

On this subject, I myself have said and noted down at another point: “Deià and its reflection on the Teix converted the place into a centre of magnetic power in Graves’s eyes – and Laura’s. They found this very interesting because it confirmed that the Greek myth of the Silver Race [= the light of the Moon] had survived in classical times linked to the White Goddess in the Balearic Islands”²⁰⁸ – and silver is the Goddess’s metal²⁰⁹. But, what is there to say about this silver race? They were obviously divinely created, characterized as eaters of bread and subject to their mothers, without any possibility *a fortiori* of disobeying them – as occurred in ancestral Majorca: maternal training dictated that if the youth did not hit the target, they did not eat. In any case, Graves tells us that the men of this race were ignorant and quarrelsome, and never sacrificed to the gods. They were terrible – but at least they didn’t make war on each other. They were destroyed by Zeus, who imposed a new order that corresponded to the “second human age”²¹⁰.

9 Apocalypse. Graves foresaw a final human age in which, having destroyed patriarchy, Goddess worship would be fully restored: thus, matriarchy would prevail again²¹¹. Majorca was the place where matriarchy had been preserved in hiding: in such an event, one could deduce the importance that “in general Deià and Majorca would (re)assume in the future”²¹². This apocalypse would entail the restoration of fertility and the primordial Golden Age. This, in turn, would not only bring perpetual happiness but also, at the same time, “the terror and destruction that inevitably accompanies all change of whatever type”²¹³. Nowadays, the neo-Pagan Feraferia mystery-religion, founded by Frederick Adams in 1957, worships the Gravesian Goddess, “awaiting the blessed cataclysm”²¹⁴. In theory, Feraferia “reconstructs” the supposed “very ancient religion,” stressing the preservation of nature; but its faithful are criticized as passive and sluggish people who pride themselves as elegant, defenders of a romantic pacifism. And, in brief, very inclined towards social milieus of glamour, where they seek to spread Goddess worship (especially among women).

For my part, while awaiting this cataclysmic Gravesian apocalyptic theophany, which I imagine as tempestive, I think a reading is indicated – or, if the chance arises, a rereading – of *The White Goddess*.

Excursus II

Niki de Saint Phalle: from Majorcan microcosm to universal archetypes

by Concepció Boncompte

*For my grandson Amadeu Maristany, because I learn from his
pristine painting and I enjoy his company in my studio.*

This past autumn, I was enraptured and filled with abundance by the exhibition “Niki de Saint Phalle 1930-2002” (Paris, Grand Palais, Sept. 2014 - Feb. 2015). Today, five months on, I think I can attribute that state of grace to three elements in the masterly showcasing of Niki de Saint Phalle’s work and career. Namely: the struggle and triumph of a self-taught artist who, by creating art, reinvented herself; the ostentatious provocation of her artistic language – femininity – in a world of masculine values; and the gradual flowering of universal archetypes based on her everyday life.

But there is more: there are personal reasons why I was plunged into a privileged communion with the exhibition. Majorcan motives – that range from small details related to my own work as a painter in Majorca, to the weighty presence of the ideology that Robert Graves developed in *The White Goddess*²¹⁵ (1948), written

²⁰⁸ Montaner, “Destinos”, p. 31.

²⁰⁹ Cf. Graves, *Greek Myths*, #5.1, p. 36-37.

²¹⁰ Id., #5.c, p. 36.

²¹¹ Cf. e.g. Eller, *The Myth*, p. 33.

²¹² Montaner, “Destinos”, p. 31.

²¹³ Vickery, *RG & the White Goddess*, p. 81-85, esp. p. 84.

²¹⁴ Adler, *Drawing Down*, p. 246-263. This is taken directly from Graves.

²¹⁵ Now in Spanish, a wonderful edition of Robert Graves’s *La Diosa Blanca*, translation and notes by William Graves, Madrid: Alianza, 2014.

in Deià – hovering over the Grand Palais exhibition space. In this article²¹⁶, I will attempt to demonstrate how in her canvases painted in Deià, Niki sowed the seed of some of the iconographic motifs that would dominate her professional career; and that these motifs are linked to the artist's inner life as well as to Gravesian literature. The theory championed by Graves – *inter alia* – of a primitive Mediterranean matriarchal society impregnates Niki's work²¹⁷. One cannot understand Niki's fabulous artistic journey without paying attention to the painter's stay in Deià with her husband, writer and musician Harry Mathews, as well as the close friendship they struck up with Robert and Beryl Graves (1954-1956)²¹⁸. In fact, Robert had a special way of greeting Niki:

– “Are you the White Goddess?”²¹⁹

But, who was this “White Goddess” when she arrived in Deià? Niki de Saint Phalle (1930, Neuilly-sur-Seine - 2002, San Diego, CA) was born into an aristocratic French-American family. Her childhood was marked by her mother's fervent Catholicism and hypocrisy; and by a rape perpetrated by her father when she was eleven years old. At 24, Niki disembarked in Majorca with her husband Harry Mathews and their daughter Laura. Professionally, the couple was in their formative stage: she, as a painter and he, as a writer; it hurt her to be considered “the writer's wife, who paints”²²⁰. It was a year since Niki had decided to be a painter; but for four years she had been devouring literature and poetry, living submerged in the world of Harry's music, visiting museums and galleries with him daily and taking acting classes²²¹. Niki's education was that of the new generation of artists. She absorbed ideas and concepts, but Niki wasn't interested in academic drawing classes – she had already dismissed that idea in Boston²²².

It is interesting to note that the actual practice of painting appeared in Niki's life linked to three fundamental changes: the first was recuperating from her appendicitis operation (1949-1950, New York); the second was after the birth of her daughter Laura (1951, Cambridge, MA); the third, in a psychiatric clinic (1953, Nice). When writer Anthony Bonner – a close friend of the couple and also, at that time, a musician – saw the collages that Niki had made with what she could find in that clinic, he gave her a box of paints and paper²²³. Niki threw herself into painting and her stay, predicted to be five years, was reduced to six weeks²²⁴. Niki left the clinic converted into an artist. From then on, she painted daily and painting became her profession²²⁵.

