
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Katherine Koch: “Jane and Niki”

Katherine Koch · Wednesday, February 24th, 2021

This short piece of my memoir reflects on two of the women artists who influenced me growing up—among them Elaine de Kooning, Mary Abbott, Edith Schloss, Jane Wilson, Fay Lansner, and Yvonne Jacquette.

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Jane Freilicher, 1924-2014, was the Morandi, the Odilon Redon, of the New York School of painters, focusing on still lifes and landscapes in New York City and Watermill, Long Island, for most of her long career. A close friend of fellow painters Fairfield Porter, Alex Katz, and Larry Rivers, she was perhaps even closer to the group of poets who included my father, Kenneth Koch, Frank O’Hara, James Schuyler, and John Ashbery, all of whom wrote poems and essays to and about her and her work.

Niki de Saint Phalle, 1930-2002, began her career as an extraordinarily prolific and controversial monumental artist in the early 1960’s—rare for a woman in the mid-twentieth century—and was a feminist and AIDS activist. Self-taught, she collaborated with architects, filmmakers, and artists like Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and her second husband Jean Tinguely, the kinetic artist—all of them worked with my father on his plays.

“An artist needs to live a boring life.” — Jane Freilicher

“Nous avons bien le Black Power, alors pourquoi pas le Nana Power? (We have Black Power, why not Hot Girl Power?)” — Niki de Saint Phalle

In my bedroom in an apartment in Greenwich Village in 1968, the year I turned 13, hung a large self-portrait by the painter Jane Freilicher.

Jane looked at me from the wall with candid blue eyes, soft brown hair, pursed lips, her right elbow akimbo, hand firmly on her hip. Wearing a light-blue painting smock with the sleeves rolled up, she’s in a graceful contrapposto, glancing towards me as she turns away from her unseen painting, with the undefended, impatient glamor of a no-nonsense woman.

One day my father brought me a gift from the artist Niki de Saint Phalle, a mini version of one of her sculptures of dancing women, an inflatable Floating Nana in psychedelic pinks and greens. I blew it up and placed it on my canopy bed, an image of the exciting world unfolding inside and outside my self.

I was lucky they were in my life, Jane and Niki—I'd known from the age of three I was going to be a painter—and even luckier to have their work right there in my room to encourage me, each with her own sense of what a woman artist can do.

I don't remember not knowing Jane. She'd always been in my life, at our apartment in New York City, her paintings displayed on our walls. She invited us to her openings, came to my father's readings and plays, and hung around with us in the summers on Long Island, talking and laughing in my parents' group of artists and writers.

Out on the eastern end of Long Island, Jane and her husband Joe Hazan's summer house and studio were a short, flat distance from the Atlantic ocean. They would invite us over to parties and to dinner, or to swim in the pool or lounge on the long deck from which dense green land rolled out under open sky in the blurry liquid light and sweet, buoyant air. That landscape appeared in most of the paintings Jane made out there, often behind vases and pots of complicated flowers, sometimes a telephone, a small tv, herself in a mirror.

Jane's studio and the house seemed to flow into each other. Unfinished and finished paintings would appear propped up in their light-filled living room, and sometimes when I was around she would invite me to walk over to see what she was working on in her studio. I learned to see that part of Long Island, quiet, near the water, through her eyes. When I would look from one of her paintings to the outdoors and back again, it was with relief. Yes, this is how to understand what I'm looking at. Here's where the beauty is.

Her paintings are clear about that beauty. At the same time they "always have an air of just coming into being, of tentativeness that is the lifeblood of art," as John Ashbery said in 2005, presenting her with the Gold Medal for Painting from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her work can give me a bodily sense of humming subtlety, as if I'm expanding several inches beyond my skin, elusive and warm.

Jane taught me a woman artist can be diffident, ironic, truthful, unexcited, annoyed—and can keep on working, can get beyond the "inevitable self-hatred" when starting a new painting—which even in her 80's she noted she still had to deal with—with no rush to definition. Living a boring life gives us the space to focus on what matters.

Niki de Saint Phalle, on the other hand, struck me with awe when, age six, I met her—she was brave, she made beauty out of randomness.

Niki covered big sculptures with white plaster and attached bags of colored paint to them—then she shot at the bags, with a rifle.

And at that moment the work changed, from blank white to a many-colored explosion, shattering, loud, clouds of plaster dust.

She did this very thing for my father's play, *The Construction of Boston*, in 1962. Dressed as Napoleon, she marched up the aisle of the theater and shot off a rifle at a plaster cast of the Venus de Milo.

My father wrote, Niki (singing):

*In my hand I have a gun...
It's the only gun that fires*

Answers to the soul's desires—

She was cool, this woman who made explosive art. I got the message: don't color between the lines. Make things out of feeling, out of mystery, no matter what gender you are, and if you answer the soul's desires in wild, in unexpected ways—great!

In the mid-1960's, mid-my-childhood, Niki's work changed. Inspired by a pregnant Clarice Rivers, artist Larry Rivers's wife, she began making her ebullient Nanas, her Babes, her Hot Girls, her "army of women coming to take over the world," as described by Bloum Cardenas, her granddaughter and a curator of Niki's 2015 retrospective at Guggenheim Bilbao. Niki made Nanas for the rest of her life, and they did take over the world, or at least various public spaces in Europe and the US—particularly her enormous ecstatic Gaudí-inflected Tarot Garden in Tuscany. I was thrilled, in 1997, to come across her sculptures colorfully flinging themselves around the Stravinsky Fountain in Paris where I could show them to our little son.

Niki's inspiration was key to me as a young artist. I learned that my least-explicable intuitions—the ones which filled me and couldn't be stuffed down—made sense when I unleashed them into the magically transformative process of art making.

Jane would invite us over to swim in her pool when there was a heat wave—no one else we knew had a pool in those days.

I would plunge into the cool blue water, seemingly plunging into the midst of elements of her art, wet green meadows and flowers, tall sky—and swim till I got tired.

I remember then the delicious sinking floating into the arms of a deck chair. My body, penetrated several inches deep by the coldness of the water, and my wet bathing suit, repelled the heat.

Somehow, in the generous world of Jane's boring life, I had become one of Niki's Nanas, big, powerful, happy, myself.

Photo credit: James Schuyler

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