

## The Architecture of Niki de Saint Phalle, Living Inside Sculpture

Not many of us can imagine designing, engineering, fabricating, financing, and living inside one's own monumental sculpture - the dream of being inside a vision of one's own making.

The prolific 20th century artist Niki de Saint Phalle (1930 - 2002) created more monumental architectural works in San Diego than in any other American city. Working through an arsenal of emotions and mediums to create impressive large-scale public sculpture all over the world, her final master work **Queen Califia's Magical Circle** is celebrating its' 15th birthday in 2018. She started painting at the age of 19 and never stopped constructing, filming, performing and fabricating artworks until her death in 2002.

*I'm following a course that was chosen for me, following a pressing need to show that a woman can work on a monumental scale.*

*- Niki de Saint Phalle <sup>1</sup>*

Throughout her long career as an artist, there were always elements of collaboration and public interaction connected to her work. She held *happenings* and solicited public interaction in her shooting works of art, **Tirs séances** or *shooting performances*(1961), as well as inviting visitors to physically enter her monumental sculptural works. Early work like **Hon: a Cathedral** (1966), created in the Moderna Museet of Stockholm Sweden, led people through a vaginal entrance into a female body. Inside the structure were multiple rooms with a variety of environments including a goldfish pond uterus and movie theater. She built several large scale structures throughout Europe

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<sup>1</sup> [New Yorker Magazine](#) "Beautiful Monsters, Art and obsession in Tuscany," 2016

including, **The Golem** (1972), in Jerusalem, Israel; **Dragon de Knokke** (1973-1975) Knokke-Heist, Belgium; and **Grotto** in Hannover, Germany (1999-2003).

Saint Phalle studied ancient cultures and their myths as well as architectural methods and materials, leading her to build the **Tarot Garden** (1975 - 2002) on fourteen acres in a limestone quarry in Tuscany, Italy. How did Saint Phalle get these monumental works built and how did she finance the structures? She was a charismatic collaborator, working with artist friends from around the world to complete her vision. She financed a portion of the first large-scale sculpture park through sales of her custom perfume. Citing architect Antoni Gaudi as an inspiration, the **Tarot Garden** was where Saint Phalle lived and worked for many years, inviting artists to collaborate and create visionary environments and sculptures in the park.

*All of the monumental sculpture armatures were made from welded steel bars, formed by brute strength on the knees of the crew...Once the steel armatures were finished and the wire mesh was stretched over them, they were ready for gunite cement which was sprayed on...the ceramics were molded, in most cases, right on the sculptures, numbered, taken off, carried to the ovens, cooked and glazed, and then put back in the place on the sculpture. When ceramics are cooked there is a 10% loss in size, so the resulting empty space around the ceramics were filled in with hand cut pieces of glass.*

*-Niki de Saint Phalle*

After years of inhaling polymer and resin fumes as well as a long list of caustic materials, Saint Phalle had damaged her lungs. Her doctor recommended moving to a place where she could *breath*, so in 1993 Saint Phalle moved to La Jolla. In moving to California, she found hope and inspiration.

*California has been a rebirth for my soul and an earthquake for my eyes—sea, desert, mountains, wide open sky, brilliance of light and vastness of space.*

*I have embraced another way of life, and have let my discovery of this landscape manifest itself in my work.*

*- Niki de Saint Phalle*

Her life long interest in the construction of public interactive sculptures as well as living in her sculptures in Italy, gave her a unique insight into how people interact with art environments emotionally and physically - how visitors react to monumental architecture and how they explore tactile elements - the stones, tiles, mirrors of the artworks. She spent years playing with materials and working with other artists who were fabricating large scale works of art including her most famous collaboration with her husband Jean Tinguely.

This ability of Saint Phalle to be audacious and fearless in large scale monumental sculpture design informed her prolific last years of life. Her last major sculpture environment, **Queen Califia's Magical Circle**, was constructed in Escondido, California over a period of four years. Califia, the mythical Amazon warrior queen of the island of California, is the centerpiece and major source of inspiration for the sculpture park. Saint Phalle studied California history, myths, and legends, including Native American and Meso-American culture, regional geography, and local flora and fauna, inspiring the creations that fill the sculpture park.

*They became...springboards to create imaginative creatures which celebrate the diversity of life.*

*- Niki de Saint Phalle*

Saint Phalle designed elements of the sculpture park at her Princess Street home in La Jolla. Structures were fabricated in her design studio in El Cajon and finished on site in

Kit Carson Park. In talking to Susan Pollack, the public art consultant who worked on the project, she stated that Saint Phalle remained totally immersed in the project until her death at the age of 71 in May of 2002. At that time trustees of her Foundation, granddaughter Bloum Cardenas, Marcelo Zitelli, and Dave Stevenson, oversaw the completed construction and staging of the park.

While in San Diego, Saint Phalle also created **Noah's Ark Sculpture Park** (1995-2000) in collaboration with her friend and architect Mario Botta. The park, located in Jerusalem, is dedicated to the children of the region and includes 23 animals created in the El Cajon studio. The animals were initially shown in Balboa Park and then shipped to Israel.

*Despite her great success, she could still look with a critical eye at the artistic environment of her time; she needed to go beyond the single sculpture and establish a fruitful connection with the surrounding space. Outside her atelier, it was necessary to build new relationships between artworks, space and architecture, in order to become a significant presence.*

*Her organic language based on fluid forms and characterized by strong colors, grew within the new architectural standards and geometries, defining an unprecedented complementarity and allowing art to offer new opportunities for a more intense social participation.*

- Mario Botta, architect and long time collaborator

Saint Phalle collaborated with a team of artists, artisans, and other specialists whose own unique talents and fierce dedication were critical to the realization of many of her large-scale environmental gardens, parks, and public art projects.