Upon returning to Paris, Harry and Niki rented a lovely house with the Bonners, surrounded by trees, in a *cul de sac* between the avenue du Général-Leclerc and the rue d'Alésia, near the Porte d'Orléans. At the house there were two cats that Niki named *Chat gris* and *Chat noir*. Anthony Bonner remembers a calm and relaxed Niki

²¹⁶ First of all I must thank William Graves, Anthony Bonner, Eva Bonner, Harry Mathews and Jane Shenefield for their kind and generous help.

²¹⁷ Vid. *Excursus* I, especially “Hesperides”, “Goddess” and “Majorca of the Mysteries”.

²¹⁸ In this respect I would like to thank William Graves for all the information he provided. His consultation of his father's diary has allowed me to understand the extent of the friendship between the two families, a friendship which continued after the Mathews departed Majorca (the Graves visited them in Paris, Grenoble, etc.); as well as knowing about details of everyday life for the Graves and Mathews in Deià. I am also grateful to him for the photograph of the Graves and the Mathews with Ava Gardner at the Son Bonet Airport, Palma (of which he thinks there may be other photos of Ava's arrival). I am especially grateful to him for consulting the collection of letters at the St. John's College Library, Oxford. They were written by Mathews to Graves from 1956 to 1961, and vice versa from 1956 to 1967. William Graves also found mentions of Niki in letters from Alastair Reid, Kenneth Gay and Walter Aurbach. This enabled me to clear up all sorts of questions – some as peculiar as to who did the dog Anubis (who was photographed with the Mathews in Deià) really belong.

²¹⁹ It should be noted that Niki possessed a spectacular beauty and that she occasionally worked as a model for *Vogue*, *Elle*, etc. Molineau, dir., *Niki*, p. 316- 317.

²²⁰ This reflection is in various chapters of her autobiographical writings, and specifically in Saint Phalle, *Harry & Me*, *passim*.

²²¹ In this sense, cf. Saint Phalle, *Harry & Me*, *passim*; Molineau, dir., *Niki*, *passim*.

²²² Saint Phalle, *Harry & Me*, p. 22. Nor did she attend drawing or painting classes in Paris.

²²³ In this sense, consult any of the artist's biographies. When I pointed out his pertinent role in Niki's career and asked Anthony Bonner how it had occurred to him to give her paints, he told me that when he and his wife arrived in Menton to spend some time with the Mathews, Harry told them that Niki was in hospital due to a nervous breakdown. Anthony and his wife Eve were surprised. According to Anthony – said with his characteristic humility – he did what he judged to be logical: he presented paper and paints to an artistically inclined friend who had problems (vid. *Excursus* III).

²²⁴ Nowadays, art's therapeutic and curative powers are well known. But at that time, only Niki sensed and knew that her cure was due to painting and not as a “special” response of her mind to electroshock. In an interview, psychoanalyst Miquel Izuel stated that art therapy disconnects the cortex from the deeper, emotional brain; the patient feels, and this experience gives the patient a new sensibility: and that is healing (“La contra” in *La Vanguardia*, 15 April 2015). Shortly after leaving the psychiatric hospital, Niki affirmed, “When I was painting I was master of my ship [...] with no professors or directors telling me what to do.” Saint Phalle, *Harry & Me*, p. 40, 44.

²²⁵ Saint Phalle, *Harry & Me*, p. 43.

from that period, chatting with the cats and a good cook. His wife Eva also has amusing memories of Niki with the cats. Niki was painting, but she didn't really like to show her work because she still wasn't sure of her artistic path. Anthony introduced her to a mentor (not a teacher): painter Hugo Weiss. For five years, Weiss – very discreetly, like Bonner – limited himself to periodically contemplating Niki's work and indicating to her the parts of her painting where she'd done something genuine, encouraging her and recommending that she not attend any drawing or painting classes (with which, as mentioned, she was in total agreement) and insisting that she work with her natural talent²²⁶. The only teachers that Niki had were in the Louvre and the Left Bank galleries. There, she discovered (among others) the poetic visual art of Jean Dubuffet as well as her interest in Art Brut. Shortly thereafter, she herself would reflect these tendencies in the work she did in Majorca. This was, in broad strokes, the Niki who arrived in Majorca in 1954. In Paris, they had heard about the island, and it suggested itself as an ideal destination for the two couples (Bonner and Mathews)²²⁷. Harry Mathews recounts that:

“Majorca was in the Mediterranean sea, which we loved. We heard glowing reports about it from friends who'd visited it, and acquaintances who had left Paris to settle there. It was beautiful; it was unbelievably cheap: '25 lamb chops for a dollar!'; there were no tourists (they came ten years after we'd left) and very few foreigners. So, in June or July 1953, in the company of another couple, our closest friends in Paris, we sailed from Marseille to Palma. The other couple is still there: they learned Mallorquin, they raised their three children there, and Anthony Bonner, husband and father, ended his career as an editor of the Catalan writings of Ramon Llull and one of the greatest authorities in the world on that extraordinary writer”²²⁸ [66-71].

Leaving behind the Paris house, the four went to Marseille, where they embarked for Majorca. Bonner excitedly remembers the arrival to Palma by sea, and the how impressed his friend Harry was at seeing the cathedral that seemed to rise directly from the water. They stayed in a hostel in the city for a month while they chose a place to live²²⁹: the Bonners stayed in Sant Agustí, and the Mathews left for Deià²³⁰. As Harry explains, the presence of Robert Graves in this village was a lure for the couple:

“It would have been easier to live in Palma, as our friends did; but we visited the entire island and, innocents that we were, we were drawn to the prospect of living in a remoter place. Deià seemed to be our ideal Mediterranean hill town, surrounded by terraces of olive groves and very near the sea. That the distinguished English poet Robert Graves had lived there for decades added to its attraction. So when we found a pleasant house to rent, we moved in. (After two years, Niki could no longer bear living there, and she was right: the little society of foreigners in the village was ultimately hateful and destructive. We moved back to Paris). Later (1961), when, together with three brilliant New York poets, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler, I started a literary review called *Locus Solus*, my friend Walter Auerbach, who had remained in Deià, arranged for our first issue to be printed in Palma. I also returned some years after this with my son Philip, who had been born in Palma in 1955”²³¹.

