

PRESS RELEASE

Niki de Saint Phalle's *Queen Califia's Magical Circle* Opens in Escondido, California, this October The Only American Sculpture Garden by this Internationally-Acclaimed Artist

ESCONDIDO, CA (Sept. ,2003) — The highly anticipated opening of *Queen Califia's Magical Circle*, the only American sculpture garden created by the renowned French-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle, will take place on October 26, 2003 at 1:30 p.m. in Escondido's Iris Sankey Arboretum in Kit Carson Park. The garden promises to become an instantaneous cultural landmark for the San Diego region—a place where visitors can roam at will, play, touch, dream and “find inspiration in Saint Phalle's extraordinary homage to California's mythic and historic origins and its cultural diversity,” said Susan Pollack, who manages the City of Escondido's Public Art Program.

Niki de Saint Phalle was born in 1930 in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, and raised in New York City. She began painting in 1948, moved four years later to Europe (Nice, Paris and Mallorca) and first came to international prominence in 1961 as a member of the influential “New Realists,” a group that also included Christo, Yves Klein and Jean Tinguely (her frequent collaborator whom she married in 1971). Today, she is best known for her oversized, voluptuous female figures, the *Nanas*, which can be seen in cities and museums around the world. Among her large-scale installations are *The Stravinsky Fountain* near the Centre Pompidou in Paris (1983), *The Tarot Garden* at Garavicchio in southern Tuscany (which was entirely financed by the artist and opened after twenty-four years of work in 1998) and *The Grotto* in Hannover's Royal Herrenhausen Garden (2003).

A Gift for Southern California and Its Children

Saint Phalle continued living near Paris until 1994 when, for reasons of poor health (brought about by exposure to toxic fumes from polyester materials used in her early sculptures), she

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moved to La Jolla, California. “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,” she once remarked. “I have embraced another way of life, and have let my discovery of this landscape manifest itself in my work.”

“*Queen Califia’s Magical Circle* is my grandmother’s gift to the region,” said Bloum Cardenas, a Bay Area artist and trustee of the newly established Niki Charitable Art Foundation. “Niki’s first significant architectural project was *The Bird’s Dream* and she called it that because her personal symbol was the eagle. This garden, then, is the final realization of the bird’s dream, Niki’s dream, to create a wonderful legacy for a place she dearly loved.”

The garden is not only Saint Phalle’s last major project but also one of only four large-scale sculptural environments designed and built by the artist and her studio. The others are *The Tarot Garden*, *Noah’s Ark* in Jerusalem, Israel (completed in 2001 in collaboration with Swiss architect Mario Botta) and Hannover’s *The Grotto*.

Always interested in expanding the audience for contemporary art, *Queen Califia* is a place for families to gather, play and engage with a visually rich world of ideas, symbols, and forms. “My first really big piece for kids was the *Golem* [completed in 1970 in Jerusalem] and three generations know and love it. Here [in Escondido], you can also touch the sculptures,” Saint Phalle said in one of her last interviews. “They feel nice and you won’t harm them. You can be a part of them ... it’s like a marriage between the sculptures and the child or adult. Maybe it brings out the child in adults, too.”

Queen Califia’s Magical Circle took nearly four years to plan and execute and Saint Phalle remained totally immersed in the project until just before her death at the age of 71 in May 2002. Foundation trustees Bloum Cardenas, Marcelo Zitelli and Dave Stevenson have overseen the garden’s final staging. They have worked closely with Susan Pollack and Don Anderson,

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Escondido's Director of Community Services, to ensure that the artist's vision is fully realized, even in the smallest details.

One of the Most Important American Public Art Projects in Recent Years

Apart from its considerable importance in Saint Phalle's illustrious career, *Queen Califia's Magical Circle* is one of the most important site-specific art projects realized anywhere in the United States in recent years. This achievement is all the more noteworthy because it has been made possible through an exemplary partnership between an artist of international stature and the City of Escondido, a municipality of relatively small size that has nonetheless funded an active and highly respected public art program since 1986. "We are honored to have this remarkable garden here in our community where it will enthrall and delight visitors of all ages for generations to come," said Escondido Mayor Lori Holt Pfeiler.

Queen Califia and the Naming of the Garden

The garden, like the state itself, takes its name from the legendary black Amazon queen, Califia, who was believed to rule a terrestrial island paradise of gold and riches "on the right hand of the Indies." The legend was first popularized in the 16th century romance novel, *Las Sergas de Esplandián*, which received wide circulation in Spain. Geologist John McPhee recounts the tale in his book *Assembling California* (1994), which Saint Phalle read and drew upon as a source for her initial ideas.

