for “shooting” (tir – to fire)

Further Reading:

Hulten, Pontus, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, Prestel Verlag, 1993

Krempel, Ulrich, *Niki's World: Niki de Saint-Phalle (Adventures in Art)*, Prestel Verlag, 2004

Schultz-Hoffman, Carla, *Niki de Saint Phalle: My Art, My Dreams*, Prestel Verlag, 2003

Violand-Hobi, Heidi, *Niki de Saint-Phalle and Jean Tinguely*, Prestel Verlag, 2007

Other resources

<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/Artist>

<http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary>

<http://www.nikidesaintphalle.com/biography.html>

<http://www.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-newrea-EN/ENS-newrea-EN.htm#chronology>

<http://nikidesaintphalle.org/life/>