

Germaine Richier

DOMINIQUE LEVY
909 Madison Avenue
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Though in her heyday she was more prominent than fellow bronze sculptor Alberto Giacometti, Germaine Richier has not had an exhibition in New York since 1957. This two-gallery retrospective rectifies that lapse in decisive fashion, reestablishing Richier (1902–1959) as one of the most pivotal figures in avant-garde European sculpture in the decade following World War II. The forty-six works here, from early nudes to strange late polychrome experiments, foreshadow a whole postwar generation: the Nouveau Réalisme of Niki de Saint Phalle, the melancholy humanoids of Lynn Chadwick and Hans Josephsohn, and the body-centered work of Alina Szapocznikow. Yet even as Richier's sculptures scream their influence, they also stand utterly autonomous, with a force and gravity that belie their age.

Richier, classically trained when such education was not easy for women, left wartime France for Switzerland in 1939. She began creating patinated bronze figures of humans and insects—ants, grasshoppers, cicadas—whose rough surfaces bear scars and indentations, and whose bodies often have bloated stomachs or stand tangled in linear webs. Often read as an index of wartime trauma, the brutalized, pockmarked surfaces also destroy expectations of female delicacy and beauty. They testify to a European civilization at its frailest, and evoke not only the existential impressions of Jean-Paul Sartre (a Giacometti advocate) but also a more general Christian “man of sorrows,” whose scars bespeak an unbridgeable division between body and soul.

Richier's art is less elegant and far more disquieting than Giacometti's sculptures, and her works don't fit into the easy categories of textbooks and permanent collections. Her obliteration, however, of the borders between academic and modern or sacred and profane has not lost any of its power in these intervening decades. And while her continued relevance should be read as an artistic achievement, it's also an indictment of our failure, seventy years later, to build a society any more virtuous than the one that ground Richier's Europe to dust.

This exhibition is also on view at Galerie Perrotin, New York until April 12, 2014.

— Jason Farago



Germaine Richier, *Le Berger des Landes Shepherd of the Land*, 1951, dark patinated bronze, 58 5/8 x 35 x 23 5/8".