



Yayoi Kusama

# A NEW WORLD

Niki de Saint Phalle

OPERA GALLERY

# Foreword

In conjunction with Singapore Art Week 2023, Opera Gallery Singapore is proud to present *A New World*, featuring iconic works from Yayoi Kusama and Niki de Saint Phalle. Born just a year apart from each other, these two artists find commonality through shared contexts and the use of bold, eclectic colours. This exhibition aims to celebrate the lighthearted playful nature of both artists' works, and opens a door to the aesthetics of our time.

With their undeniable sense of creativity, Kusama and Saint Phalle were both female artists best described as “being ahead of their time”, in an age where the art world is starting to welcome heterodox ideas; and generally male-dominated. We think of something that was ahead of time as something new; something unexpected; and as a result, eventually holds against the passing of time. Then comes the idea of a new world as an escape, or on the other hand, a desire to magnify parts of life worth relishing. Both artists were, in their unique ways, creating “A New World” as they envisioned it, where the boundaries between art and life were deliquescent and art was a thoroughfare to understanding life. Whether it was pertaining to personal struggles or wider socio-political issues, both Kusama and Saint Phalle portrayed their anxieties and aspirations in creations that were fantastical, ravishing and visionary.

Kusama herself expressed: “I fight pain, anxiety, and fear every day, and the only method I have found that relieved my illness is to keep creating art.” We see the way she moulds her mental struggles into something beautiful and are immediately transported into a cosmos of infinite design, ever more enticing with each encounter. Her brightly coloured net and dot motifs are used to “scatter proliferating love in the universe”, as the artist puts it; tantalising microcosms of a world she imagines. An eternal return to the same motifs bears an inherent heaviness, but that heaviness presents itself as a longing, a beautiful commemoration of life and its perpetual possibilities.

To see possibilities is akin to dreaming of new worlds. Saint Phalle, in a similar vein, creates art to materialise her ambitions to better the world and to explore the various roles of women in her lifetime, in part due to her traumatic backstory. With the crosscurrents of creative influences and free-spirited, heroic flair, Saint Phalle was unafraid of pushing against conventions. Her 'Nana's, which recurred through her oeuvre and are featured in this exhibition, are her symbols of feminism and a celebration of womanhood. Throughout her life, she strived to create a new world where, in her words, “you could have a new kind of life, to just be free.”

All with a subtext of 'love it or leave it', each piece featured in the exhibition reflects the unabashed confidence that Yayoi Kusama and Niki de Saint Phalle unanimously embody. Perhaps it is worth remembering after all, that playfulness is by virtue of hopefulness, and the ability to create new worlds. We invite you to catch a glimpse into these two iconoclastic female artists' visions and overtures of a New World, relevant to this day and even more so in generations to come.

## **Gilles Dyan**

Founder and Chairman  
Opera Gallery Group

## **Stéphane Le Pelletier**

Director, Asia-Pacific  
Opera Gallery Asia-Pacific

## **Irene Chee**

Gallery Manager  
Opera Gallery Singapore

# Yayoi Kusama and Niki de Saint Phalle: *catharsis* and subversion

*“And, by representing pity and fear, it (representation) achieves a purification (catharsis) of these kinds of emotions.”*

—Aristotle, *The Poetics*



Niki de Saint Phalle, *Sphinx*, 1990

What could possibly bring two women together who, at first sight, do not seem to share any common ground? Neither their geographies (one in Japan, the other in France) nor their histories (East and West). Yayoi Kusama was born in 1929 in Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture, Japan. Niki de Saint Phalle, in 1930 in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France. While the former started drawing from an early age, the latter did not come to art

until she was an adult. Catherine Marie Agnès de Saint Phalle started as a model, then a housewife, before she began to exult in drawing, and then sculpture. Art became a necessity when Niki de Saint Phalle was interned for severe depression. The first echo with Yayoi Kusama: madness as a creative impulse, art as a saving grace. For the Japanese artist, drawing enabled her to transcribe the hallucinations she was suffering from since the age of 10.

For both artists, creation acts both as a revelation of the violence they endured and as a weapon of their emancipation. Beyond their plastic works, Yayoi Kusama and Niki de Saint Phalle have constructed “performative self-imageries” (Amelia Jones). They did not quite cross paths, yet their lives and careers strangely echo each other. Both evolved in an oppressive family environment.

Yayoi Kusama grew up with a fickle father and was the victim of an abusive mother as well as a rigid, patriarchal system. Although Niki de Saint Phalle did not know the rigour of the Japanese system, she, too, was subjected to an oppressive patriarchal structure. Like Yayoi Kusama’s, the French artist’s father was unfaithful to his wife, before becoming his own daughter’s tormentor. The rape suffered by Niki de Saint Phalle remained hidden for a long time in the confines of her unconscious, and turned into the driving force behind the 1961 *Tirs*, which made her known to the general public.

“Art is a guaranty of sanity,” Louise Bourgeois wrote on the front of her work *Precious Liquid* (1992). For Yayoi Kusama and Niki de Saint Phalle, art is an outlet. “Amid such a toxic family, the only thing I lived for was my art,” said the Japanese artist in her 2002 biography. Yet it would be simplistic to limit the two artists to their personal experiences, traumatic as they were. Today, Yayoi Kusama and Niki de Saint Phalle appear above all as figureheads.

The ones of a structural revolution in the art world: the legitimisation of female figures in art history. Well beyond their sole biographies, they stand at the heart of a reassessment of dominant values and narratives. Their resemblances were woven, knotted in our imaginations, to create “misty analogies” (Michel Foucault).

The first thread to be drawn would be that of the therapeutic vocation of art, already apparent in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Surrealism, with Joan Miró and Victor Brauner for instance. Art became a fetish, art became magic and, by using familiar forms, sometimes charged with affect, artists liberated their traumas and their psyche. A genealogy with surrealism, that leads us to appreciate Yayoi Kusama's *Shellfishs* in a new light. Circular shapes, organic forms: the artist revives a surrealist biomorphism. In the centre, realistic conches and shells stand out against an abstract background.

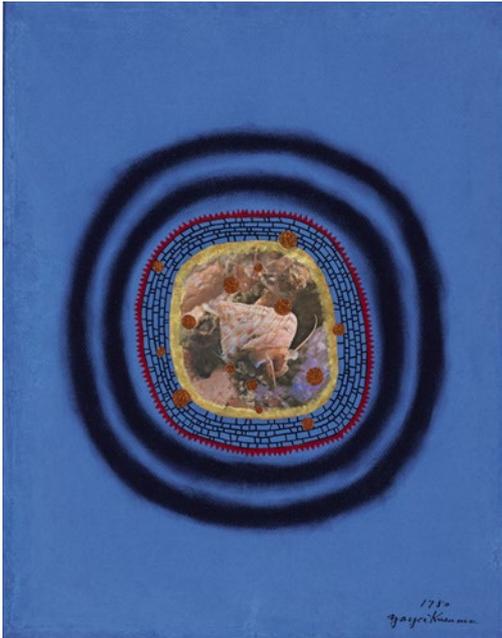


Yayoi Kusama, *I Carry on Living with the Pumpkins*, 2014

**“Amid such a toxic family, the only thing I lived for was my art.”  
—Yayoi Kusama**

The dots, a leitmotif in the Japanese artist's work, are superimposed on the initial image and spread to the edges. Like waves of a drop in the water, the rings widen, adorned with red and black lines, to finally drown and disappear in a monochrome, blue or yellow background. The circle, as a primordial form, is also present in *Le miroir* by Niki de Saint Phalle. A magical mirror, undoubtedly.

The colourful, biomorphic, forms are filled with abstract motifs. They testify to the horror of emptiness, the vital need for decorative overload and, above all, an opening to another world. This mirror is a gateway guarded fiercely by two snakes, recurring features of Niki de Saint Phalle's work.



Yayoi Kusama, *Shellfish*, 1980

Both protectors and torturers, their duality generates a paradoxical field of attraction. *Passing Wind* (1987) and its multitudes of cells invade the canvas, small format infested with childish and colourful forms, the self-obliteration of the artist overwhelmed by hallucinations. Those works by Yayoi Kusama and by Niki de Saint Phalle convey a magical and primitive energy.

A second thread to unwind would be that of art as a catalyst for madness, for pain.

Each of them has experienced traumas, their darkness conquered through works surprisingly joyful and colourful in appearance, "dark stories in rainbow coats" (Catherine Francblin). In *Man Reading on a Snake* (Snake Daddy) (1980), the childlike reptile and the reassuring father figure are in fact the metaphorical materialisation of Niki de Saint Phalle's abuse. Impressions from her early life emerge in the

elementary scribbles scattered over the monster's body. The sweetness covers the violence, just as innocence buried the event, that "summer of snakes" which would come back to her in a dream, much later. The same goes for *I am Upside Down, Green (Remembering)* (1997). Behind the colourful pirouettes remain the stigmata of a broken childhood and a rage to rebuild herself, to erect "a new matriarchal society", as she said about her Nanas.

