

GALERIE MITTERRAND

The Conversation Continues and Invites Your Participation

(Text by writer and cultural curator, Enuma Okoro)

Deborah Roberts and Niki de Saint Phalle: *The Conversation Continues*

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One of the many reasons that art is essential for society is because it has the powerful ability to destabilize our comfortable perceptions, and in so doing, to stimulate our thinking, awaken our feeling and eventually, if we are courageous enough to allow it, to affect our behavior. But for any art to stir us and possibly transform us, we as viewers must be open and ready to engage it. Art calls us not just to be passive consumers of visual culture but invites us to be attentive lookers, active listeners and engaged interlocutors. In the Galerie Mitterrand exhibition, *Deborah Roberts and Niki de Saint Phalle: The Conversation Continues*, we are asked to join the ongoing conversation embedded throughout history on what it means for a body, a human being to be truly seen and justly reckoned within the world, specifically a world steeped in Euro-centric Western patriarchal systems of ideology and power. For artists Deborah Roberts (1962-) and Niki de Saint Phalle (1930 -2002), born more than a generation apart and coming of age in different historical and cultural periods, the bodies we are asked to consider are those of women and children, those whose lives are often the most vulnerable to emotional, physical, and mental violence across the world. To place these artists in dialogue across boundaries of time and culture is to highlight the ways in which society still fails women and children, to emphasize the ways these two women

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have been and continue to be beacons of light and town criers for justice through the varied mediums of the art, and to honestly acknowledge the complications and challenges that can exist in conversations between interlocutors from different cultural contexts and backgrounds.

Deborah Roberts, the African American mixed media artist born in Austin Texas, primarily employs collage to create complex figurative works that both highlight and draw into question how Black children, especially Black girls, are seen, represented, and treated in society. Her work considers the identity formation of Black children in a world that often fails to afford them the luxury of childhood, and fractures little boys and girls into oversexualized, emotionless, and mythically violent beings that strip them of their youthful innocence and deny their humanity. Effects of which render Black children simultaneously invisible and hyper visible all at once and puts Black children in increased and ongoing contexts of danger. But through the seemingly playful elements of her art, in her latest series of painting-collages, *Periode Nègre: The Conversation Continues*, mixing vibrant colors of clothing with collaged composite pieces of facial features, and body parts, Roberts coaxes you to a place of having to contend with the realities behind these figurative compilations of identity and Black childhood. From images of young girls with afro puffs framing their faces for you *Let Your Root Feed Your Crown* (2023), or staring boldly and directly at you, *Numéro Deux* (2023), to the softly questioning innocent faces of adolescent boys dressed in what could be mistaken for striped prison clothes *Numéro Six* (2023) or diamond patterned motif of harlequins, *Numéro Un* (2023) perhaps alluding to the 16th century characteristics of that Italian carnival character as a troublesome, ignorant masked servant. There are endless

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stereotypes and tropes to which Black children are subjected. But to say yes to being a conversation partner with Roberts' work is to find yourself asking the necessary questions that arise from paying attention. Why are these children fractured? What are their larger-than-life hands and folded arms and tilted heads saying? To what do their postures bear witness? Why are parts of their bodies invisible or seemingly disappearing into the background of the canvas? Who is gazing at them and can the viewer bear or dare to receive the returned gaze of these children? Every child in each of Roberts' eight works in the exhibition declares to be seen and their collaged eyes follow you full of their own necessary questions. One can almost hear and imagine those questions are both childlike in their inquiries of "Why?" and "Do you see me?" and searing in their underlying questions for accountability, "How could you do...?" and "Why can't you...?"

Roberts' work is creatively put in conversation with the late French American sculptor, painter and filmmaker, Catherine Marie-Agnes Fal de Saint Phalle. Known famously as Niki de Saint Phalle. A complex artist whose own life contained various painful fractures that split between her identity as an abused daughter, an institutionalized wife, a magazine model, a seemingly reluctant parent, and an outspoken, daring, rebellious feminist avant-garde artist. De Saint Phalle used her work to wrestle with her own experiences as a child and a woman within patriarchal systems of abuse and confinements. Her multimedia work across the span of her career included oil paintings, relief collages, her famous shooting *Tir* series, sculptures, garden art and architecture and her larger-than-life *Nanas* for which she was most acclaimed. It is those colorful, exuberant, almost free-floating Nana sculptures that dialogue with Robert's painting collages. De Saint Phalle began her Nana goddess works in

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1964, first made with papier-mâché and then with polyester. At the time, they formed new expression of her ongoing work of representing what she wanted for herself as a woman and for others who felt marginalized and unjustly treated by the mores, customs, and even laws of society, in a nutshell, more freedom, creatively and simply to exist in the world. The Nanas (a word that translates into a slang for woman, something like "broad") sometimes as high as 12ft tall are voluptuous, large bodied, thick-thighed, big bottomed and full breasted female figures that fell in contrast not only to de Saint Phalle's own slight model frame, but also to notions of beauty in the 1960s. They danced on tiptoes, floated with wings above the air, rode dolphins and existed as brightly, joy-filled, giantesses who would dwarf anyone, especially men who stood beside them. The artist was creating female figures who could take up as much space as they chose to and made in all colors of the rainbow. But the Nanas, *La Patineuse* (1967), *Nana Fontaine Type* (1967), and works on paper, *Black is Different* (1994), in the exhibition point in part to de Saint Phalle's reactive work to the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and to an ongoing engagement with black body representation in her work. Striking and exuberant as there are, and with the assumed notable intention of social activism and desired support of the struggle for civil rights, it is hard not to also want to interrogate these works with their charcoal black bodies and exaggerated bodily features. De Saint Phalle had publicly shared that as a child she felt most safe with her family's Black female cook in the family kitchen. One can sympathize with the child, but also must contend with the recognized motif of the care-taking Black servant woman of white children. It is uncomfortable but also unavoidable. Yet, it does bears witness to the reality that regardless of our intentions, we often do hold multiple and conflicting narratives, some unquestioned or inherited from our environment and society, and others,

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symbolic of ways of being we hope to exemplify through our life choices and work. And this is part of the reason why conversations such as this between artists, between cultures, between women, between historical time periods are essential. One can still dialogue while also recognizing the complications and realities of intersectionality in representation, identity formation, systems of power and in the dialogues and collaborations for more just societies. The beauty being that art can be a space that allows one to have these conversations while recognizing the discomforts and the differences.

Robert's series is titled as a nod to Pablo Picasso's African Period, where inspired by works of African art viewed at the Musée d'Ethnographie in Paris, Picasso incorporated elements of African artistic and sculptural practice into his own work. Eventually leading to creating the Cubist movement of the early 20th century. Of the many things that could be said about Picasso's controversial appropriation of African art and culture, it is notable that the artistic conversation between the works of these two women, Deborah Roberts and Niki de Saint Phalle, occurs in the 50th year of Pablo Picasso's death. The conversation extends beyond these two women and includes many partners, some willing, some likely unwilling. But to visit this timely, compelling and necessary exhibition, and to sit with these works, is to lend an ear, an eye, and hopefully in due course, a voice and a hand to the ongoing struggle for the wellbeing and just treatment and recognized full humanity of all historically and continually marginalized people.

- *Enuma Okoro*