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Ready for Revival: Germaine Richier's Figurative Sculptural Fantasies

by David Carrier

Germaine Richier at Dominique Lévy and Galerie Perrotin

February 27 to April 12, 2014

909 Madison Avenue at 73rd Street

New York City, 212 772 2004



Works by Germaine Richier including *La Spirale*, 1957, far left, featured in the exhibition under review. Courtesy of Dominique Lévy, New York.

Germaine Richier (1902-1959), a pupil of Antonie Bourdelle was much honored in her native France and, also in the United States during her lifetime. Inevitably, she faced the struggles of a female sculptor but once she was photographed in her studio by Brassai things looked up, and starting in 1948, she appeared in no less than five consecutive installments of the Venice Biennale and she was collected by many American and European museums. She started out in the figurative tradition in which she was trained with patinated bronze nudes such as *Loretto* (1934) and *Nu ou La Grosse* (1939) included here. Then, influenced no doubt by World War Two, which she spent in exile, in Switzerland, her subjects became stranger, as her expressionist figure, *Don Quichotte à la lance* (1949) testifies. And she did human-insect hybrids like *La Mante, moyenne* (1946), which has a woman's torso above and the body of a praying mantis below. Inspired late in her too short life by collaborations with Hans Hartung and other painters, she applied color to sculptures, *Le Couple peint* (1957) is one, or polished them- the golden *La Spirale* (1957) is a splendid illustration of how boldly she experimented.

Soon after Richier's death, her style of art dropped out of fashion. In the 1960s, the new American movements, Pop Art and minimalism, were alien to her concerns. Some of her peers remained much admired. Alberto Giacometti's presentations of urban anxiety became canonical, and Marino Marini, who became her friend in Switzerland, achieved fame for his distinctive sculptures of a war victim. But her art, which is much more varied than Marini's, and certainly more eccentric than Giacometti's, has not recently attracted much attention in this country. In fact, this show is Richier's first in America since 1957. When, three decades ago, I began taking an interest in writing art criticism, Rosalind Krauss's *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977) made a great impression on me. In Krauss's story of sculpture, which takes the reader from Rodin to Carl Andre, Eva Hesse and Robert Smithson, Richier can hardly have any place. Indeed, her name does not appear in the book. But nowadays, of course, we tell that story differently. And Richier seems

ready for revival: her bold development of figurative sculptural fantasies links her with Robert Gober, Kiki Smith and a host of other now celebrated contemporary figures.

It's understandable that in presenting this revival of a prolific, recently marginalized artist that Lévy- Perrotin would want to show as much of her art as possible. But displaying more than forty sculptures, many of them large, in these two grand, but relatively small galleries made it simply impossible to focus properly on the individual works. Sculpture, especially figurative sculpture needs room to breathe. But in this setting, it was impossible to step back. A display of just one or two pieces on each floor would have been much more effective. But at least the exhibition inspires the hope that a full museum-scale retrospective of this important artist might be on its way.



Germaine Richier, Don Quichotte à la lance, 1949. Polished natural bronze, 18 x 6-1/4 x 7 inches, Edition 12. Courtesy of Dominique Lévy, New York



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