*I am Upside Down, Green (Remembering)* is a carnivalesque reversal of values, a celebration of a divine feminine. Like Yayoi Kusama's *Guidepost to the New World* (2016). The peas have spread their tentacles, and the hallucinations have taken shape to invade the viewer's space. But nothing is frightening about this schizophrenic view here. The artist makes it a playground, an experience, and a playful environment.

To transform. Transcend. Sublimate. Niki de Saint Phalle and Yayoi Kusama reveal themselves as demiurges. And the more lancinating the pain is, the more the works become invasive. In 1993, Yayoi Kusama exhibited at the Venice Biennale. It had been twenty years since she had left the United States to be voluntarily internalised to a mental institution in Tokyo. In 1993, she painted *Tale of the Universe* and *Cosmos at Dawn*. While confined, she opened herself up to the universe with a tenfold force in which the motif became more pervasive than ever.



Niki de Saint Phalle, *Le Miroir (Magie du miroir)*, 1980



Niki de Saint Phalle, *I am Upside Down, Green (Remembering)*, 1997

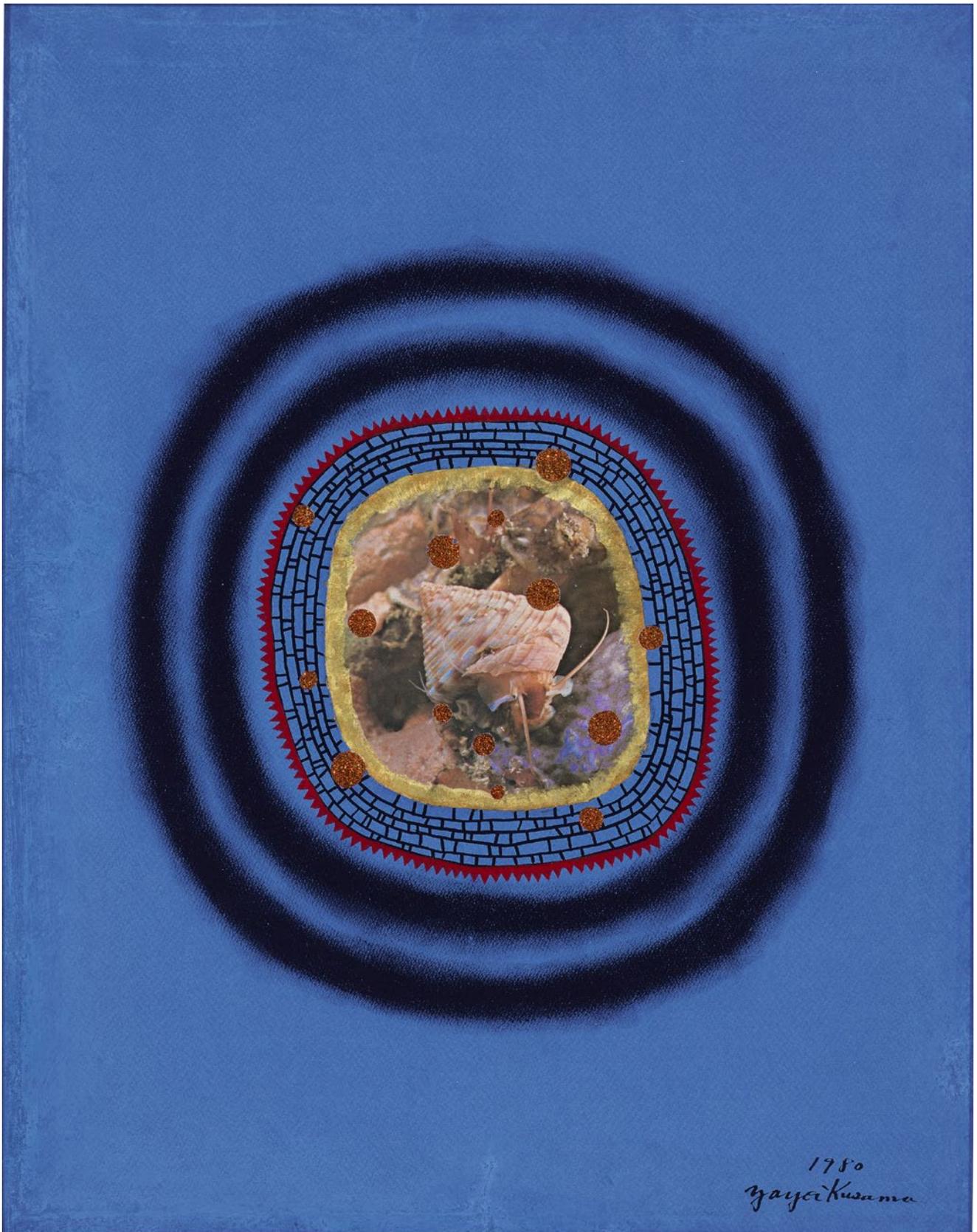
And if Niki de Saint Phalle fought the demons of depression, she came up against another incarceration, that of her body damaged by her sculpture practice. From the 1970s onwards, she suffered from respiratory insufficiency caused by the polyester dust she worked on relentlessly. Her physical decline was accompanied by a contradictory desire to put her heart to the test, to become a creator in the divine sense of the term. *The Tarot Garden* is the most striking manifestation of this. Her *Sphinx* (1990) echoes it. Hybrid deity, this creature appears naked. Her long blue hair branches out along her body with its heavy breasts and wide hips. She is enthroned in majesty, crowned like the Empress of the Italian Gardens, the monumental sculpture-architecture in which Niki de Saint Phalle lived until the mid-1990s. To bypass the prison of the mind, of the body, in a cathartic gesture, a testament.

Throughout her life, Niki de Saint Phalle tried to deconstruct overly patriarchal institutions. As Yayoi Kusama did. They each have a strong sense of freedom and independence. Their soft and colourful universe subverts the art world by seducing it first. This presumed softness feeds the essentialist discourse of a particular art history that would like to bind these forms to the prerogative of female creation. Yayoi Kusama and Niki de Saint Phalle short-circuit these clichés with all the violence and destructive force contained in their works. Much more than rebellious and solitary figures; exceptions. They stand as beacons for the generations of artists who have succeeded them. Their aesthetics carry a message of subversion, addressing an asphyxiating system.

Jeanne Mathas

Yayoi  
Kusama





**Shellfish**

1980

Signed and dated on the lower right; signed, titled in Japanese and dated on the reverse  
Gouache, pastel, ink and printed paper collage on paper mounted on panel  
66 x 51.7 cm | 26 x 20.4 in

