Charlotte Loves Colorful Characters

Niki de Saint Phalle: Creation of a New Mythology
March 18 – October 3
Although it’s still a relative newcomer to Charlotte, Firebird, the Niki de Saint Phalle mosaic sculpture, prominently located on the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art’s main entrance plaza, has already become something of an icon for the city since its unveiling in November, 2009. The work has appeared in all sorts of local marketing promotions, brochures and TV spots, and has caught the eye of every tourist who has made their way down South Tryon Street. The mirrored monumental work has succeeded in that most difficult of public art tasks: capturing the fancy of individual citizens while endearing itself to the city at large.

A big part of the sculpture’s appeal is its role as an architectural moderator, which it accomplishes by bringing both the scale and function of the Mario Botta-designed museum building down to the personal level. The work is also emblematic of de Saint Phalle’s sculptures in general; her work has serious visual oomph that can charm and delight, yet also engage deeper questions at certain points; if you’re in the mood to ask.

With Firebird, the Bechtler latched onto de Saint Phalle’s populism in a big way. Andreas Bechtler, the museum’s patron and namesake, recalls seeing the piece initially in Switzerland and became reacquainted with the sculpture after it was included in an exhibition a few years ago in Atlanta. At the time, Bechtler was pondering his options for an outdoor piece for the museum and was leaning towards something along the lines of the Centre Pompidou’s Stravinsky Fountain (a collaboration between de Saint Phalle and her husband, sculptor Jean Tinguely). He decided to purchase the work after that Atlanta experience because for him “it really clicked.”
During the *Firebird*'s short time in front of the museum, the city has grown to love the sculpture and embraced it as a sort of cultural mascot. So when museum staff began making plans for future exhibitions, Bechtler Museum President John Boyer said, “Niki got pushed toward the head of the line because of the *Firebird* and the community's reaction to it. That was a real indicator to us that it’s a community that would want to know more about the artist.”

Thus the Bechtler’s current exhibition, the apocryphally titled “Niki de Saint Phalle: Creation of a New Mythology,” will likely expand her appeal. The show brings five more of her outdoor sculptures to The Green, the park directly across the street from the museum, which already hosts a substantial collection of permanently sited works of public art. From the beginning, planning discussions for the show included the idea of bringing additional outdoor works to town.

“Niki has produced so many pieces that are meant for outside viewing,” Boyer explains, “and I had just been to California and made a couple of pilgrimages to see other outdoor pieces by Niki that I hadn’t actually seen before. Those experiences only served to reinforce how important we thought it was to have her work across the street for the community to enjoy.”

The exhibition also has another 55 pieces on display in the museum’s fourth floor gallery, all but one on loan from the Niki Charitable Art Foundation in California. The show is a mix of sculptures and three dimensional collages, lithographs and etchings with a prevalent funky vibe affirming the *Firebird* allegiance: serpents, birds, corpulent gods and goddesses, dragons, sphinxes, totems, celestial figures, and disembodied heads all make appearances in an ongoing parade of various guises, elaborate persona and vivid color schemes. These topics are in fact fundamental recurring aspects of de Saint Phalle’s methodology and exemplify a compelling fact about her art: while a certain playfulness and accessibility readily appeals to the general public at an introductory level, her work, especially the early pieces, also can probe and dip into stark subject matter. Take a close look at her piece *The Bride*, which is in the show and provides a sense of her encounters with the shady side of identity and societal roles, for instance.

Also of note are three later works dubbed the Meta-Tinguelys (produced in tribute after Jean’s death in 1991), which have kinetic geometric elements powered by small interior motors that begin to move as the viewer approaches. For Boyer, this series represents “an aspect of who (Niki) was as an artist as she tried to breathe life in her work and experiment. The whole dynamic, literally intellectually and physically of making these works come alive and the effect it has on the viewer is absolutely fundamental to who she became as an artist.”

It is also in this series where the most direct connection to the Bechtler family of collectors can be drawn. The work, like the Pompidou fountain, is strongly indicative of the close working and personal relationship of Niki and Tinguely, himself a masterful kinetic sculptor whose work comprises a large percentage of pieces in the museum’s collection. Both artists dealt in whimsy, marvel and serendipity, yet they also quirkyly complemented each other; de Saint Phalle’s playfully primal exuberance consistently providing the yin to Tinguely’s pandemoniacally-mechanized yang.
Miles Davis, 1999
Polyurethane foam resin, steel armature, stained and mirrored glass, tumbled stones, gold leaf, 106 x 51 x 39 in