Collaborators included Marcelo Zitelli, a native of Argentina, who first met Saint Phalle in 1987 in Paris where he had come to work in the theater. For the first five years, he

lived in the artist's home, assisting her in the making of small maquettes from original drawings, and working with her and Jean Tinguely on the fountain at Château Chinon for French President Mitterand, and at the Tarot Garden in southern Tuscany. He was Niki's assistant and collaborator for fifteen years until her death in 2002 and remains the curator and a trustee of the Niki Charitable Art Foundation.

*With Niki, it was always a collaboration. She knew how to discover the ability of other people, right down to the last person on a project,"*

- Marcelo Zitelli

Lech Juretko, a native of Szczecin, Poland, Juretko lived for five years in Hamburg, Germany, before immigrating to San Diego in 1986. A contractor by trade with no prior experience in art, Saint Phalle immediately recognized Juretko's skilled eye and superior craftsmanship and offered him the opportunity to work on the mosaics for **Gila** (1994), a private commission in San Diego, California. Juretko now heads Art Mosaic Inc., which has overseen the selection, design, hand cutting, and application of mosaics for all of Saint Phalle's later projects including **Queen Califia's Magical Circle**.

Pierre Marie LeJeune, a well-known French sculptor and designer, LeJeune met Saint Phalle in 1978 and worked with her on painting her sculptures for the Stravinsky Fountain in Paris (completed in 1983). Later, he was involved in decorative and design work for the **Tarot Garden**, the **Grotto** in Hannover's Royal Herrenhausen Garden (2003) as well as other collaborative projects, including mobiles, lamps, tables, chairs and fountains. He also created the integrated bench seating in the **Queen Califia's Magical Circle**.

Ron McPherson, La Paloma, fabricated the snake and maze walls and the Queen Califia sculpture for the Escondido garden. He previously worked with the artist on the structural engineering and fabrication of **Gila** and **Coming Together**, a 2002 commission

for the Port of San Diego. McPherson studied engineering and printmaking before going to work with Kenneth Tyler at Gemini GEL, where he eventually ran the print shop. La Paloma started in 1974 and the company has worked with many important artists such as Jasper Johns, Jonathan Borofsky, Ellsworth Kelly, Richard Serra, Claes Oldenburg, Paul McCarthy, Tim Hawkinson, and Ed Ruscha.

*I have been very fortunate in my life to work with many leading artists like Richard Serra and Jasper Johns and I think that Niki has been one of my major influences.*

*- Ron McPherson, whose company La Paloma has fabricated many of the artist's large sculptures since 1994.*

Saint Phalle also collaborated with San Diego furniture maker and artist Del Cover. Del met Saint Phalle in San Diego through carpenter Ted Deddrick, who worked for Martha Longnecker of the Mingei International Museum. Del recalls, *I showed her some of my art work (currently painted snakes) and she said that she had not ever worked in wood, but asked if I would want to try something in wood.* The first piece Del worked on for Saint Phalle was the **Tree of Life**.

In case you haven't visited **Queen Califia's Magical Circle**, here is an overview of the art piece: located within Kit Carson Park, landscape architects Deneen Powell Atelier, San Diego included the following plant list, Coastal Live Oak, Valley Oak, Canyon Oak, California Sagebrush, Brush Poppy, White Sage Cactus, Prickly Pear, San Pedro Cactus, Dwarf Coyote Bush, and Natural California Lilac. There is one entrance into the sculpture park, which every person travels through to get into the magical circle environment. You will walk through a maze of disorienting mirrors that open up into a magical translation of the world that Niki de Saint Phalle saw when she came to California. When you step inside, you wonder what everything represents and how she made it all happen.

Constantly changing light and weather conditions gives visitors to the park mercurial and lasting memories questioning what they saw and how they felt in the park. I believe it took a lifetime of designing, experimenting, and making large scale artworks, as well as a devotion to public engagement, to reach this pinnacle of her career.

**Queen Califia's Magical Circle** was Niki de Saint Phalle's gift to the children of the world. The city of Escondido donated the land and oversees the care of the park. Volunteer docents open the park free to the public and provide information about Saint Phalle and the park structure. There is always a need for docents to help lead tours of the park as well as to open the park to the public. People interested in volunteering as a docent can contact Kristina Owens at the city of Escondido, at [760 839-4000](tel:7608394000).

San Diego County is home to the largest collection of Saint Phalle's public sculptures in America. They include the **Nikigator** (2001) and **Le Poete et sa muse** (1998), Mingei International Museum in Balboa Park; **Ganesh**, in the sculpture garden of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego in La Jolla; **Coming Together** (2001) along the waterfront at the San Diego Convention Center; **Arbre Serpents** (1988), **Cat** (1999) and **#19 Baseball Player** (1999) at the Waterfront Park; **Grande Step Totem** (2001) at the California Center for the Arts, Escondido; **Sun God** (1983) Stuart Collection at UC San Diego.

**Queen Califia's Magical Circle** is located in the Iris Sankey Arboretum in Kit Carson Park, 3333 Bear Valley Parkway, Escondido, California. The park's entrance is five minutes from the Via Rancho Parkway exit of the 15 fwy at the intersection of Bear Valley Parkway and Mary Lane. Admission is free. [www.queencalifia.org](http://www.queencalifia.org). The park is open on Tuesday and Thursday from 9am to noon weather permitting. Also open every 2nd Saturday of the month to the public 9am to 2pm. The Garden may also be visited by groups of 10 or more by advance reservation at (760) 839-4519 or [kowens@escondido.org](mailto:kowens@escondido.org)