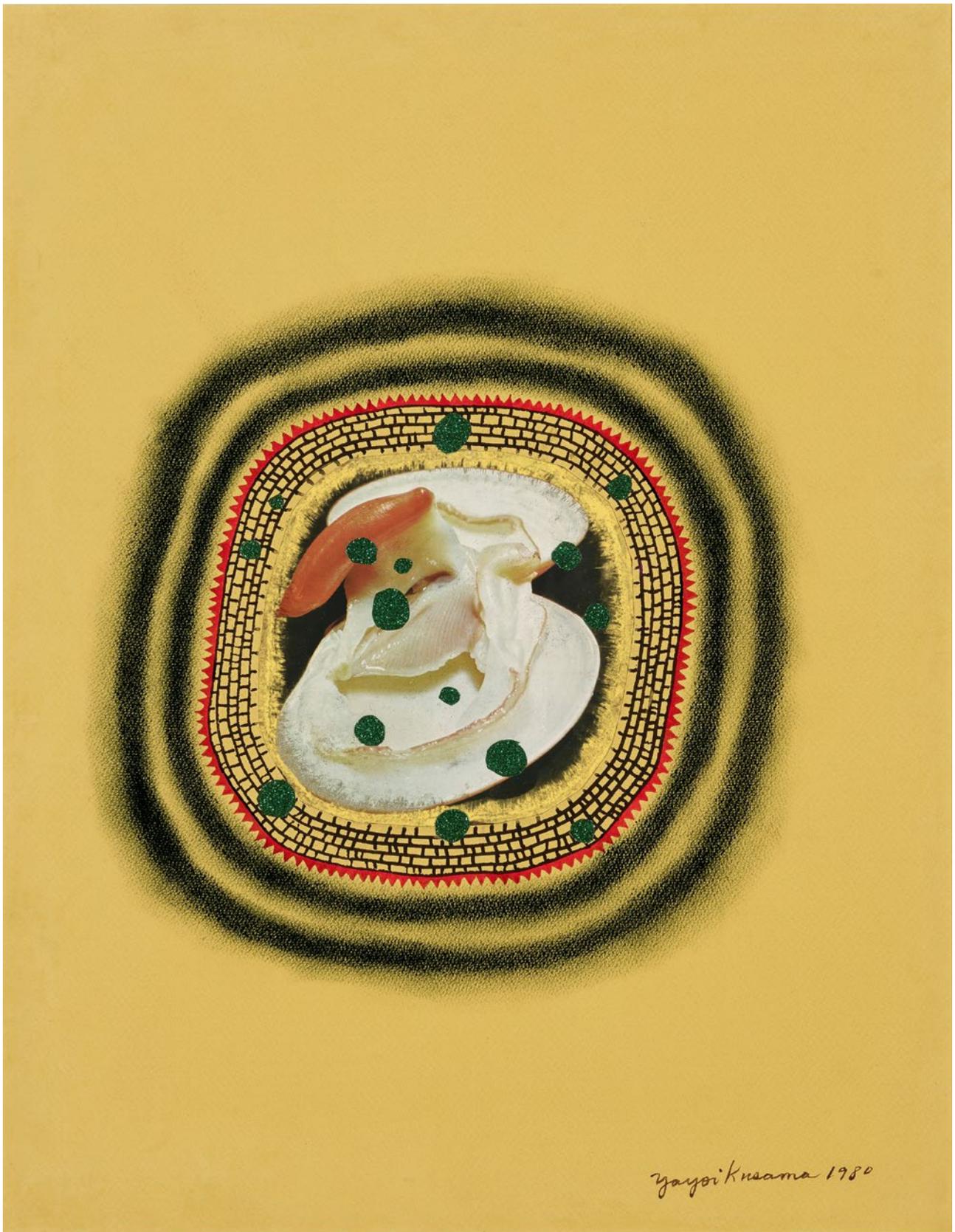
**PROVENANCE**

Private collection, Asia  
Private collection

**CERTIFICATE**

Yayoi Kusama Inc. has issued a registration card of this work





**Shellfish**

1980

Signed and dated on the lower right; signed, titled in Japanese and dated on the reverse

Gouache, pastel, ink and printed paper collage on paper mounted on panel

65.7 x 51.1 cm | 25.8 x 20.1 in

**PROVENANCE**

Whitestone Gallery, Hong Kong and Tokyo

Private collection, Asia

Acquired from the above by the present owner, 2016

**CERTIFICATE**

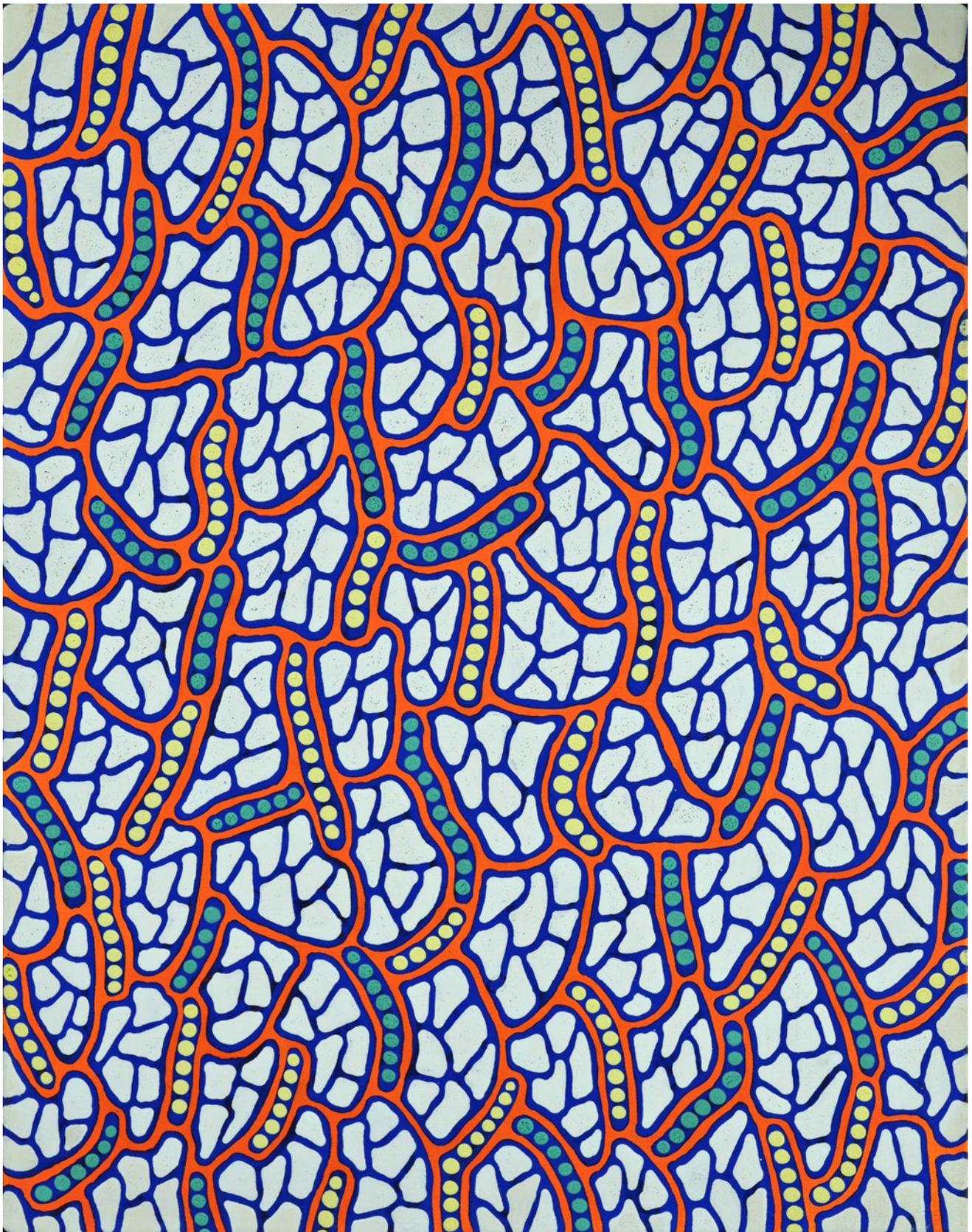
Yayoi Kusama Inc. has issued a registration card of this work

Shellfish

1980

(detail)





**Passing Wind**

1987

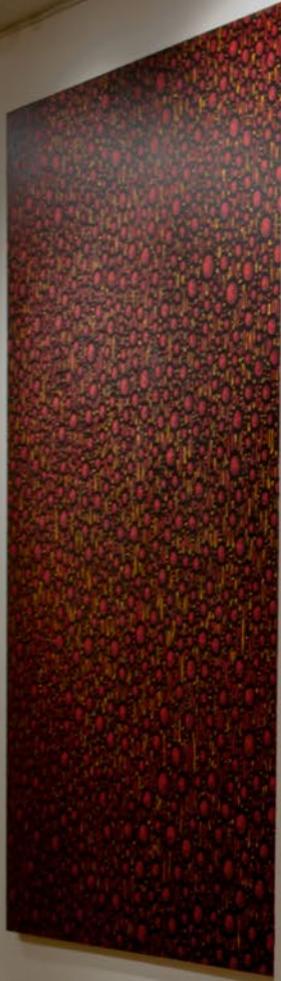
Signed and dated on the reverse Acrylic on canvas  
41 x 31.8 cm | 16.1 x 12.5 in

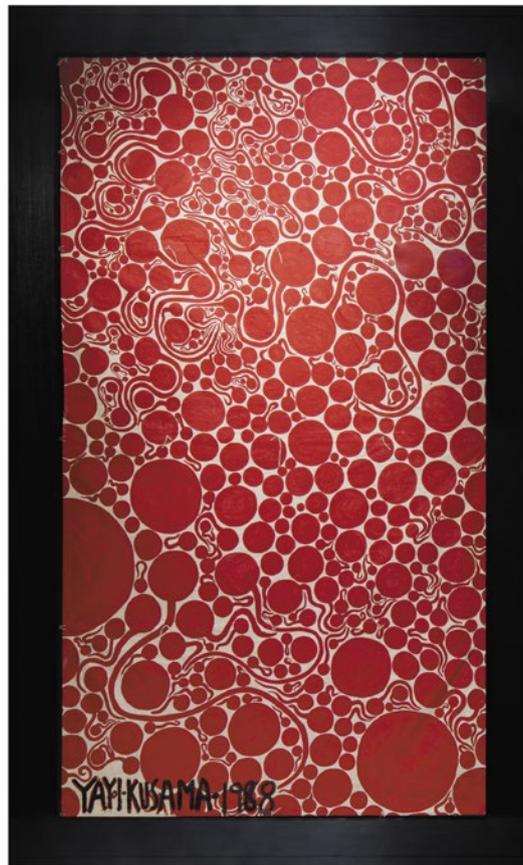
**PROVENANCE**

Artist's studio  
Private collection

**CERTIFICATE**

Yayoi Kusama Inc. has issued a registration card of  
this work





## Fire

1988

Signed and dated on the lower left  
Acrylic on Japan paper laid on silk  
270 x 154 cm | 106.3 x 60.6 in