²²⁶ Cf. *Excursus* III.

²²⁷ Anthony Bonner recounted how an American neighbour, a painter who had a ready answer for everything – “when you got home you realized that nothing was true but he'd already won the battle” – had told them about Majorca and Spain. They didn't know anything about the island and the only thing they knew about Spain was the existence of *toreadores*. Another couple who were friends and translators and who had lived in Paris also came with them to Majorca. Cf. *Excursus* III.

²²⁸ Letter from H. Mathews to C. Boncompte, 27 March 2015. In Niki's biographies, the arrival date for Majorca is September 1954.

²²⁹ Sant Agustí, next to Palma. Cf. *Excursus* III.

²³⁰ Anthony Bonner told me that the Mathews first lived in Deià, in a house near that of the Graves, on the right side of the highway, nearer to the village. Later, the Mathews moved to Llucalcari, in a lovely house where all the rooms were on different levels. Entering the village, it was on the right. When bringing up this information with William Graves, he identified the Deià house as the one known as Ca n'Anita. The Llucalcari house is at the beginning of the slope towards Canyaret. Cf. *Excursus* III; and a letter from W. Graves to C. Boncompte, 20 April 2015.

²³¹ Letter from H. Mathews to C. Boncompte, 27 March 2015.

Situated in Deià, Niki captured the new Majorcan surroundings in her paintings. Two of the village characteristics extolled by Harry, the olive trees and the proximity to the sea, appear reflected in Niki's paintings from this period. The canvas entitled *The Olive Trees* (1956) was exhibited in the artist's first individual show (Sankt Gallen/Switzerland). She evokes the sea's nearness in *Deyà* (fig. 28), a composition indebted to Dubuffet. In this canvas one can observe a meticulous rendering of the landscape, as well as a curious microscopic detailing that divides the pictorial surface into different shapes and colours, two characteristics that already allow one to associate this work with Niki. From the painter's palette dominated by the earthy tones of Dubuffet and de Fautrier, glints (colour combinations) emerge that are genuinely hers. Among the glints, one's attention is caught in the upper part of the canvas by a spiral filled with other smaller volutes. The artist has placed a series of track-like marks around the aforementioned arabesques. In the spiral's centre, Niki has depicted the head of a monster. This composition highlights the fact that the painter's artwork had promptly incorporated the third particularity that Harry had noted about Deià: the influential presence of the poet Robert Graves and Gravesian literature²³². Niki's spiral belongs to the same family as those found in burials in the Cyclades and Malta, or in the bronze plate from Majorca's Cometa dels Morts in Lluc (fig. 29). As Kerényi (one of the authors who inspired Graves²³³) explained, all these spirals are related to labyrinthine dances performed at funeral ceremonies. Later, Niki would develop this first Majorcan labyrinth on a ceramic plaque in which she depicted the ambitious labyrinth project (1980) to be built next to her Jardin des Tarots (Italy). Majorca's landscape – the fields divided by stones, the cactuses, the lemons, the immense night skies and the hills surrounding Deià – left its mark on artwork such as *Nightscape* (1956-1958), which Niki may have done after leaving the island²³⁴. In *Le Rêve de Laure* (1955-1957) and *Le Château du monstre et la mariée* (1955) (fig. 27) a small female nude occupies the central part of both paintings. In the latter, the nude depicts a birth and Niki sows the seed of various ideas that she will explore until she converts them into career landmarks, among them: the series entitled *Les Accouchements* [*The Births*] and *Les Mariées* [*The Brides*], from the first half of the 1960s. The painter soon enlarged the pictorial space that in her Deià artwork had been devoted to the female form, and this figure's role came to dominate the composition. In *Moonlady with Dragon*, the Moon Goddess is trampled by the dragon (a symbol of male power for Niki),²³⁵ who thrusts his teeth into the woman's guts (1958) (fig. 31). Niki seems to establish a parallel between the demons that tear at the female figure's intestines²³⁶ (the rape committed by her father wrenched away Niki's societal and family role) and the patriarchal system's aggressivity and barbarism, which upset the cosmic forces, in balance until then due to matriarchy [#177]. Niki, with her characteristic intuition, brought Gravesian mythology to her own sense of self. She is an artist who works from her own family group. Her daughter Laura was the protagonist of some of her paintings and occasionally the child intervened directly in the painting (e.g. *Entre la ville et la fleur*, 1956-1958). After her departure from the island, Harry Mathews and Robert Graves maintained a frequent correspondence and their letters indicate that Niki continued with the same dynamic: the children touched her pictures, the sculptures she made for the children's rooms, etc.²³⁷ Niki mined the world of the family for inspiration and material which she processed into simple, colourful images. She portrayed essential ideas – snapshots captured by a childlike eye – that, once depicted on canvas, can be read and combined like chapters in universal mythology. In her family microcosm, Niki found eternal archetypes that, little by little, she would develop individually. In *Autoportrait* (1958-1959), the artist – threatened by an ominous background (Pollock) – erects a bright colourful *trencadís* mosaic (Gaudí) around her whole body, and, from a face tracked by scars (Frida Khalo), the yellow eyes of a goddess emerge, a sibyl who prophesies: "Through painting I could explore the magical and the mystical which kept the chaos from possessing me. Painting put my soul stirring chaos at ease and

²³² When I asked Anthony Bonner about Niki's possible interest in mythology, esotericism, etc., he replied that while he was Niki's friend, he didn't have the close friendship with her that he had with Harry Mathews; thus, he didn't know her well enough to comment on those particularities. Nonetheless, he did add that Niki was enormously intuitive and could intuitively perceive these and other subjects. Cf. *Excursus III*.

