

Germaine Richier,
Chessboard, Large Version
 (Original Painted Plaster)
 1959, plaster and metal



Along with her contemporary Alberto Giacometti, the French artist Germaine Richier created bold sculpture that reflected the existential angst of post-war Europe and influenced a generation of young British sculptors

Natalie Ferris on

Germaine Richier

In 1957, discussing her own work, the sculptor and etcher Germaine Richier (1902–1959) reflected upon an artistic practice that had long negotiated the savagery of conflict and the fragility of the human spirit:

'Our age, when you consider it, is full of talons. People bristle, as they do after long wars. It seems to me that in violent works there is just as much sensibility as in poetic ones. There can be just as much wisdom in violence as in gentleness.'

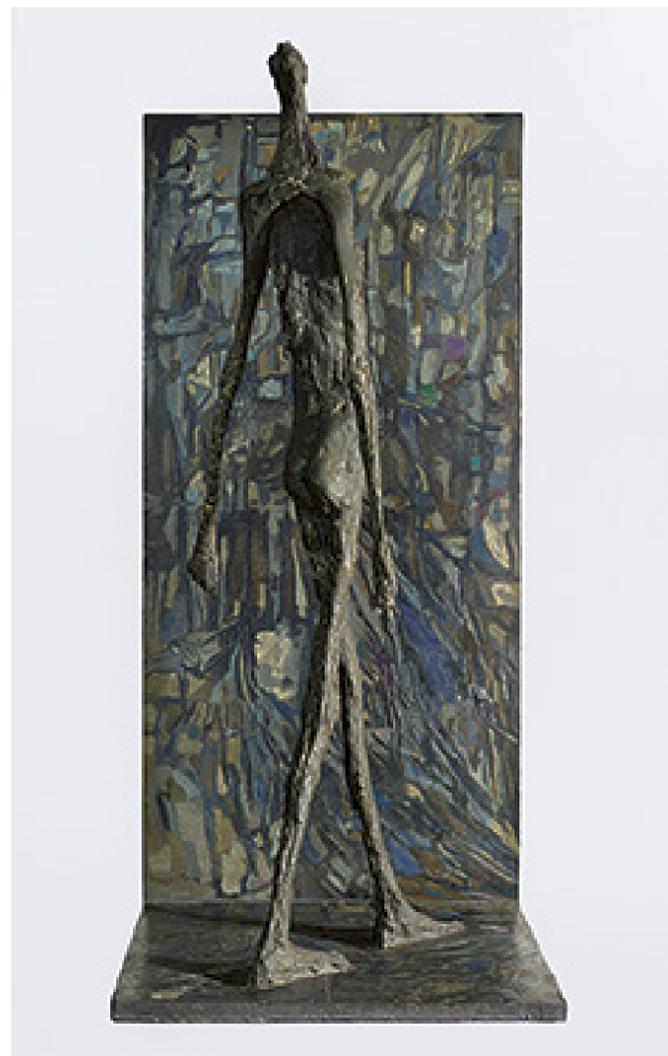
Perforated, shorn of musculature, or buckling under the strain of their own distended bodies, her bronzes emerged from the furnace of a beleaguered post-war France. Along with her contemporary, the sculptor Alberto Giacometti, with whom she was frequently compared, Richier explored the new image of humanity in an era freighted with continued privation and existential angst. And yet the apparent violence committed to these bodies, from the corrosion of their surfaces to the distortion of their limbs, is also a matter of alchemy. In curious,

mystical compounds reminiscent of surrealist artists Max Ernst or Wifredo Lam, her figures adopt strange new growths or bearings – sprouting fibrous wings, acquiring spindly insect legs, budding branches or urn-like handles at their temples, and developing mottlings of vibrant colour. Richier appears to ask, through such metamorphoses, what lies at the extreme reaches of the human body.