### PROVENANCE

Whitestone Gallery, Hong Kong and Tokyo  
Private collection, Asia  
Acquired from the above by the present owner, 2016

### EXHIBITED

Sendai, Art Museum, Miyagi, 11 June - 10 July 1988  
Tsu, Art Museum, Mie, 30 July - 3 November 1988  
Shiga, Museum of Modern Art,  
22 October - 11 December 1988  
Himeji, State Museum of art, 3 - 28 March 1989  
Gunma, Hara Museum Arc, 15 April - 4 June 1989  
Nagoya, State Museum of Art, 5 September - 1 October  
1989  
Hiroshima, State Museum of Modern Art, 10 October -  
12 November 1989  
Munich, Haus der Kunst, 16 December 1989 - 18  
February 1990  
Düsseldorf, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen,  
13 July - 6 September 1990  
Moscow, Centralin Dom,  
20 September - 21 October 1990  
Brussels, Musée des Beaux-Arts,  
7 February - 7 April 1991

Turin, Promotrice delle Arti,  
19 October - 8 December 1991  
Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna,  
5 March - 17 May 1992  
Kassel, Documenta-Halle, 1992  
Montréal, Musée des Beaux-Arts,  
11 June - 26 September 1993  
Lübeck, Holstentorhalle, MuK, Petrikirche, 1995  
Santiago de Chile, Buenos Aires, Museo Nacional de  
Bellas Artes, Montevideo, Museo Nacional de Artes  
Visuales, 1995-1996  
Detmold, Fliegerhorst, Hohenloh, 1997  
Luxemburg, Halle Victor Hugo, 1998  
Detmold, Art Kite Museum, 1999-2005

### LITERATURE

Paul Eubel, *L'art prend l'air, cerf-volants d'artistes*,  
exhibition catalogue, Goethe Institute, Osaka, ill. pp. 54-  
56 and pp. 348 - 349  
Paul Eubel, *Bilder für den Himmel, Kunstdrachen. Ein  
Projekt des Goethe-Instituts Osaka*, exhibition catalogue,  
1989-1990, ill. pp. 314-315  
Paul Eubel, *Pictures for the Sky, Art Kites*, Goethe  
Institute Osaka, 1992

### CERTIFICATE

Yayoi Kusama Inc. has issued a registration card of  
this work



**The Tale of the Universe**

1993

Signed, dated and titled on the reverse

Acrylic on canvas

278 x 248 cm | 109.4 x 97.6 in

**PROVENANCE**

Artist's studio

Private collection

**CERTIFICATE**

Yayoi Kusama Inc. has issued a registration card of this work



**The Cosmos at Dawn**

1993

Signed, dated and titled on the reverse

Acrylic on canvas

278 x 248 cm | 109.4 x 97.6 in

**PROVENANCE**

Artist's studio

Private collection

**CERTIFICATE**

Yayoi Kusama Inc. has issued a registration card of this work

**I carry on Living with the Pumpkins**  
2014

Signed and dated on the lower right  
Urethane paint on fiber reinforced plastics  
180 x 180 x 30 cm | 70.9 x 70.9 x 11.8 in

PROVENANCE

Private collection  
Victoria Miro Gallery, London, United Kingdom  
Private collection, 2014

CERTIFICATE

Yayoi Kusama Inc. has issued a registration card of  
this work



**Niki  
de Saint Phalle**



**YAYOI  
KUSAMA**  
A NEW WORLD  
**NIKI DE  
SAINT  
PHALLE**

It takes time to feel Kusama and Niki de Saint Phalle's work. It is when the feelings begin to rise in the air, the atmosphere is charged, and the light is shining in the darkness.

With their colorful and playful sculptures, Kusama and Niki de Saint Phalle have created a world of their own. Their work is a celebration of life, love, and the human spirit. Their art is a testament to the power of imagination and the beauty of the world we live in.



**Pouf Serpent Bleu**

1991

Painted resin

Edition of 20

185 x 80 x 90 cm | 72.8 x 31.5 x 35.4 in

**PROVENANCE**

Private collection







**I am Upside Down, Green  
(Remembering)**  
1997

Acrylic on polyester resin  
Edition of 5, each work unique  
117 x 80 x 14 cm | 46.1 x 31.5 x 5.5 in

**PROVENANCE**

Tasende Gallery, La Jolla, United States  
Private collection

**EXHIBITED**

San Diego, Mingei Museum, *Niki de Saint Phalle - Insider / Outsider - World Inspired Art*, 1998, another edition of this work ill. in colour p. 117

**LITERATURE**

*Niki de Saint Phalle, Catalogue raisonné, vol. I, 1949 - 2000*, Acatos (Publisher), Lausanne, 2001, p. 294, no. 645, ill. in colour

**CERTIFICATE**

The Niki Charitable Art Foundation has confirmed the authenticity of this work



**Do You Like My New Dress,  
Black (Remembering)**

1997 - 2000

Signed on the right foot

Fiberglass and painted polyester

Edition of 5, each work unique

99 x 55.8 x 10.1 cm | 39 x 22 x 4 in

**PROVENANCE**

Private collection

Christie's, New York, 14 November 2002, lot 184

Private collection

**EXHIBITED**

Amsterdam, Galerie Delaive, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, 1998 San Diego, Mingei International Museum, *Niki de Saint Phalle - Insider/Outsider - World Inspired Art*, 1998, another edition ill. in colour p. 3

**LITERATURE**

*Niki de Saint Phalle, Catalogue raisonné, vol. I, 1949 - 2000*, Acatos (Publisher), Lausanne, 2001, p. 292, no. 641, ill. in colour



**Collaboration (Remembering)**

1998

Signed, numbered and dated  
Fiberglass and painted polyester  
Edition of 5, each work unique  
84 x 74 x 13 cm | 33 x 29 x 5 in

**PROVENANCE**

Private collection (acquired directly from the artist in 1998)  
Private collection, Switzerland

**EXHIBITED**

San Diego, Mingei Museum, *Niki de Saint Phalle -  
Insider / Outsider - World Inspired Art*, 1998,

another edition ill. in colour p. 3

Bern 2001, Kornfeld Gallery, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, list no. 10

**LITERATURE**

*Niki de Saint Phalle, Catalogue raisonné, vol. I, 1949 - 2000*,  
Acatos (Publisher), Lausanne, 2001, p. 302, no. 661,  
ill. in colour

**CERTIFICATE**

The Niki Charitable Art Foundation has confirmed the  
authenticity of this work

**Running Nana**  
1966

Painted papier-mâché  
Unique piece  
71 x 72,5 x 39 cm | 28 x 28.5 x 15.4 in

**PROVENANCE**

Private collection, Switzerland  
Dagny and Jan Runnqvist collection, Geneva, Switzerland