²³³ Kerényi, *Labyrinth, passim*. Among the images reproduced in this book, the most relevant for this article is that of a container with spirals from the Cyclades, now in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens. For Malta, cf. e.g. Sultana, *Temple & Tomb, passim*. For the Gravesian context vid. *Excursus I* in this catalogue. Also of note: the spirals and dance depicted on the cover of the recent Spanish-language edition of *La Diosa Blanca*, translated and annotated by William Graves.

²³⁴ Dorothy Bradbury also depicted some of these elements in artwork such as *Garden Son Moragues* (1970).

²³⁵ Vid. Pesapane, *Petit Dict.*, p. 40; Molineau, dir., *Niki*, p. 38.

²³⁶ Where, it would seem, our emotional brain is located.

²³⁷ I am grateful to William Graves for this information: in March 2015, he patiently searched for it among the letters exchanged between Harry Mathews and Robert Graves, preserved at the St. John's College Library, Oxford.

provided an organic structure to my life which I was ultimately in control of"²³⁸ (1960) (fig. 29). Niki belongs to a particular group of artists defined by Apollinaire²³⁹. For the poet there are, on the one hand, virtuoso artists whose work bears no trace of struggle and who do not have to deal with opposition. They are not divine, and the world can do without them. On the other hand, there are other artists who make an effort, and have to delve into themselves. Niki is in this latter group. In this sense, during the two years in Majorca, Niki continued the professional struggle initiated in Nice, and only worked with her personal talent. Her creative feminine force also opened up in Majorca: she gave birth to her son Philip in Palma²⁴⁰. Amidst the fragrances emanating from the sacred Orange Grove tended by Robert Graves in Deià²⁴¹, Niki's painting absorbed those perfumes that allowed for self-exploration; she sowed her paintings with sacred seeds that would open powerfully throughout her entire career.

Over the years, Niki continued to consider it a great piece of luck to have known and shared many hours with Robert and Beryl Graves in Deià, a friendship which was maintained after the Mathews departed the island²⁴². Graves's ideas impregnate a good part of Niki's work. But Deià's artistic circle was another matter. Confronted by a woman with an independent spirit, a strong sense of self, an exquisite physical appearance and an artistic practice that questioned academic schooling and degrees, Deià's "artistic" leaders were not unresponsive. After two years, Niki found them to be hateful and destructive. This doesn't surprise me: a rumour had even circulated that, in Deià, they had taught Niki how to draw.

However, now it is interesting to look at how the small icons that Niki inserted into her Deià paintings acquired independence and scale. In 1960, the artist left the children in Harry's care and moved to one of the studios in the Parisian *impasse* Ronsin (Montparnasse) in order to devote her life to art. There, her professional career took a radical turn. Niki had become acquainted with this artistic centre, because sculptor Jim Metcalf had previously lent her one of the workshops²⁴³ (Jim was a friend from Majorca [#169-171]). Some of Europe's most avant-garde creators were working in these studios: one of them, Jean Tinguely, would become Niki's partner. In fact, in terms of artistic impact, one can establish a parallel between the ambiance in the aforementioned *impasse* Ronsin in the 1960s and the mythic Bateau Lavoir (Montmartre), when Picasso occupied one of its studios at the beginning of the twentieth century. In these latter workshops the *malaqueño* painted *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), the painting that would transform the history of art²⁴⁴. But, with regards to the *impasse*, it was in its courtyard, in 1961, that Niki – this time, a lady – also provoked another historic rupture with her first *Tirs* session. This action gained her entry into one of the artistic movements that, at the time, was making the most contributions to European art: Nouveau Réalisme, lead by Pierre Restany (fig.33). Niki was the only woman in the group. In the *Tirs* sessions that Restany organized for Niki in Europe and the United States, she aimed bullets at all her demons: the father figure, the Church, conformity, decline, sexism, intolerance, etc. The collection of objects with bags of paint upon which she unleashed rifle shots of rage elevated Niki to a higher artistic plane. Mentally, these actions broke through her oppression and allowed her to open up and flow in a magnificent manner.

After the cleansing that the *Tirs* implied, Niki used another language to confront working on the nature of femininity. Among the sacred seeds sown in Deià, the *White Goddess* (1963) was, appropriately, one of the first to flower (fig. 34). It must be remembered that *White Goddess* was not only the title of Graves's fundamental book – it was also the gallant nickname with which Graves addressed Niki. In this period, the painter-sculptress gave *White Goddess* and other pieces a new dimension by employing 'outsider' artist material²⁴⁵. *White Goddess* is an exultation of Niki's values, with the surety and force of creating a transcendental work for the history

²³⁸ Saint Phalle, *Harry & Me*, p. 52.

²³⁹ Guillaume Apollinaire, "Les peintres nouveaux" in *La plume*, 15 May 1905.

²⁴⁰ The child was named 'Philip' because Graves had suggested that they give him the name of the protective saint from the day on which he was born. Anthony and Eva Bonner took care of Laura, the Mathews' daughter, while Niki and Philip were in a Palma clinic in the area bordered by the following streets: Marquès de la Sénia, Monsenyor Palmer, and the passeig Marítim. Saint Phalle, *Harry & Me*, p. 79. Cf. *Excursus* III.

²⁴¹ Cf. *Excursus* I.

²⁴² For this cf. Saint Phalle, *Harry & Me*, p. 66; the letters between Harry Mathews and Robert Graves preserved at St. John's College, Oxford; and Robert Graves's personal diaries. I am grateful to William Graves for this information.

²⁴³ Saint Phalle, *Harry & Me*, p. 85.

²⁴⁴ With respect to the ambiance and the interests of Picasso and his circle at the Bateau Lavoir, as well as the gestation process for *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, vid. Boncompte, "Iconografía", *passim*.

