



REVIEWS MAY 07, 2014



Germaine Richier

NEW YORK,
at Dominique Lévy and Galerie Perrotin

by Austin Considine

View of Germaine Richier's exhibition, showing (foreground) *The Bullfighter*, 1953; at Perrotin.



Dominique Lévy and Galerie Perrotin's joint presentation of more than 40 works by the French sculptor Germaine Richier (1902-1959) helped bridge an important art historical gap between the desiccated, vanishing forms of Alberto Giacometti and the unsparing, corporeal feminism of Louise Bourgeois and Kiki Smith. Richier is sadly underappreciated on this side of the Atlantic; this was the first solo exhibition of her work in the United States since the year she died.

The nonchronological arrangement of the sculpture throughout the contiguous galleries was dense, yet delicate, like a scorched and ancient forest, its shape-shifting chimeras burnt and resurrected. (The pieces ranged from less than a foot to over seven feet in height.) Surrounding photographs of Richier's work and studio by Brassai attested to the teeming environment in which she worked. Her subjects, like those of her teacher, Antoine Bourdelle, are often literary or mythological. There was *Pomona* (1945), the Roman goddess of fruit, and a sculpture of a six-headed horse galloping forth from hell. A life-size, emaciated Don Quixote, his woodlike limbs as tenuous as his grasp on reality, stood nearby a diminutive bullfighter, not quite four feet tall, who's more Humpty Dumpty than swaggering torero. Kafkaesque metamorphosis pervaded. The spindly figure in *The Ant* (1953) is half-woman, half-insect. In the nightmarish *Spider* (1946), a woman-arachnid hybrid gets tangled in her own web.

Giacometti is Richier's nearest aesthetic kin, and his legacy has significantly eclipsed hers. That's regrettable. The waifish, phenomenological style that defined Giacometti's best work emerged during his post-Surrealist period of the mid-1940s—contemporary with Richier's own such experiments. The two artists mixed in the same heady Parisian circles; no doubt their ideas intermingled. But given the singularity and rapidity with which Richier's vision developed from about 1944, her importance as an innovator has been underrecognized, her debt to Giacometti overstated, at least in the United States. It's unfortunate for an artist whose work appeared in five Venice Biennales and, in 1951, the first São Paulo Biennale.

Rendered mostly in patinated bronze—though sometimes in lead, or combined with globs of colored glass—Richier's surfaces resemble charred wood, jagged bone or moss-hewn rock. Her often gaunt, elongated forms manipulate the space and light inside and around the sculptures and seem to express a deep struggle for transcendence. Richier didn't invent all the textures and lines that animate her work, but she uniquely advanced them. She also helped make room for distinctly female voices amid the overwhelmingly male discourse surrounding 20th-century upheavals.

Kiki Smith's bronzes, with their sometimes burnt and skinned bodies, are foreshadowed by Richier's life-size nudes of a man and woman, *Thunderstorm* (1947-48) and *L'Ouragane* (1948-49). The former is mostly faceless, his body pocked with holes. The latter, whose title is a neologistic feminization of the masculine noun for "hurricane," retains her face but appears as though dipped in hot tar.

Standard history fixes Richier's maturation to the atomizing horrors of World War II. But her work, like Smith's, exhibits a Catholic fixation on the flesh which may hark back further. As Anna Swinbourne notes in her catalogue essay, Richier's visit to Pompeii in 1935 proved formative: her sculptural textures would soon resemble those of the charred and lava-caked bodies at that site. But within this anxiety lies a struggle to outstrip the limits of the flesh. As David Sylvester wrote of Richier's 1955 solo exhibition at London's Hanover Gallery, "Hers is a human image challenged, battered, ruined, and still obstinately human."