Christie's, Paris, 2 December 2014, lot 1  
Private collection

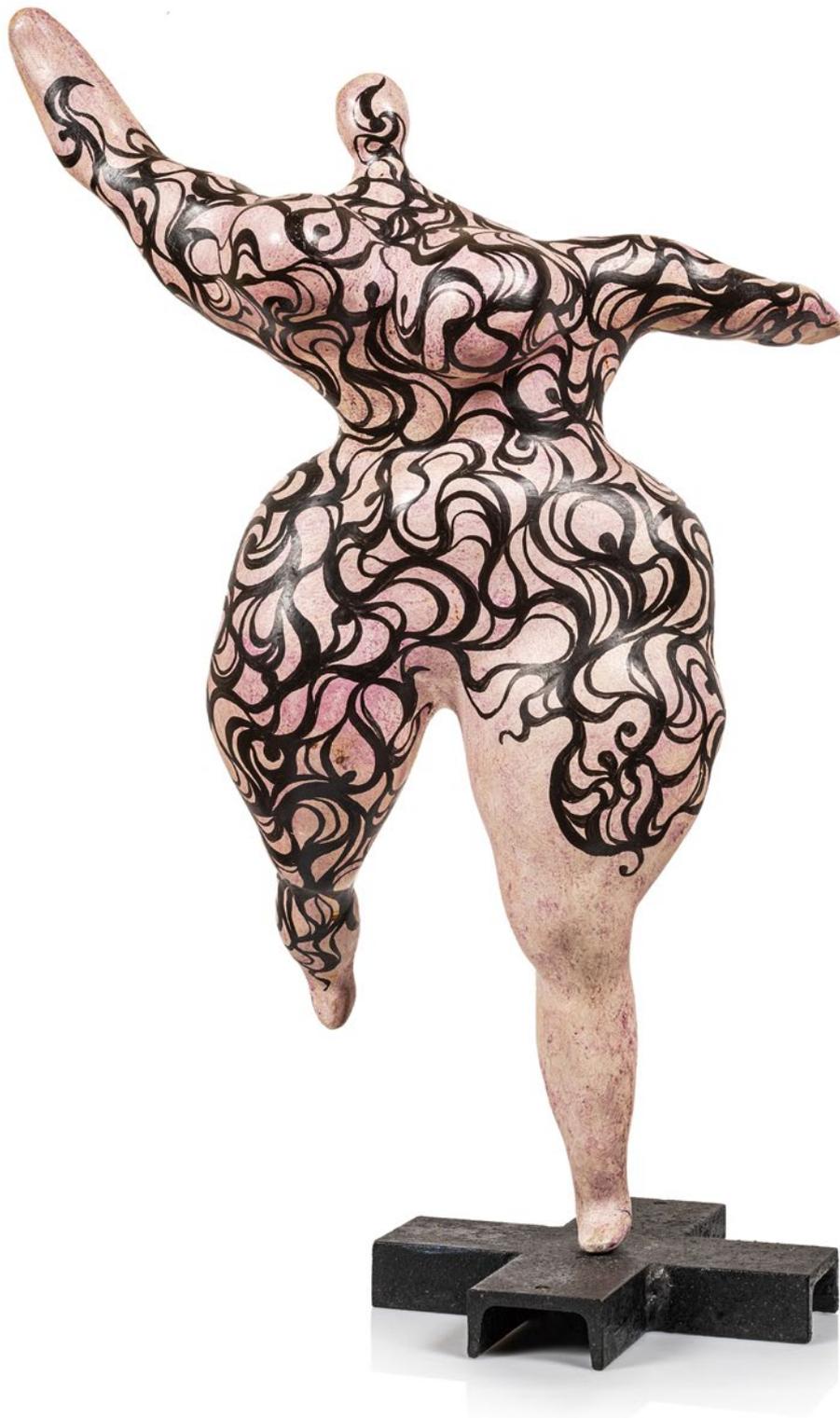
**EXHIBITED**

Nice, Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, *Niki de Saint Phalle : la donation*, 17 March - 27 October 2002, ill. in colour  
p. 220

**CERTIFICATE**

The Niki Charitable Art Foundation has confirmed the  
authenticity of this work





**Nana moyenne danseuse**

1967

Signed and dated on the reverse

Painted resin

Unique piece

58 x 40 x 20 cm | 22.8 x 15.7 x 7.9 in

**PROVENANCE**

Private collection

Sotheby's, Paris, 13 December 2006, lot 154

Private collection, Paris, France





## **White Tree**

1972

Resin polyester assembled on wood panel

Unique piece

244.5 x 122 x 22 cm | 96.3 x 48 x 8.7 in

### **PROVENANCE**

Alexander Iolas Gallery, New York, United States

Collection of Brooks Jackson Inc., New York, United States

Galerie Sammy Kinge, Paris, France

Private collection, United Kingdom

Galerie Mitterrand, Paris, France

Private collection

### **LITERATURE**

*Niki de Saint Phalle, Catalogue raisonné*, vol. 1, 1949-2000, Acatos (Publisher), Lausanne, 2001, p. 253, no. 548, ill. in colour

### **CERTIFICATE**

The Niki Charitable Art Foundation has confirmed the authenticity of this work



**Ange vase (Black)**

1993

Signed, numbered and stamped inside the vase

Painted polyester and ceramic

Edition of 50 + 10 AP

99 x 57 x 32 cm | 39 x 22.4 x 12.6 in

**PROVENANCE**

Galerie Vogel Heidelberg, Germany

Private collection, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Germany

Private collection, Paris, France

Galerie Mitterrand, Paris, France

Private collection

**CERTIFICATE**

The Niki Charitable Art Foundation has confirmed the authenticity of this work



**Le Miroir (Magie du miroir)**

1980

Signed and numbered on the reverse  
Mirror, painted polyester and wood  
Edition of 20, each work unique  
106 x 152 x 25.5 cm | 41.7 x 59.8 x 10 in

**PROVENANCE**

Galerie Bonnier, Geneva, Switzerland  
Private collection, Geneva, Switzerland

**CERTIFICATE**

The Niki Charitable Art Foundation has confirmed the authenticity of this work



Niki de Saint Phalle surrounded by her sculptures painting, 1981 © Le monde

## Clarice chaise femme

1982

Stamped with signature, numbered and stamped on the reverse of the back left leg

Painted polyester

Edition of 20 + 6 AP

119 x 114 x 80 cm | 46.9 x 44.9 x 31.5 in

### PROVENANCE

Colette Creuzevault collection, Paris

### EXHIBITED

Montreal, Galerie Esperanza, *Sculptures et Lithographies*, 1983 (another edition of this work)

Bonn, Kunst und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, 19 June - 1 November 1992 (another edition of this work)

Glasgow, McLellan Galleries, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, 22 January - 4 April 1993 (another edition of this work)

Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, June - September 1993 (another edition of this work)

Regensburg, Kunstkabinett, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, 1996 (another edition of this work)

Montreal, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, *Le Plaisir de l'objet*, 16 May - 2 September 1997 (another edition of this work) Hull, Musée Canadien des Civilisations, *Le Plaisir de l'objet*, 9 October 1997 - 15 February 1998 (another edition of this work)

Ohio, Cincinnati Art Museum, *Le Plaisir de l'objet*, 15 March - 26 May 1998 (another edition of this work)

Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, *Le Plaisir de l'objet*, 16 November 1998 - 31 January 1999 (another edition of this work)

Louisville, J.B. Speed Museum, *Le Plaisir de l'objet*, 8 March - 23 May 1999 (another edition of this work)

Munich, Die Neue Sammlung, *Le Plaisir de l'objet*, July - September 1999 (another edition of this work)

Cracow, Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie, *Le Plaisir de l'objet*, November 1999 - January 2000 (another edition of this work)

Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, *Le Plaisir de l'objet*, March - May 2000 (another edition of this work)

Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, *Niki de Saint Phalle. La vie joyeuse des objets*, October - December 2001 (another edition of this work)

San Diego, Mingei International Museum, *Niki de Saint Phalle Remembered*, December 2003 - April 2004 (another edition of this work)