²⁴⁵ See the dolls of Katherina Detzel, Reinaldo Eckenberger and Danielle Jacqui in García, *Arte outsider*. The author explores the "unstoppable urge which drives human beings to express themselves despite a scarcity of materials".

of art²⁴⁶. With *White Goddess*, Niki constructed a metal structure on a wooden base that had the appearance of a bas-relief. In covering a wire framework with plaster, the artist left a large central cavity – the womb – from which sprout spiders, parrots, planes, chickens, dolls, wheels, skulls, horses, flowers, motorcycles, etc. Everything emerges from the goddess's bowels. Plants germinate from her hair (just as wheat arises from some renditions of Ceres' head); Arcimboldo-like flowers spring from the shoulders; and the impassive face is a mask: a manifestation of the divinity. *White Goddess* symbolises generosity, abundance, fertility. Everything is contained in her.

Another series from this period that was gestated in Deia is *Les Accouchements*. Constructed with a technique similar to the previous series, these are totemic pieces of art that radiate an ancestral force upon the viewer. Niki seems to gain access to knowledge and the world's myths without leaving her body, voyaging amongst the ins and outs of these long suffering bowels that spill out in *Accouchement blanc ou Ghéa* (1964). Gaea, the primordial Earth goddess and creative feminine power, is in fact Niki herself. The dolls that occupy the newborn's space are often her daughter's.

The exaggerated brides from the series *Les Mariées* (1963-1965) are already sculptures which, in a single image (exempt from large scale format and with techniques similar to previous series) tackle the world of the bride – which in *Le Château du monstre et de la mariée* (1955) needed to be explained with infinite circular explanations. In eight years, Niki has accomplished a process that the majority of artists do not achieve in a lifetime.

Always fascinated by the creative feminine force, Niki drew her pregnant friend Clarice Rivers in 1964 and, based on this drawing, the first *Nanas* emerged, happy symbols of a strong and energized womanhood. Originally created with her daughter, the artist began constructing the *Nanas* using cloth pasted onto a metal structure. *Nana Hon* (1966) is the most famous of the *Nanas* [*Hon* means 'she' in Swedish] (fig. 35). Created in collaboration with Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvedt, it was a giant goddess lying on the ground with open legs. The visitor entered through her sex and, via the womb, penetrated into the body's interior where there was a milk bar, a patio, a slide, etc.

Nana Hon is the goddess and the cathedral with which Niki wanted to surpass Gaudí (1852-1926), Postman Cheval (1863-1924) and the Watts Towers by Simon Rodia (1879-1965) – the three creators who had guided the artist's career. Absolutely fascinated by Parc Güell, Niki wanted to build her own park: Le Jardin des Tarots (Garavichio, Italy)²⁴⁷. But her park would be quite a different park, as beneath a playful and festive appearance, the artist wanted to make the visitor aware of the complex values of the historic Tarot. As is generally known, the Tarot is a conduit to universal wisdom via the Arcana cards and, at the same time, a means of communicating with the unconscious that, through the use of symbolic language, allows for greater self-understanding. The Tarot contains the same dialogue between microcosm and macrocosm that is detected in Niki's own artwork: this debate is her way of working artistically with the personal experiences through which she arrives at universal archetypes.

Perhaps the artist – who through painting had come to comprehend the magic and mystical elements of her soul's chaos²⁴⁸ – built the Jardin des Tarots to provide society with a means of moving closer to personal and cosmic knowledge²⁴⁹. Thus, Niki places herself in a posture similar to that of an initiate in one of the ancient mystery religions who, upon returning from Hades, divulges the knowledge acquired there in fulfilment to a pact with the goddess (Persephone). In her park, Niki designed an initiation route brimming with fantasy in which the visitor physically penetrates each of the sculptures. Let us focus on one of them: the sculpture of the Empress Arcana card (1980-1989) which has the largest dimensions because it depicts the Cosmic Mother, origin of all abundance and the creative feminine force (fig. 36). Going beyond the *Nana Hon* (1966), the Empress is not a symbol of womanhood but in fact a superior being: she is the divinity that promotes the development of femininity in all its complexity. For Niki, the Empress is – simultaneously – *la Grande Déesse, la Reine du Ciel, la Mère, la Putain, l'Émotion, le Sacré magique, la Civilisation*²⁵⁰. She is a black goddess, like some of the Isis statues, like many Romanesque Virgin Mary figures and like the Majorcan Mare de Déu

²⁴⁶ It would be very interesting to establish a parallel between Picasso's prostitute goddesses depicted in *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* and *The White Goddess* and other goddesses created by Niki that also share this double nature.

²⁴⁷ Niki was initiated into the Tarot by her close friend Eva Aeppli, the first wife of Jean Tinguely. Cf. Pesapane, "Jardin", p. 261. An interest in the Tarot is another of the links between Picasso's circle at the Bateau Lavoir and Niki's circle at the *impasse* Ronsin.

²⁴⁸ Saint Phalle, *Harry & Me*, p. 52.

²⁴⁹ Niki built *Le Jardin des Tarots* in an altruistic manner: she financed the construction through the sale of her own artwork. For more information, consult the artist's biographies.

²⁵⁰ Pietromarchi, *Niki*, p. 50. Cf. also Johnston/Caracciolo Chia, *Niki, passim*.

de Lluc commented on by Robert Graves²⁵¹. The sculpture is totally covered with *trencadís* mosaic (Gaudi's influence), her pink body with fertile multi-coloured breasts dominates the park, and her blue mantle unfurls sinuous shapes amidst wild nature. She is an ancestral psychedelic queen. During the park's construction, the artist went to live in the Empress's interior. Niki entered the Cosmic Goddess's belly to be reborn²⁵². Niki needed to overcome the disastrous relationship she had with her mother and opted to be gestated – anew – in the belly of a superior mother, the Empress, symbol of the womb.