This tension, between the figurative and the fantastic, reached its peak in her late great work *Chessboard, Large Version (L'Echiquier, grand)* 1959, produced in the same year as her premature death and currently on view at Tate Modern. The grouping of five anthropomorphic figures, to which Richier tirelessly returned throughout the final four years of her life, reworked in varying scales, patinas and arrangements, represents the principal pieces in a game of chess: the king, queen, bishop, knight and rook. In the original smaller-scale 1955 version, the pieces were arranged on a board of scrap iron that she worked into with clay. Here, the larger plaster figures have been freed from their chequered base and mounted on free-standing plaster supports to present a far more precarious equilibrium. As a late evolution in her work, the application of colourful paint to the surfaces forms radiant lines that appear to course through the nerves, arteries and bones of each figure, charging them with a sense of their potential for movement. 'A form lives to the extent to which it does not withdraw from expression,' the artist noted in 1959, and this installation honours her unwavering commitment to the eloquence of gesture.

Born in 1902 in the small village of Grans near Salon-de-Provence, southern France, Richier moved at the age of two with her parents and her four siblings to Castelnau-le-Lez, near Montpellier, where she spent the rest of her childhood on the family estate, Prado. There is something of this primordial landscape in her work: the archaic myths, religious convictions and fables that issued from the region blend with the parched earth, spidery vines and glaring sunlight. She established a connection to the natural world from a young age, as her family were millers and vine growers, accepting the cycles of change and decay, flight and predation, life and death.

A pilgrimage to Pompeii in 1935 marked perhaps the most profound moment in Richier's creative life, impressing upon the young artist the iconography of human endeavour and a sense of bodies as blasted, organic, open material. This interlacing of the sacred and the profane eventually got her into trouble when her commissioned altar crucifix, the emaciated *Le Christ d'Assy* 1950, was moved from the altar to another part of a church in Haute-Savoie.



Top: Germaine Richier's *La Ville* 1952 with lead backdrop painted by Maria Helena Vieira da Silva

Chessboard, Large Version (Original Painted Plaster) installed at the exhibition *Germaine Richier*, Musée Grimaldi, Château d'Antibes, Antibes, 1959

The fact that she is not as well known today as Giacometti may be because of her gender. She nevertheless received international acclaim throughout her lifetime. Schooled in the Western classical tradition by two assistants to Auguste Rodin in Montpellier and Paris, Louis-Jacques Guigues and Émile-Antoine Bourdelle, she featured at Venice Biennales and was awarded the sculpture prize at the first São Paulo Biennial in 1951, while her work was shown in major galleries across Europe and America throughout the 1930s to 1950s.

Richier's advocates included David Sylvester and the poet Francis Ponge, and her social circles in Zurich and Paris comprised the artists Jean Arp, Giacometti, Marino Marini and Fritz Wotruba, as well as the writers André and Bona Pieyre de Mandiargues and Nathalie Sarraute. Her influence in Britain was particularly profound. She first exhibited in London in 1947 at the Anglo-French Art Centre, a show which has been credited as a source of the skeletal figures and brutalised forms of the 'geometry of fear' sculpture of the early 1950s, inspiring British artists such as Reg Butler, Bernard Meadows and Eduardo Paolozzi. In 1950 her work was again used to explore the connections between French and British art in *London-Paris: New Trends in Painting and Sculpture* at the ICA, alongside Robert Adams, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Hans Hartung, Peter Lanyon and Isabel Lambert. Her impact gave rise to Sylvester's striking assertion in 1955 that: 'Nobody, perhaps, occupies so central, so crucial, a position in contemporary sculpture as Germaine Richier.'

Some of her most intriguing sculptures construct an environment above, beneath or around the figures. Wood, bronze or stone are used as pedestals or as proscenium-like surrounds, while a number of her forms are attached to given points in their surroundings by fine rods of bronze. In 1951 and 1952 she invited the artists Maria Helena Vieira da Silva and Hans Hartung to paint backdrops to two of her sculptures – *La Ville* and *La Toupie* respectively.

Richier's own working environment was itself a spectacle. Looking at photographs of her in her studio, many of which were taken by Brassai, we see a potent physical presence amid a pageant of forms. A stocky, broad-shouldered woman, with roughly cropped dark hair, a direct gaze and forceful, ready hands, she vitalised her material. In an age of talons, Richier directed all of her efforts towards clawing back the essential resilience of the human form.

Chessboard, Large Version (Original Painted Plaster) is on view at Tate Modern.

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Top: Germaine Richier in her studio with one of her favourite models, Antonio Nardone, Paris, 1954

Germaine Richier on the beach at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, winter c1954-5