Petite Ganesh II, 1998
Polyester paint, aluminum base
15.5 x 7.5 x 6.5 in

La Peste, 1986
Painted polyester, plastic baby figurines
44.4 x 72.8 x 11.8 in

Horus, 1999
Painted bronze and base metal
90 1/2 in x 55 1/10 in x 63 in
Photo by Laurent Condominas.
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L’oiseau amoureux, 1994
Serigraph, 25.31 x 19.61 in

Sun God Vase, 2001-2003
Polyester, flash paint, clear coat
20.7 x 21.6 x 8 in

Grande Step Totem, 2001
Polyurethane foam, resin, steel armature, ceramic tiles, tumbled stones, glass, glass pebbles, 198 x 42 x 112 in

La Cabeza Ou Tête de Mort (Grande), 2000
Polyurethane foam, resin steel armature, mirrored and stained glass, glass pebbles, tumbled stones, abalone shells, fused millefiori glass inserts, 12 x 14 x 12 ft
De Saint Phalle was born near Paris in the town of Neuilly-sur-Seine in 1930 to a French banker father and an American mother. The family’s finances were wiped out in the stock market crash of 1929, forcing their relocation to the United States in 1933. This bicultural upbringing would have great impact on Niki’s work. She also possessed stunning good looks, working throughout her teenage years and early 20s as a model for French Vogue, Elle, and Life magazines. Her captivating personality radiates in her first husband’s, writer Harry Matthews, description of an early encounter: “a svelte young woman walking past turned to say ‘Hello, Harry’ with a smile that illuminated her beautiful face to an extent that left me without breath or speech.”

The couple would eventually escape what Matthews described as their “genteel, upper-class, New York WASP upbringing” by eloping and they had two children by the time Niki was 25. Throughout the 1950s the couple lived in a variety of locales including Cambridge, Massachusetts, Sienna, Majorca, and Paris; their travels throughout Europe during these years proved formative.
As Boyer describes it, Niki “very much saw herself as a person of the world. She was interested in everything and everyone and was fascinated with the exotic.” It was also at this time that de Saint Phalle visited Barcelona and saw firsthand the work of Antoni Gaudi, whose Park Güell proved a seminal influence on her artistic approach. The great Catalan architect’s singular eclectic vision, diverse material usage, flowing organic forms, and mosaic aesthetic both fascinated and inspired de Saint Phalle.

These good times were offset by difficult years however. De Saint Phalle’s struggles in balancing her own independent desires as an artist, the demands of raising young children and the conservative familial expectations of the time left her stricken with mental issues, ultimately leading to a nervous breakdown in 1953. She dedicated herself to her work in the aftermath of the trauma in large part as a therapeutic measure.

The emotional maelstrom and turbidity of these years weighed heavily on Niki’s outlook and brought deep ponderings on issues that concerned her: the struggles of the individual, the societal role of women and feminine identity, and the dichotomy of internal conflicts and desire. Such rich material provided the underpinnings and subject matter of her artistic practice throughout the rest of her life.

Though long recognized as a major international artist, particularly through her much admired public artworks and astonishing sculpture gardens, de Saint Phalle has not been given nearly as much exhibition exposure in the United States as many of her peers. The Bechtler’s show will surely help and is timely on many fronts, both arriving after the Firebird has settled into its urban-hipster roost and at a moment when uptown Charlotte continues to strengthen its status as an urban cultural center to be reckoned with in the South. The show also sets a precedent and tempo for future exhibitions that can stretch beyond the boundaries of the Bechtler’s collection.
Bechtler’s Perspective

Despite (or more accurately, because of) the personal difficulties and health issues she faced, de Saint Phalle’s art is nothing if not antidotal. Andreas Bechtler has spoken of the joy he continually finds in her work and there is no denying that this sense of pleasure is a fundamental element. When asked specifically about the presence Niki brought to her work as a person, Andreas said, “To me, in most of her pieces, I am touched. As in Tinguely’s pieces there is something that puts a smile on your face. It’s such an honest, well-meant feeling that comes through,” he says. “There is, of course, the depth, especially if you go into the mystical elements, and despite the serious matter, it makes you smile. It’s not what you usually find.”

In regards to the show and its impact on the museum’s first year of operations, Andreas went on with an optimism that seemed plucked from the very air of de Saint Phalle’s studio.

“It’s a wonderful journey what happens here (at the museum). I never thought it would work out that well to be honest. I am stunned how well we are received and how John (Boyer) has been such an incredible force. All the shows and presence we’ve been able to create and the appreciation from so many sides, I would never have believed this is possible in such a short time really,” he says. “Now the Niki show, some years ago that would have been just a fantasy, some crazy thought you would think about like, ‘Wouldn’t that be great?’ But now seeing this and feeling what impact we can make for Charlotte and the surrounding areas, and how much joy we can create for people that walk by, it’s a wonderful thing I would never have expected. For me it’s a wonderful thing to see that people are touched.”