Niki de Saint Phalle was avid to complete the symbolism of knowledge acquisition with another construction near the Jardin des Tarots: a labyrinth. Though it was never built, the project endures (1980) (fig. 37). Niki drew it on a ceramic plaque and placed it at the feet of another Tarot Arcana, the Pope, the symbol for 'he who listens', and who evokes Niki's relationship with Harry²⁵³. If we take into account that walking a labyrinth is to undergo a process that leads us from ignorance to knowledge, we can understand that the labyrinth is understood as an allegory for he who seeks. Italy is, precisely, a land rich in the glorification of this type of search: a little to the north of where the Jardin des Tarots is situated there lies the Villa Pisani labyrinth (1720) at Stra, which has several particularities worth commenting on. In the centre of this labyrinth, a tower rises topped with a sculpture of Athena *Nike*, goddess of wisdom, the arts, war and a patroness. One of her symbols, the barn owl, alludes to the goddess' wisdom as this bird, like Athena, sees in the "dark". These characteristics, and the elevated position of the labyrinth's tower at the Villa Pisani, allow Athena to distinguish the pilgrim of knowledge, guide them and, as *Nike* (victorious in war), help them in their "struggle". The result is to inevitably associate Niki with *Athena Nike* within the context of their respective labyrinths. Just like *Nike*, the artist has emerged victorious from all sorts of wars (for example, among others, the *Les Tirs* series) in her search for wisdom, and she set herself up as a patron of the arts. Funding the construction of a labyrinth might suggest to the visitor the journey that the artist had already experienced and the wisdom revealed to her in that process, permitting her to guide the uncertain walker in their fundamental search. Unfortunately, Niki's labyrinth only exists on a ceramic plaque but *Athena Nike* still presides at Villa Pisani and it is a good idea to visit her after delving into the Jardin des Tarots.

The unrealized labyrinth project returns us to the beginning of this article: back to Deià and the primitive labyrinth that Niki depicted in *Deyá*. It is interesting to compare the Majorcan labyrinth with the 1980 labyrinth project, as the latter is not the repetition of an iconographic motif, but rather the evolution of the motif itself in Niki's career²⁵⁴. In *Deyá*, Niki de Saint Phalle seems to reflect the road (with monster) that the young artist had to travel. In contrast, the 1980 labyrinth project is something quite different. In this piece, Niki, just like *Athena Nike*, motivates the human beings trapped in the system to undertake a search that will free their soul. Could Robert Graves have imagined how close he was to the mark when he asked the young Niki:

–“Are you the White Goddess?”

Excursus III

Niki de Saint Phalle/Harry Mathews and Anthony Bonner/Eva Bonner: memories of Paris, Nice and Majorca. Notes from 3 interviews with the Bonners

Concepció Boncompte

When I found out from a letter of Harry Mathews' that Anthony Bonner – his close friend with whom he come from Paris to settle in Majorca – lived in Palma, I wanted to meet him. I wished to ask him a series of questions. When Niki was hospitalized in Nice in 1953, Anthony Bonner's gift of a box of paints and

²⁵¹ *Excursus* 1, and #172.

²⁵² Pesapane, *Petit Dict.*, p. 60: *Je voulais inventer une nouvelle mère, une déesse mère et dans ses formes renaître*. At this time, Niki was reading American anthropologist Joseph Campbell's books on comparative mythology, which identify common archetypes in all myths. Pesapane, "Jardin", p. 262.

²⁵³ Pesapane, "Jardin", p. 264.

²⁵⁴ It is interesting to highlight that Niki retained the primitive labyrinth's curves, a reflection of the bird entrails consulted by ancient diviners. The drawings of these bird intestines, later synthesized in spiral games, served as guidelines for funeral dances designed to aid the deceased in finding their way to the other life. Indeed, Niki's proposed labyrinth is exactly this: the road for discovering another life, genuinely one's own, but in this world (1980). For the relation between ancient labyrinths and bird entrails, as well as their relation to spirals and funeral dances, vid. Kerényi, *Labyrinth*.

paper had not been in vain: it was a determining factor in the artist's career. I would like to thank P. de Montaner who gave me his friend Lluïsa Cotoner's telephone number; she put me in touch with her sister Almudena Cotoner; the latter, after checking with Anthony Bonner's daughter, gave me permission to phone him (fig. 35). It was a chain of kindness on the part of everyone involved. By chance, afterwards I discovered that Deborah Bonner – an excellent translator who had translated three of my articles about Picasso into English – was Anthony's daughter!

16 April 2015: telephone interview with Anthony Bonner

CB Did you meet the Mathews in Menton in 1953 on the occasion of a jazz festival?

AB No, and it wasn't a jazz festival, it was a classical music festival! I'd been Harry's friend since the age of 14. My friendship with Harry is the oldest among my friendships. Harry wanted to be an orchestra conductor and I wanted to be a composer, and we both studied music at Harvard. Afterwards we met up again in Paris. Harry came with Niki and Laura, his daughter. In Paris we rented a house together with two cats near the Porte d'Orléans (by the intersection of *rue Général Leclerc* and *rue d'Alésia*). The cats were already there. It was the cats who adopted us.

CB And what happened in Menton in 1953?

AB My wife and I went to see the Mathews in Menton, where they had rented a house. When we arrived Harry told us that Niki had been hospitalized. We were shocked. That was the situation we encountered.

CB How did it occur to you to give Niki a box of paints and paper when you went to see her in the psychiatric hospital?

AB You see a friend who has problems, with artistic inclinations, and it seems like the logical solution.

CB What you did was a determining factor for Niki, and she explains it in her books, biographies, etc.

AB I only gave her the tools.

CB Do you remember the collages that Niki did when she was hospitalized, before you brought her paints?

AB No, I don't remember.

CB How was it that the two couples went to Majorca?

AB I was studying music and had some money saved. I wanted to go to a cheap place. An American painter neighbour told us about Majorca and Spain. At that time Spain, for us, was totally unknown. We only knew that there were *toreadores* there. Another couple (he was a translator) who were friends came with us (or they were already there, or they came later). In Majorca we settled in Sant Agustí, near to Palma.

CB Do you remember Niki's life in Majorca? What did she paint?

AB I was more Harry's friend, childhood friends, and we both liked poetry. We read poems together. We had a lot of contact with Niki for other reasons. For example, for the birth of their son Philip, Laura – the older daughter – stayed at our house.

CB Niki got tired of the Deià: do you know why?