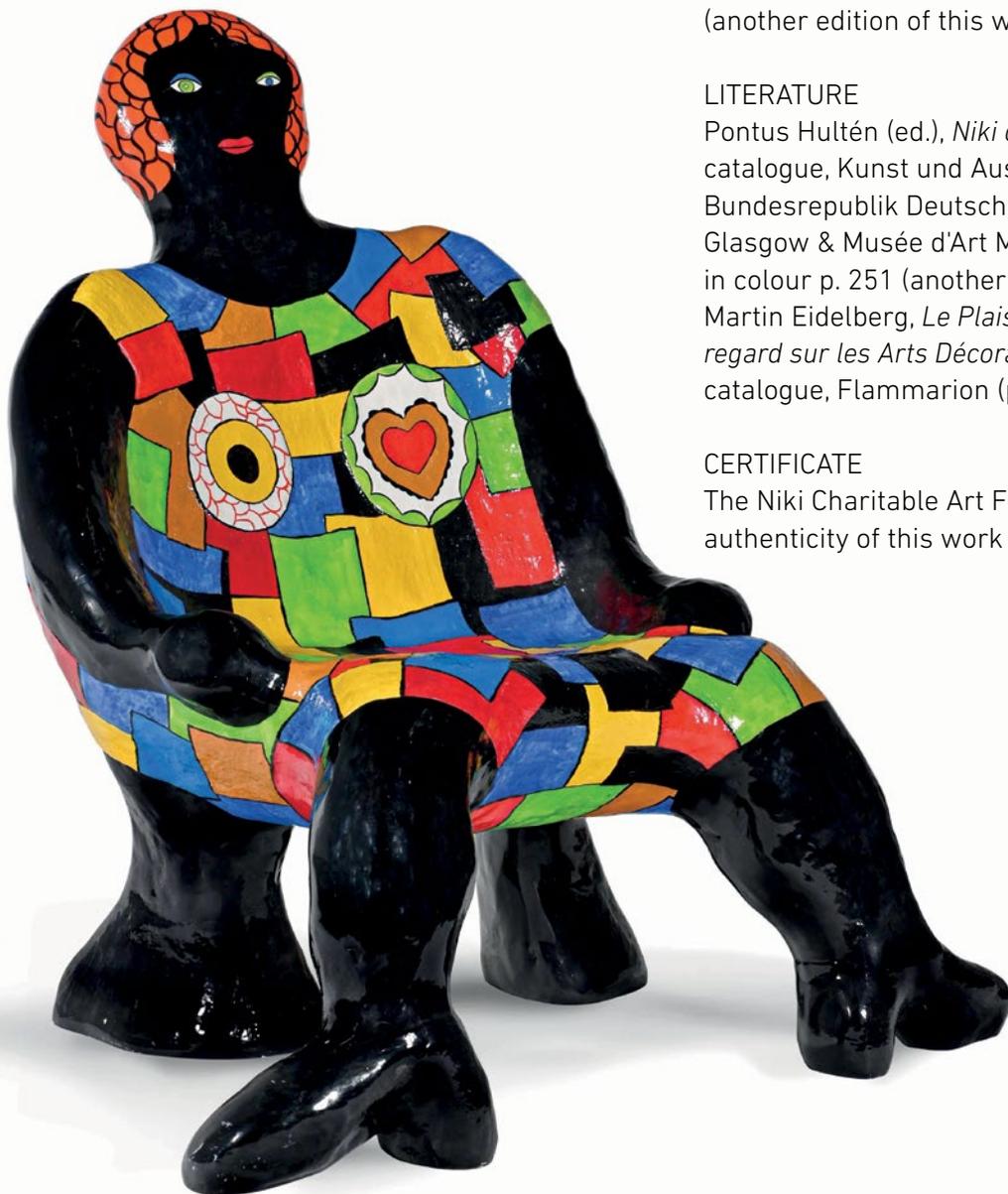
### LITERATURE

Pontus Hultén (ed.), *Niki de Saint Phalle*, exhibition catalogue, Kunst und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland & McLellan Galleries, Glasgow & Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, ill. in colour p. 251 (another edition of this work)

Martin Eidelberg, *Le Plaisir de l'objet : nouveau regard sur les Arts Décoratifs du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, exhibition catalogue, Flammarion (publisher), 1997

### CERTIFICATE

The Niki Charitable Art Foundation has confirmed the authenticity of this work





Niki de Saint Phalle during the installation of her retrospective at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1980 © Estate Leonardo Bezzola



### **Fauteuil noir**

1980

Signed and numbered and stamped on the underside

Painted polyester

Edition of 20 + 4 AP

102 x 79 x 70 cm | 40.2 x 31.1 x 27.6 in

### **EXHIBITED**

Paris, Centre George Pompidou, *Rétrospective 1954 - 1980*, 1980 (another edition of this work)

Paris, Galerie Samy Kinge, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, 1981 (another edition of this work)

Geneva, Galerie Bonnier, *Niki de Saint Phalle : objets à apprivoiser*, 1981 (another edition of this work)

Tokyo, Space Niki, Space Niki Collection, April - June 1986 (another edition of this work)

Bonn, Museumsmeile, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, 1992 (another edition of this work)

Ludwigshafen, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, *Niki de Saint Phalle: Liebe, protest, Phantasie*, 2000 (another edition of this work)

Kunsthalle Emden, *Niki de Saint Phalle : Liebe, Protest, Phantasie*, 2000 (another edition of this work)

### **CERTIFICATE**

The Niki Charitable Art Foundation has confirmed the authenticity of this work



### **Obélisque serpents**

1987

Signed, numbered and stamped on the underside

Painted resin

Edition of 10 + 4 AP

30 x 14 cm | 11.8 x 5.5 in

#### **PROVENANCE**

Artur Jorge collection, Portugal

Christie's, Paris, 8-9 December 2010, lot 175

Private collection

#### **EXHIBITED**

Ulm, Ulmer Museum, *Niki de Saint Phalle : Liebe, Protest, Phantasie*, 26 September - 21 November 1999

Ludwigshafen am Rhein, Wilhelm-Hack Museum, *Niki de Saint Phalle : Liebe, Protest, Phantasie*, 26 March - 14 May 2000

#### **LITERATURE**

Suzanne Pflieger, Pierre Restany, Bettina Scheeder, Barbara Regina Renftle and Dagmar Rinker, *Niki de Saint Phalle : Liebe, Protest, Phantasie*, Ulmer Museum / Wilhelm-Hack Museum Ludwigshafen am Rhein, 1999, another edition ill. in colour p. 64

#### **CERTIFICATE**

The Niki Charitable Art Foundation has confirmed the authenticity of this work

Obélisque serpents  
1987





**Homme lisant sur un serpent  
(Serpent and Daddy)**  
1980

Signed, dated and numbered on the underside  
Painted resin  
Edition of 10  
14 x 23 x 20.5 cm | 5.5 x 9 x 8 in

PROVENANCE  
Private collection, New York, United States

**Dragon**

1974-75

Signed and stamped

Painted polyester

Unique piece

65 x 50 x 23 cm | 25.6 x 19.7 x 9.1 in

**PROVENANCE**

Private collection, Europe

**EXHIBITED**

Rotterdam, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Beelden, modellen en maquettes van Niki de Saint Phalle, 21 July - 5 September 1976

**CERTIFICATE**

The Niki Charitable Art Foundation has confirmed the authenticity of this work



I could do whatever I wanted,  
whether people liked it or not.

- Niki de Saint Phalle



**Green Goddess**

1990

Painted resin

Edition of 8

102 x 30 x 69 cm | 40.2 x 11.8 x 27.2 in

PROVENANCE

Private collection



**Sphinx**  
1990

Signed, numbered and stamped on the bottom  
Painted polyester with gold leaf  
Edition of 10  
28 x 43 x 29 cm | 11 x 16.9 x 11.4 in

**PROVENANCE**

Private collection  
Sotheby's, London, 30 June 2000, lot 207

Russeck Gallery, Palm Beach, United States  
Collection of Gerard L. Cafesjian, New York, United States  
Private collection, Paris, France

**LITERATURE**

Cecchetto, Stefano (ed.), *Niki de Saint Phalle*, Skira, Milano, 2009, another edition of this work ill. in colour p. 128

**CERTIFICATE**

The Niki Charitable Art Foundation has confirmed the authenticity of this work

Sphinx  
1990



# Chronologies



# Yayoi Kusama

## Chronology

### Childhood in Japan 1929 - 1949

Yayoi Kusama was born on 22 March 1929 in Matsumoto, Japan, into a wealthy family of merchants who owned a plant nursery, which would later influence Kusama in her work.

She was the youngest of four in her family, from two parents who suffered from a loveless marriage. Her father cheated on her mother, and her mother would be abusive towards her. She would also repeatedly discourage Kusama from pursuing an artistic career, and in turn Kusama hid her creations and rushed to finish them to not get caught.

Early on, Yayoi Kusama started developing a contempt for sexuality, almost a sort of rejection, since her mother would send her to spy on her father's affairs: *"I don't like sex. I had an obsession with sex. When I was a child, my father had lovers and I experienced seeing him. My mother sent me to spy on him. I didn't want to have sex with anyone for years [...] The sexual obsession and fear of sex sit side by side in me."* These visions, which were traumatic for Kusama, became a haunting obsession that never left her mind.

At ten years old, Kusama started to experience a form of neurosis, made of *"flashes of light, auras, or dense fields of dots"*. Initially, they were patterns on fabrics she would stare at, but they would then expand to everywhere around her, engulfing her in infinite repetition. This would be the phenomenon that would inhabit her artistic process for the rest of her life - *self obliteration*, as she called it.

Indeed, art became her token to freedom, she who was constantly haunted by her own mind and its twists. She would draw many pumpkins, because the shape was so familiar to her from her family's plant nursery, and populate them with many dots. The shape was comforting and funny to her. Her childhood was also very much

marked by the war, which gave her a deep value for freedom and peace. When she was thirteen, she worked in a military factory to sew material for the Japanese army, that was involved in World War II, and she would hear the air-raids and the American aircrafts.

In 1948, she went to study *Nihonga* painting at the Municipal School of Arts and Crafts in Kyoto.

Due to the war, Japan was in a very anti-West cultural stance and tried to value the supremacy of Japanese tradition. Kusama was thus obliged to respect conventional artistic techniques and materials, specifically designed to distinguish themselves from Western styles, called *Yoga*. That is when she started seeking more freedom in her creative process, becoming very interested in the European and American avant-garde, organising many exhibitions in Matsumoto and Tokyo in the 1950s.

## Success in the homeland 1950 - 1956

By 1950, Kusama developed a distinctive abstract style, with watercolour, gouache and oil paint on paper. *The Woman*, in 1953, in one of her earlier abstract works, where we can see the artist breaking free from traditional Japanese practices. This singular organic form, floating in a sort of black abyss, is perhaps the first manifestation of the artist's tortured vision of sex, the shape being

reminiscent of female genitalia. In this period, she would start developing her systematic polka dots that then became her trademark. Nothing went uncovered - walls, canvases, bodies, objects of everyday life, entire rooms. These "infinity nets" as she called them, were a direct reflection of the hallucinations she had.

