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Germaine Richier's sculptures get their first US showing in nearly sixty years

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The late French sculptor Germaine Richier sits in her crowded Paris studio on Avenue de Châtillon, 1956. Her work is now the subject of a major new exhibition in the US, the first in nearly sixty years.
Photography: Anthony Denney

In a 1956 photo, Germaine Richier stands over a table in the back corner of her Paris studio sorting through papers. The profile view reveals a lower lip pushed out and up in the act of discernment and a utilitarian grey ensemble that makes her

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nearly invisible against the ashy studio walls. She is simultaneously surrounded, protected, dwarfed, and upstaged by her sculptures: bronze figures of various sizes and patinas that are at once organic and demonic, familiar yet unknowable. A survey presented jointly by Dominique Lévy and Galerie Perrotin brings together 46 of these bewitching forms in the first US exhibition of Richier's work since 1957.

'To me, she really was the mother of post-war sculpture in Europe,' says gallerist Dominique Lévy, who assembled works from the artist's estate as well as loans from private collections. 'She aroused curiosity from the beginning and created a lot of debate about the constant dilemma of postwar art: figuration or abstraction?'

Richier (1902-1959) managed to split the difference. Classically trained, first at the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Montpellier and later as a student of sculptor and Rodin protégé Antoine Bourdelle, she initially focused on busts before working her way down. After World War II, which was spent on prolonged vacation in Zurich, she began incorporating animal and vegetal elements - insects, trees, bats and toads - into bodies ravaged of all but their strange and profound humanity.

The frequent choice of dark patinated bronze intensifies the rough surfaces of the sculptures. Anna Swinbourne, who contributed an essay to the exhibition catalogue, traces this aspect of Richier's work to a formative 1935 trip to Pompeii. 'She talked very often to people that she knew about the impact that that trip had on her, to see the charred remains of human beings,' says Swinbourne, 'and I think that it's an underestimated influence in her work.'

Works from the 1950s such as 'Le Griffu' and 'Le Mandoline (ou La Cigale)' show Richier experimenting further with structure and surface. The addition of metal wire adds a lean, geometric counterpoint to her earthy figures, while polished natural bronze injects exuberance into a perforated carapace. And although Richier made a career out of defying categorisation, there are works that cross paths with the elongated lopers of Giacometti and a monumental bronze shell that would look at home in the electro-plated undersea garden of Claude Lalanne.

The masterstroke of the exhibition is the decision to eschew the sparsely populated rooms typical of contemporary shows for a more dense arrangement, heightened by a selection of Brassai photos. 'The sculptures echo each other. They bounce off each other. So even sometimes you're disturbed, because they're too close,' says Lévy. 'When you look at the photographs of Germaine Richier in the studio, she was always working in relation to her own work. And so we tried to recreate that atmosphere.'

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