AB I don't know.

CB Where did the Mathews live in Deià?

AB At the beginning, in a house near Can Graves on the highway, on the right, before coming to Can Graves, closer to the village. After, they rented a house in Llucalcari, entering the village on the right. It was a delightful house: each room was on a different level.²⁵⁵

CB After the Mathews left Majorca, did you keep up the relationship?

AB Yes. When we went to New York we would see Harry. But it's many years since we saw Niki. The last time was in Paris having supper with Harry, that Swiss sculptor Yves Tinguely (Niki's partner), Niki, Eva, our two daughters and me. In approximately 1962.

CB What can you tell me about Niki and her work?

AB I've always been a great admirer of hers. Whenever I could, I've gone to see her exhibitions. In New York I was very interested to see a film about Niki and her work, it was very good!

AB Why don't you come to my house one day and we can keep on talking?

CB I'd love to.

²⁵⁵ William Graves has identified these houses for me. The Deià house is Ca n'Anita, and nowadays it belongs to a woman from the village. The Llucalcari house is now the property of Oleguer Armengol. CBC.

20 April 2015: interview at Anthony Bonner's house (Palma)

AB I remember one day when I was visiting Niki at the psychiatric hospital, we were in the room, Niki asked Harry what was that on the window (there were bars on the window), and Harry told her it was so that the birds didn't come in.

CB I've brought you the books that I've got about Niki: on the phone you said you'd like to see them.

AB [Looking at the photos of Niki as a model] Ah! Yes . . . she was very pretty, but normally she never dressed like that. She was always dressed like that photo with her in front of her painting, in Deià in 1954. But one day we went to a concert in the *salle* Gaveau, in Paris, she made herself up very well and got very dressed up, and when we arrived at the event everyone turned to look at her. She was so pretty that she could attract the attention of an entire concert hall.

CB When was the last time you saw Harry?

AB Two years ago in New York. We find transatlantic trips tiresome now [AB is 87 years old].

CB What is the last exhibition of Niki's that you've seen?

AB In New York 5 or 6 years ago.

CB In 1953 you went to Menton just to spend a few days with Harry and Niki?

AB I don't remember it very well. But in Menton or Nice, in 1953, a Hungarian who was a bit of a friend of Harry's organized a music festival. When we went back to Paris [1953] we rented a house with Harry and Niki near the Porte d'Orléans. At the house there were two cats that adopted us. Niki called them: *Chat gris* and *Chat noir*. She talked to them: *Pour quoi tu fais ça*, etc.

CB And Niki, what was she like?

AB Very relaxed, cheerful, very calm. And a very good cook!

CB Living together, you must remember what Niki painted.

AB She kept on painting, but as she wasn't yet very sure of what her artistic path would be, she didn't really like to show what she was doing. I remember that when we arrived in Palma by boat, Harry was very impressed to see a cathedral rising out of the sea. At that time the highway wasn't there and it seemed like the cathedral was in the sea.

CB Do you remember who was the person who told you about Majorca?

AB In Paris, a painter neighbour. A guy who had an answer for everything, and later maybe nothing he said was true. When I got home and checked, I saw that nothing he'd said was true, but it was already too late, because I'd lost the battle. He always won. He knew it all.

CB It seems to me that you didn't like that painter at all.

AB He said that his painting was 60 years ahead of its time! He said that in Majorca you could buy 25 lamb chops for a dollar, that the lemons were free and that you could ski! Maybe he was a friend of Bill Waldren.

CB I've heard it said that Niki learned to draw in Deià . . .

AB [Looks surprised].

CB Yes, that surprised me. I don't see any change, on a technical drawing level, between the paintings before Deià and those after. Moreover, Niki had already dismissed the idea of academic classes when they lived in Cambridge; and the painter Hugh Weiss, in Paris, had totally advised her against it.

AB Hugh Weiss was very discreet.

CB Niki explained that you [CB uses 'voste', the polite form of 'you'] – excuse me, you [CB changes to 'tu', the informal 'you'] – introduced her to Hugh, and that he was her mentor for five years. He guided her. Every three months he went to see what she had done and pointed out which parts of the painting were influenced by one painter or another, and also the parts where Niki had been absolutely original, where it was more her!

AB Hugh Weiss was a figurative painter. When Niki started *les Tirs* he didn't like it. He found it too . . . like a spectacle, too . . . He felt that Niki should stick with paintings.

CB Do you know why the Mathews chose to go to Deià and you didn't?

AB For me, Deià is very nice, but it's an artist's colony and it's all a lot of gossiping. Later on my daughters had friends there, and when they went there they always heard gossip!²⁵⁶

AB In New York I saw a film about Niki that talked about the *Jardin des Tarots*. Have you seen it?

CB No . . .

²⁵⁶ This seems to horrify him.

AB It's very good, you'd like it.

CB I'll look for it on the internet . . .²⁵⁷ Do you know if Niki was very interested in the esoteric world? [I show him a photo of her, Harry and Laura in Deià with Anubis the dog, the text and the esoteric Egyptian symbols].

AB The things that Niki did were more intuitive rather than thought-out. She was a very intuitive person and usually didn't give explanations . . . Do you know who Charles Yves is?

CB No.

AB He was an American composer from the start of the twentieth century. He had a traditional side and another more out-of-place side. He worked in an insurance company and, as well, made music. He wrote a sonata that's very difficult to play – a musician complained to him a bit and he answered: “You don't have to play it, a sonata can go to the park and calmly sit on a bench”²⁵⁸.

CB Can you tell me something about Niki's life in Majorca?

AB It's difficult to explain. Niki was very intuitive. She could come with us, be very effusive, and afterwards disappear for a time. It wasn't a false effusiveness, she was very sociable. But she didn't need social contact. We had much more to do with Harry. Niki was different. You could never know her very well. But we were very good friends! The last time we saw Niki we went to supper with her and Harry in Paris, with the Swiss sculptor Tinguely, our daughters . . . Tinguely was very likeable. She wasn't a “diva” at all. She clowned around, she made the girls laugh. That must have been in about 1962.