At age ten, back in 1939 it was the first time she drew such shapes on a woman wearing a kimono, who was presumably her mother. The whole figure disappears under dots. About this phenomenon, Kusama said: "*One day I was looking at the red flower patterns of the tablecloth on a table, and when I looked up I saw the same pattern*

*covering the ceiling, the windows, and the walls, and finally all over the room, my body and the universe. I felt as if I had begun to self-obliterate, to revolve in the infinity of endless time and the absoluteness of space, and be reduced to nothingness. As I realised it was actually happening and not just in my imagination, I was frightened. I knew I had to run away lest I should be deprived of my life by the spell of the red flowers. I ran desperately up the stairs. The steps below me began to fall apart and I fell down the stairs spraining my ankle.*"

## New life in New York City 1957 - 1972

Japanese society for Kusama soon became "*too small, too servile, too feudalistic, and too scornful of women*". The conservative society coupled with her stifling mother were too much for the artist in her quest for freedom, which was bound to stay censored in her homeland. Eager for a wider world, Kusama built a strong friendship with Georgia O'Keeffe, often exchanging letters while she was still in Japan.

This helped her secure the future she imagined in the United States, already preparing exhibitions and sales. Interest overseas had grown, and in 1958, she was ready for a new start in New York.

In 1959, *No. F* is the first of the celebrated series, which is the first real shift from her abstract biomorphic forms. There, "stereotypical repetition" had become central in her practice. Kusama explains her Infinity Nets series : "*without beginning, end, or center. The entire canvas would be occupied by a monochromatic net. This endless repetition caused a kind of dizzy, empty, hypnotic feeling*". They became popular, gaining traction in the art scene where Minimalism was still avant-garde.

Donald Judd purchased one of her *Infinity Nets*, and in 1961, Kusama moved into his building where there was also the sculptor Eva Hesse. She became a close friend of Kusama's. Kusama also became very close to Joseph Cornell, an American visual artist and film-maker, with whom she had a platonic but passionate relationship.

In the 1960s Kusama created sculptures covered with phallic forms, such as ladders, armchairs, shoes. *Accumulation No. 1* is one of the most famous. This widens her spectrum of repetition from two to three - dimensionality. They were a way for her to cope with her sexual anxieties, but also to dominate through her art the symbol of patriarchy. She also established an aesthetic in her persona, regularly appearing in public with her bob wigs and progressive outfits, but still staying connected to Japan: during shows, she wore kimonos to show the world her roots.

In 1965, Kusama had a breakthrough when she made *Infinity Mirror*

*Room— Phalli's Field*, giving to her signature repetition an even more infinite dimension through the use of mirrors. In this work, she used her body to activate the space, which was thus also repeated into infinity.

Since then, she has produced more than twenty distinct Infinity Mirror Rooms, which range from small rooms to bigger visual experiences. Her first experimentation with a Happening, or performance art, was in 1966 during the 33<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale, in which her representation had been refused. Nevertheless, she put 1,500 plastic silver globes on the lawn near the Italian Pavilion, called *Narcissus Garden*, which due to the distorted reflection they made, are reminiscent of the myth.

This work would later on have many representations worldwide, with various versions of Narcissus Garden being presented worldwide in Le Consortium, Dijon, 2000; Kunstverein Braunschweig, 2003; as part of the Whitney Biennial Central Park, New York in 2004; and at the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris, 2010.

## Revival in Japan 1973 - present

In 1973, Kusama's mental health declined greatly, due to Cornell's death, the pressure of work, and financial problems, she decided to go back to her homeland, now very well known there and in the Western world.

In 1977, she decided to check herself into a mental hospital where she still lives, the Seiwa Mental Hospital, and where she was diagnosed with neurosis.

In the 1980s, her *Infinity Nets* series gained much attention, rising to the rank of Rothko and Pollock's works. In 1993, she created her iconic Pumpkin, made for the Benesse Art Site on Naoshima Island in Japan. Her work, from this period of her life, started shifting to more cartoonish and compelling forms, which were memories from her childhood garden. That year, she was this time officially featured at the Venice Biennale, at the Japanese pavilion. Kusama kept experimenting with installations featuring her obsessive dots, such as the *Obliteration Room* in 2002, where a dining room is covered in coloured round stickers she handed to the visitors. The room, once white and immaculate, progressively got obliterated by colour with the participation of the public. It also symbolises Kusama's desire to defy rules and parental controls by letting children do what they want with the work. This was the first time Kusama let visitors participate in one of her works.

In 2005, *Guidepost to a New World* featured 11 striking red polka dot sculptures made of aluminium going up to almost three meters tall, towering over the viewers as menacing, but also comforting and funny creatures, in the same spirit as her pumpkins, embracing a form of Kawaii culture. In her ninth decade, Kusama has been featured in many retrospectives across the world, such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris, in 2011, through a selection of one hundred and fifty works produced between 1949 and 2010.

In 2017, the Yayoi Kusama museum opened in Tokyo. Kusama has always held a paradoxical position with the commercialisation of art: for a long time, she revolted herself again, but in her later years, embraced it completely by collaborating with high-fashion brands such as Louis Vuitton in 2012. This year, in 2022, they are reuniting with handbags and accessories reimaged with the artist's signature dots. The two entities have taken over Tokyo's public space with an array of artworks and exhibitions to promote the collaboration.

She has continued working with a broad spectrum of mediums, returning sometimes to drawing and painting, such as acrylic on canvas.



# Niki de Saint Phalle

## Chronology

### A tormented youth 1930 - 1952

Catherine Marie-Agnès Fal de Saint Phalle was born on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1930 in Neuilly-sur-Seine to Jeanne-Jacqueline Harper, a woman from the American upper middle class, and to André Marie de Saint Phalle, who came from an old noble French family. The latter was a well-known banker whose company went bankrupt during the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Niki de Saint Phalle considered herself "a child of the depression", as she was born out family bankruptcy and as her mother suffered from depression due to her husband's infidelities.

She spent her early years in the castle of her paternal grandparents in Nièvre. Her mother had left to join her husband in the United States.

In August 1933, she joined her parents, her brother and her two sisters in Greenwich (USA), where she was raised by a nanny she nicknamed Nana, a foreshadowing of the feminine and sensual figure that would later inhabit her art. Her mother started calling her Niki at that time.

She moved to New York in 1936 and attended the Convent of the Sacred Heart. She particularly enjoyed the calligraphy class in which she developed her handwriting and worked on the pretty curves that would later be found in her work and letters. Her creative skills started showing from the age of 6 - she was constantly drawing complex and rich forms, curved lines, twists and turns. Niki already was a rebellious pupil who loved games, theatre and the stage. After she got expelled from her school, she soon joined the Brearly School in New York, where she discovered Greek tragedies, Shakespeare and Camus.

In the summer of 1942 - which Niki de Saint Phalle called "Summer of Snakes" -, she was raped by her father.

At 14, she painted the genitals of her school's statues blood red in an act of defiance. Her parents then sent her to a religious boarding school. At 17, she started a career as a model posing for Elle, Harper's Bazaar, Vogue, and even being the cover girl for Life.

In 1949, aged 18, she distanced herself from the family setting to marry her childhood friend, poet and musician Harry Mathews. The couple avoided social constraints. Harry studied musicology at Harvard and Niki de Saint Phalle focused on theatre. Their daughter Laura was born on April 31<sup>st</sup>, 1951.

## Art-therapy 1953 - 1963

In 1952, the couple moved to Paris. In the summer, they traveled to the South of France, Spain, Italy... Niki de Saint Phalle was particularly stricken by cathedrals as she saw "a collective ideal" in them. That very figure was to become recurring in her artwork; according to her, art was a collegial act born from mutual stimulation and enrichment.

In 1953, Niki de Saint Phalle went through severe depression and was committed to a psychiatric hospital in Nice. That is where she discovered painting, an art that proved to be a real therapy for her: "I started painting among the insane... I discovered the dark world of madness and its cure, I learned to translate my feelings, fears, violence, hope and joy into paintings." (Catherine Francblin, *Niki de Saint Phalle, la révolte à l'œuvre*, éditions Hazan, 2013). The electroshocks she underwent altered her memory on the long term. Indeed, her entire artwork is split between amnesia and hypermnesia, oblivion and resurgence of suffering. She perceived creation as a means to exteriorise what was buried in her psyche. The collages she made while at the psychiatric hospital didn't really win her friends and family over, yet she went on creating as her husband and the painter Hugh Weiss supported her spontaneity.

1955 marked another turning point for Niki de Saint Phalle. Her son Philip was born on May 1<sup>st</sup>. She later left for Madrid and then Barcelona, where she discovered the work of Gaudí, and particularly Park Güell. That aesthetic shock would later be an inspiration for her own sculpture park, the *Tarot Garden*, which represents the peak and completion of her vision.