The imposing mosaic sculpture of Califia herself (11 feet tall), an archetype of feminine power and strength, commands the center of the garden. Clad in gold armour, she holds a small bird aloft while standing astride a monumental eagle (13 feet tall). Openings between the bird's massive legs lead visitors into a small domed "temple" decorated with cosmic symbols as well as painted ceramic plaques that were originally designed for *The Tarot Garden*. A golden, egg-shaped fountain occupies the middle of the space—a reference to Califia's magical reign over the oceans as well as to the theme of birth, death and transformation, which recurs throughout Saint Phalle's considerable body of work.

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Entering the Magical Circle—The Snake Wall and Maze

The garden's outside diameter measures 120 feet and is encircled by an undulating wall across which slither large, playful serpents decorated in colorfully patterned mosaics. The *Snake Wall* has one entrance into the garden—a maze-like passageway whose walls and floor are also decorated in bold patterns of black, white and mirrored tiles. This gateway “announces that you are crossing a threshold into a new magical world—the world of your past, your roots, your land, your unconscious dreams,” observed Marcelo Zitelli, the artist’s curator and longtime assistant.

A Celebration of California’s Diverse Histories and Cultures

In planning the garden, Niki de Saint Phalle immersed herself in regional history and myth. They became “springboards to create imaginative creatures which celebrate the diversity of life,” said the artist, “as well as those factors which have played a large role in southern California [including the Spanish, Mexican and Southwestern Indian cultures].”

Eight large totemic sculptures (ranging in height from eleven to twenty-one feet) surround Queen Califia. They are adorned with stylized monsters, protective deities, geometric symbols, crests, skulls, humans and various animals that once played vital roles in the lives of the people and are still endowed with sacredness and special powers. Of particular importance in the garden is the eagle, distinguished by his extraordinarily high flight, which brings him nearer to the sun and in closer proximity to the gods than any other creature. Figuring in both pre-Conquest Mexican legend and Native American imagery, it can also be seen in three of Saint Phalle’s best-known sculptures—*The Firebird* (part of *The Stravinsky Fountain* in Paris), *The Sun God* (1983) at the Stuart Collection on the campus of the University of California at San Diego and *The Sun (Card No. 19)* at *The Tarot Garden*.

A Shimmering, Virtuoso Display of Mosaic Art

Queen Califia’s Magical Circle bears the brilliant, unique mosaic ornamentation that is an unmistakable part of Saint Phalle’s later work. “The garden uses a far greater diversity of mosaic

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materials gathered from around the world than seen in any of her other large-scale projects,” said Lech Juretko, who has directed Saint Phalle’s mosaic workshop since 1994. “Here, Niki personally selected dozens of varieties of glass in differing shapes, color, hue, translucency and degrees of reflection. For the first time, she also used a wide assortment of polished and tumbled stones such as travertine, agates, quartzes and veined turquoise.” The results are magical and ever changing, as the movement of light, wind, color and reflections continually transform the garden.

General Information – Hours, Location, Admission

Queen Califia’s Magical Circle is located in the Iris Sankey Arboretum in Escondido’s Kit Carson Park. The park’s entrance is five minutes from the Via Rancho Parkway exit of I-15 at the intersection of Bear Valley Parkway and Mary Lane; then follow signs to parking. Admission is free. Hours are 9 a.m. to sunset daily. For general information, call (760) 839-4691 or go to www.queencalifia.org.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

PRESS PREVIEW:

The media is invited to attend a press preview on **Thursday, October 23, 2003**, from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Please RSVP no later than October 22 by calling (760) 745-9396 or by email at press@queencalifia.org.

MEDIA KIT:

An online media kit with backgrounders, fact sheet, artist chronology and other information can be downloaded at www.queencalifia.org or sent upon request.

VISUALS:

A CD of photographs of the artist, the Escondido Garden and other significant works available upon request; digital images also available through above website.

AVAILABLE FOR INTERVIEW:

- Bloum Cardenas, the artist’s granddaughter and Foundation trustee
- Marcelo Zitelli, Saint Phalle’s curator and Foundation trustee
- Mayor Lori Holt Pfeiler, City of Escondido
- Susan Pollack, Manager, Public Art Program, City of Escondido

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