CB You knew Niki for many years; can you tell me what she was like as a human being?

AB She was a bit mysterious. She was very affectionate, or else she retreated. When we saw her she was very affectionate but afterwards she could go a lot of time without visiting.

CB And when you lived in Paris?

AB At that time she was more open. She liked talking to the cats.

CB When did you meet Niki?

AB In around 1952. I was surprised to read poetry by Niki. I wouldn't have imagined it.

CB Well, at least in Deià, she wrote one [I show it to him].

AB Do you know why Niki said I was a jazz musician? I read it in an autobiography that I found on the internet. She called me a jazz musician.

CB Yes, I've read it, but I don't know why.

AB It had been a while since I had stopped playing jazz and one day all four of us went to supper at the house of an orchestra conductor, Keith Humble, a fabulous pianist. We started to play four hands jazz. When you play tennis with someone who is much better than you, either you sink or you surpass yourself. It's the same with music and that night, instead of sinking, I surpassed myself playing! It was my last meddling in the world of jazz.

CB We've already talked a lot about Niki now and I'd like to know about your life. Perico Montaner says that you are such a discreet man that nobody knows anything about you!

AB [Laughs]. In my life there has been a series of changes. When I arrived in Majorca [1954-1958] I wanted to be a composer; also, I wrote dodecaphonic music. But I saw that I wasn't a composer.

CB I don't quite understand, can you explain?

AB It took a lot of effort to compose²⁵⁹. With the type of music I composed, you couldn't get 500 people in an auditorium²⁶⁰. Then, the third couple that had come with us to Majorca (a little before or a little after) from Paris, and had stayed on the island for two years, was working in New York. He was the translator Lowell Bair and he said I should also try it, being a translator. [...] In 1958 we went to New York to spend a year and a half there. We had come to Majorca for 6 months, and we'd stayed here for 4 years. In New York, I suggested translating François Villon to an editor who was an acquaintance of Bair's, and he accepted. I also worked as a music critic in New York. R.F.C. Hull's editor [Hull was Jung's translator] spent the summers in Majorca [#114]²⁶¹. I thought about translating Ramon Llull and I suggested it to him. As Carl Jung mentions Llull, he was the only American editor who didn't ask me, “Ramon who?” [He showed me the books on Llull translated into English and published by Princeton University Press, where

²⁵⁷ Found: it is a film by Peter Schamoni.

²⁵⁸ With respect to this type of answer, I tell him how once a lady told Picasso that she didn't understand anything about his exhibition, and he replied: “That's just what I need!”

²⁵⁹ I understand that he had to make a huge effort and work at it for more hours than other people.

²⁶⁰ I understand that Bonner felt that the music he composed didn't have the desired quality, he said that what came out of him (musically speaking) was not sufficiently fluid.

²⁶¹ It was Gerhard Adler.

the aforementioned editor who spent the summers in Majorca worked and, from what I understand, must be a very interesting person].

CB And your interest in botany?

AB With regards to botany: two times a week I went to the mountains with an English friend, Robert Kenyon, who is the one who got me to speak Majorcan (he already spoke it). There were two languages here, on one hand the official and written language, in Spanish, that provided limited and “official” information. On the other hand, there was the popular oral language: Majorcan. People said very little of interest in the official language; in contrast, in Majorcan they explained everything in great detail. If you wanted to live here and understand everything, you had to learn Majorcan. I started to get interested in botanical subject matter. For example: I saw crags that in other places had been totally stripped but here they had flowers, so I asked myself why was that? But there were no books, only occasional publications and hard to get a hold of. [...] There was a botanist to whom I asked questions: Father Bonafé. There was a good plant guide from the end of the nineteenth century, but there’d been a lot of water under the bridge since then. There was also a plant guide by an American from the 1930s that was inaccessible except at the Biblioteca March. If you wanted to learn about Balearic botany, it was difficult (monographic studies). In subsequent editions of my book *Plantes de les Balears* I was helped by a Majorcan botanist, Guillem Alomar.

[On a Palma map he shows me the area where the clinic was where Niki had her son Philip and the Bonners had their three children. It was in the triangle formed by the following streets: Monsenyor Palmer, the marquès de la Sénia and the *passeig* Marítim.

I ask him if we can take a photograph together and he happily agrees. I would have liked to have included the magnificent sea view that you can see from their living room but it’s not possible because of the backlight. The photos we take turn out with lots of smiles and he likes them.

As I leave I bump into Eva Bonner at the elevator and take the opportunity to greet her. It has been a very agreeable interview].

21 April 2015: telephone interview with Eva Bonner

EB If you don’t mind, I’ll speak with you in Spanish, as I don’t hear very well.

CB Don’t worry, I don’t mind. What type of relationship did you have with Niki?

EB I didn’t have a very close relationship with Niki. In Paris, at the beginning, Niki was studying acting. I’m a year and a half older than my husband Anthony and four years older than Niki, and that created a certain distance. Moreover, Niki was from a very rich New York family, she’d gone to those private nun schools in New York . . . Anyway, Niki and I were from very different worlds. But we really loved each other!

When we were in Paris, I was going to classes at the Sorbonne. In fact, I was already studying in Paris in 1948. After, when Niki left Harry, we saw little of her.

We weren’t best friends. Tony and Harry, yes, they were best friends. They’d known each other as boys, their families knew each other. Many times the three of us would get together: Tony, Eva and Harry.

I have very delightful memories of when we rented a house together near the Porte d’Orléans, in Paris. Niki was very amusing with the cats [she also tells me that Niki called one cat *Chat gris* and the other *Chat noir*]. Laura, Niki and Harry’s daughter, was there; but I don’t remember anything about her.

We went to Marseille together, we travelled by boat together and we were, approximately, one month in a pension in Palma, while we looked for a house. We went to Sant Agustí, and they went to Deià.

Harry and Tony wrote each other often.

When Niki was in the clinic when Philip was born, we looked after Laura. Afterwards we went to Llucalcari to see them.