In 1956, Niki de Saint Phalle completed a series of oil paintings. Her first exhibition took place in April at the Gotthard Gallery in Saint-Gall, Switzerland.

That same year, she met Jean Tinguely and his wife Eva Aeppli. When she set out to create her first sculpture a few months later, Jean helped her weld a metal frame which she then covered with plaster. Jean and Eva lived on impasse Ronsin, a place filled with artistic emulation and independence that Niki de Saint Phalle particularly appreciated. She worked extensively with her New Realist friends; just like them, her paintings incorporated recycled materials and objects: children's toys, fabric, pieces of wood, but also knives and razor blades that she used to carry in her handbag. Niki de Saint Phalle also collected pairs of scissors that she put between her mattress and box spring, as symbols of buried violence. The world she developed was then tragic and provocative (*Paysage de la mort, You are me*).

Tinguely became her partner in 1959. At 30, Niki de Saint Phalle decided to fully dedicate herself to her career as an artist. On February 12<sup>th</sup>, she organised her first session of "shots" on impasse Ronsin. A dozen others were to take place between 1961 and 1963. It was the starting point of what particularly characterised the beginnings of her artwork, i.e. "Art-action" or public performance. With a rifle in hand, she shot at a set of disparate objects so as to burst colour packets that had been arranged on a layer of plaster. "Ready! Take aim! Fire! Red, yellow, blue, paint is crying, paint is dead. I've killed paint. It is resurrected. A war with no casualty." The final work was entitled *Shot*. Several New Realists attended the inaugural action, and art critic Pierre Restany offered Niki de Saint Phalle to join that group mainly composed of Arman, César, Christo, Gérard Deschamps, François Dufrêne, Raymond Hains, Yves Klein, Martial Raysse, Mimmo Rotella, Daniel Spoerri, Jean Tinguely and Jacques Villeglé.

The artist's first solo exhibition was organised by Pierre Restany and his wife Jeannine de Goldschmidt at Galerie J in June 1961. The latter was famous among the Parisian art market in the 1960s because of its bold programming. The exhibition, entitled *Feu à volonté* (All-you-can-fire) invited visitors to shoot at paintings. In October 1961, Niki de Saint Phalle also exhibited her work at the MoMA in New York.

## A female mythology 1963 - 1972

In May 1963, Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely bought "L'Auberge du Cheval Blanc" in Essonne. She was very concerned by the traditional status of women in society and created a series of sculptures featuring witches, prostitutes and parturient women. To her, all those women stood as sacrificed goods, prisoners of a role that was imposed on them.

Niki de Saint Phalle went back to New York in 1964 and created a series of sculptures-collages sporting hearts and dragons; they would later become Nanas. The pregnancy of her friend Clarice Rivers, the wife of painter Larry Rivers, inspired Niki de Saint Phalle for her first Nanas; they were showcased at Galerie Alexandre Iolas in Paris, first in fabric and wool, then in polyester and painted plaster.

In June 1966, Niki de Saint Phalle was invited by Pontus Hulten to install a large sculpture by the entrance of Moderna Museet in Stockholm. With the help of Tinguely, she created a monumental 91-foot-long pregnant *Nana* lying on her back. That gigantic "cathedral woman" was named Hon ("She" in Swedish). The public could visit her by entering through her genitals. Different "rooms" could be found inside, as well as mechanisms created by Jean Tinguely and assemblages from Per Olof Ultvedt. The launch was a huge success with the public.

In 1967, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam presented *Les Nanas au pouvoir* ("Nana Power"), Niki de Saint Phalle's first museum exhibition. The public discovered the first *Nana Dream House*, Nana Fountain, as well as plans for *Nana Town*.

In 1968, Niki de Saint Phalle presented her work at the MoMa in New York as part of the *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage* exhibit; she was among the four women whose works were showcased. In October, the artist exhibited a mural relief painting in 18 parts, *Last Night I Had a Dream*, at Galerie Alexandre Iolas in Paris.

At that time, Niki de Saint Phalle started suffering from respiratory diseases also caused by the inhalation of polyester dust.

In 1969, after coming back from a trip to India, she began working on her first large-scale architectural project, *Le Rêve de l'oiseau, Big Clarisse et la Sorcière*, which was located in the Var forest, in southern France. The construction was completed in 1971. That same year, Niki de Saint Phalle collaborated with Jean Tinguely on the Cyclop in Milly-la-Forêt, Essonne, which was finished in 1994.

The New Realists's final Festival was inaugurated in 1970 in Milan. On that occasion, Niki de Saint Phalle shot at the crucifixes and virgins of an altar-ensemble she had created beforehand.

In 1971, after *Nanas and Devouring Mothers*, the artist's stance on women began to change and got more critical. That same year, she married Jean Tinguely.

## Art for all 1972 - 2002

In 1972, she created *The Golem*, a monumental sculpture that was installed in a kindergarten in Jerusalem. The artist got inspired by the mythical creature from popular Jewish culture described in psalms of the Talmud.

Niki de Saint Phalle then directed her first feature, *Daddy*, an autobiographical film that symbolised a psychoanalytic reckoning with her father. Peter Whitehead, an influential counter-culture filmmaker, helped her with that project.

In 1974, Niki de Saint Phalle installed three giant *Nanas* - called Caroline, Charlotte and Sophie - in Hanover, Germany. She also reunited with Marella Agnelli, a friend she had met in the 1950s, and told her about her architectural dream: a sculpture garden. Carlo and Nicola Caracciolo, Marella's brothers, offered Niki de Saint Phalle a piece of land in Tuscany so that she could carry out her colossal project. The self-financed work started in 1978 and lasted for twenty years. It was to become the Tarot Garden.

In 1980, Niki de Saint Phalle launched her first collections of furniture and decorative objects, as well as a perfume, which enabled her to finance her project in Tuscany. The Centre Pompidou organised the artist's first retrospective that same year.

In 1983, Niki de Saint Phalle created the *Stravinsky Fountain* in Paris, in collaboration with Jean Tinguely; it was financed as part of the construction of the Centre Pompidou. In that kinetic ensemble, Jean Tinguely's dark machines stood alongside Niki de Saint Phalle's shimmering sculptures, evoking Igor Stravinsky's musical work.

Later, the *Sun God*, a 32-foot-high firebird, was installed on the campus of the University of California at San Diego. It was the artist's first monumental installation in the United States.

From 1984 to 1990, while building the *Tarot Garden*, Niki de Saint Phalle was actively involved in the fight against AIDS. She wrote the book *AIDS: You Can't Catch It Holding Hands* with Silvio Barandun and illustrated the cover. She was deeply affected by the death of her friend and assistant Ricardo Menon, who died of AIDS; she decorated his grave in the Montparnasse cemetery with a cat so that "*all the cats (would) come and visit him.*" In 1990, she also made an animated film based on her book with the help of her son Philip Mathews.

Jean Tinguely died at the age of 66 in Switzerland in 1991.

In 1993, Niki de Saint Phalle moved to La Jolla, California, where the climate was better suited to her fragile health.

In 1994, she published a memoir, *Mon secret*, for her daughter Laura, in which she revealed that she had been raped by her father at the age of eleven. The book was intended to free Niki de Saint Phalle from the trauma that had plagued her life. It showed how art had become therapeutic for her.

The Niki de Saint Phalle Museum opened in Nasu, Japan, that same year.

In 1995, Peter Schamoni directed a film about her life, *Niki de Saint Phalle: Who Is the Monster? You or Me?*

In 1997, an *Ange Protecteur (Guardian Angel)* was installed on the ceiling of the Zurich railway station. That monumental winged and colourful Nana watched over the passengers.

The *Tarot Garden* was officially opened to the public in May 1998. It consisted of 22 monumental sculptures, some of which were habitable, inspired by the Major Arcana of the divinatory tarot. Built in concrete, they were covered with a mosaic of mirrors, glass and coloured ceramics.

In 1999, Niki de Saint Phalle completed her series of sculptures entitled *Black Heroes*, which testified to her political commitment. She also published her second autobiographical book, *Traces*.

Between 2000 and 2001, Niki de Saint Phalle bequeathed a large part of her work to the Sprengel Museum in Hanover and to the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Nice. This represented about 500 sculptures and 500 graphic works.

On 25 May 2002, Niki de Saint Phalle died of chronic respiratory failure at the age of 71 in San Diego, California.

In 2003, *Queen Califia's Magical Circle Garden*, her last architectural project, which she had begun in 1999, was inaugurated in Escondido, California. The latter was inspired by Califia, the black Amazon queen California was presumably named after.

The Niki Charitable Art Foundation was created by the artist, but only became officially active after her death. Its role is to preserve and respect the work of Niki de Saint Phalle. It also participates in the dissemination of her works, by lending the artist's personal collection.

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