



ArtSeen

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GERMAINE RICHIER

by Sara Christoph

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Though housed in the impeccable walls of Dominique Lévy uptown, the sculptures of Germaine Richier look to have been unearthed just moments ago, as if pulled from the ground like the cast bodies of Pompeii. Richier (1902 – 1959), a French artist well known in her time but largely forgotten in our own, is currently undergoing an unearthing herself. An ambitious, crowded show, the survey presented by Dominique Lévy and Galerie Perrotin is her first major exhibition in the United States in over 50 years, and presents work from her two most active (and sadly, last) decades: the 1940s and '50s. In their stark, roughly-hewn forms, Richier's sculptures point to a dark and compelling artistic vision.

At the start of her career, her sculptures were as weighty and massive as the bronze masterworks of her teachers, Auguste Rodin and *Émile-Antoine Bourdelle*. Throughout the '30s, she showed regularly in Paris and socialized with other Montparnasse artists, such as Alberto Giacometti (whose influence on her work remains pronounced). In 1939, Richier and her husband, the Swiss-German sculptor Charles-Otto Bänninger, absconded to Switzerland to escape the occupation, remaining in neutral territory until the close of World War II. Somewhere within this turbulent period, her sculptures began to shed: pounds, traditions, distinctions of gender, and later, of species. Her trademark "hybrids" appeared: figural sculptures in which animal extremities were grafted onto a human body.

When she returned to her studio in Paris in 1946, her work flourished. She made "La Mante, Moyenne," a petite patinated bronze figure with thin, angular arms, spindly claws, and breasts. Like the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and many other polytheistic cultures, Richier was interested in the mythology of metamorphosis, and formally experimented with the human body in moments of imaginative transfiguration. Though just over two feet tall, "La Mante" seems to threaten us with her own forgone metamorphoses, her seductive strangeness a menacing goad.

This hybridization continued to evolve throughout her next decade of work, culminating in large sculptures like "La Fourmi" (1953) and "La Sauterelle, Grande" (1955-56). At once sensuous and predatory, the female figure in "La Sauterelle" sinks her weight into the ground on crouched knees,

throws open her palms, and calculates her strike. Fleshy and robust, her potential is terrifying.

In much of the literature on Richier, the artist's gender eclipses all other readings of her work. She cut her hair short, wore shapeless, masculine clothes in the studio, had no children, and made sculptures of insect-women that preferred to devour their mate rather than allow them near their young. For the moment let's spare ourselves the hagiography and simply look at the work alone. "La Mante" exudes carnivorous laughter—not only for the hapless male whom she stalks, but at us, for believing what the artist created is exclusively tied to feminine angst.

Though the gendered characteristics of her work are often fearsome, the themes to which her work gestures are timeless and universal: mythology, evolution, mortality, resurrection, and decay. Richier was a teenager in France throughout World War I; only two decades later, she would flee yet another earth-scorching war. Though the narrative of postwar reconciliation is labeled by some as another well-trod reading of her work, it cannot be ignored. Richier's bodies are often mutilated and emaciated, sinewy and fragile. Her "La Cheval à six têtes, grande" (1954-56) ferociously rears its six heads, and simultaneously, chunks of flesh slough off before our eyes. Where tendons and veins—life—should be, we see only decrepit barrenness.

Today, more often than not, we witness expressions of such desolation digitally, through photographs or video coverage of war. Perhaps sculpture no longer feels appropriate to depict such ruin. Like many whose lives were disrupted (even indirectly) by war, perhaps Richier wanted to experiment with a world in which boundaries were not violently contested, but merged. In the shadows of Dresden, Stalingrad, and Hiroshima, hybridity might have appeared as a welcome retreat.

"A form lives to the extent to which it does not withdraw from expression. And we decidedly cannot conceal human expression in the drama of our time," Richier wrote in 1959. Her artistic oeuvre might not be the most revolutionary of her period, but her goal was not to upend artistic convention—the slippage of revolutionary rhetoric into savagery still stung. This pseudo-conservatism might make her work less interesting for some critics, but like the preserved casts of Pompeii that she visited, Richier's work stands today as a haunting excavation.



Germaine Richier, "La Mante, Moyenne," 1946. Dark patinated bronze, 273/16 × 65/6 × 149/16". Photo: Pierre Antoine © Germaine Richier / 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

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