

Reconsidering Germaine Richier's Spectral Sculpture

by [Mostafa Heddaya](#) on February 28, 2014



Installation view of 'Germaine Richier' at Dominique Lévy and Galerie Perrotin (all photographs by the author for Hyperallergic)

Among France's postwar female sculptors, Germaine Richier, and her haunting figuration, is today perhaps the most under-appreciated. This has now been partially corrected thanks to the efforts of Dominique Lévy and Galerie Perrotin, two Upper East Side galleries that have joined forces to present a wide-ranging [exhibition](#) of the artist's work. This is a show whose breadth was last rivaled in America in 1958, when a retrospective was held at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The following year, another retrospective at the [Musée Grimaldi](#) in Antibes (now the Picasso Museum) bookended Richier's career, opening shortly before her early death at age 57.

Though the doyenne of that generation of sculptors is no doubt Louise Bourgeois, Richier — nine years her senior — enjoyed a fair amount of influence, and notoriety, as her contemporary. Richier studied sculpture in Paris under [Antoine Bourdelle](#), whose studio also instructed Alberto Giacometti, and deftly fused the classical forms of cast bronze sculpture with more mystical elements. For Richier, these fissures in the classical ideal of corporeal perfection did not come directly from the horrors of the Great War, but rather from a formative visit to Pompeii, as Anna Swinbourne, an independent art historian, noted in a talk at the gallery yesterday (Swinbourne contributed one of two catalogue essays accompanying the exhibition).



Nicola Hicks at the Yale Center for British Art ([click to enlarge](#))

In many ways, Richier’s work remains contemporary, with her spectral aesthetic and focus on human, animal, and archetypal subjects (e.g. 1954’s “L’homme de la nuit, grand”) transcending historical particulars. The ultimately provisional fate of figuration introduced in her works, planted at the precipice of formlessness while peering into the abyss, recalls the work of younger artists like Britain’s Nicola Hicks and the Belgian Berlinde de Bruyckere. (Hicks’s sculpture is currently the subject of an [outstanding presentation](#) within the galleries of the Yale Center for British Art.)

As their mantle is taken up in various parts by contemporary sculptors, there remains a great deal of interest in the lineages of mid-century modernism. (See, for example, last year’s *Les Papesses* at the Palais des Papes in Avignon, [reviewed](#) by Hyperallergic’s Jillian Steinhauer.) The reasons for this sustained attention can be traced to some of Richier’s own powerful writing on the practice in the year of her death, some of which is included in this exhibition’s text:

What characterizes sculpture, in my opinion, is the way in which it renounces the full, solid form. Holes and perforations conduct like flashes of lighting into the material, which becomes organic and open, encircled on all sides, lit up in and through the hollows. A form lives to the extent to which it does not withdraw from expression. And we decidedly cannot conceal human expression in the drama of our time.

These questions of representation are timeless, and Richier’s virtuosic play with lines, perspectives, and topographies discloses the formal seriousness of her life’s work.



Germaine Richier, "Le Cheval à six têtes, grand" (1954-56)



Germaine Richier, installation view



Germaine Richier, "La Spirale" (1957)



Germaine Richier, "La Sauterelle, grande" (1955-56)



Germaine Richier, "La Chinoise" (1952)



Germaine Richier. "Le Sablier III" (1953)



Germaine Richier, "Le Pentacle" (1954)



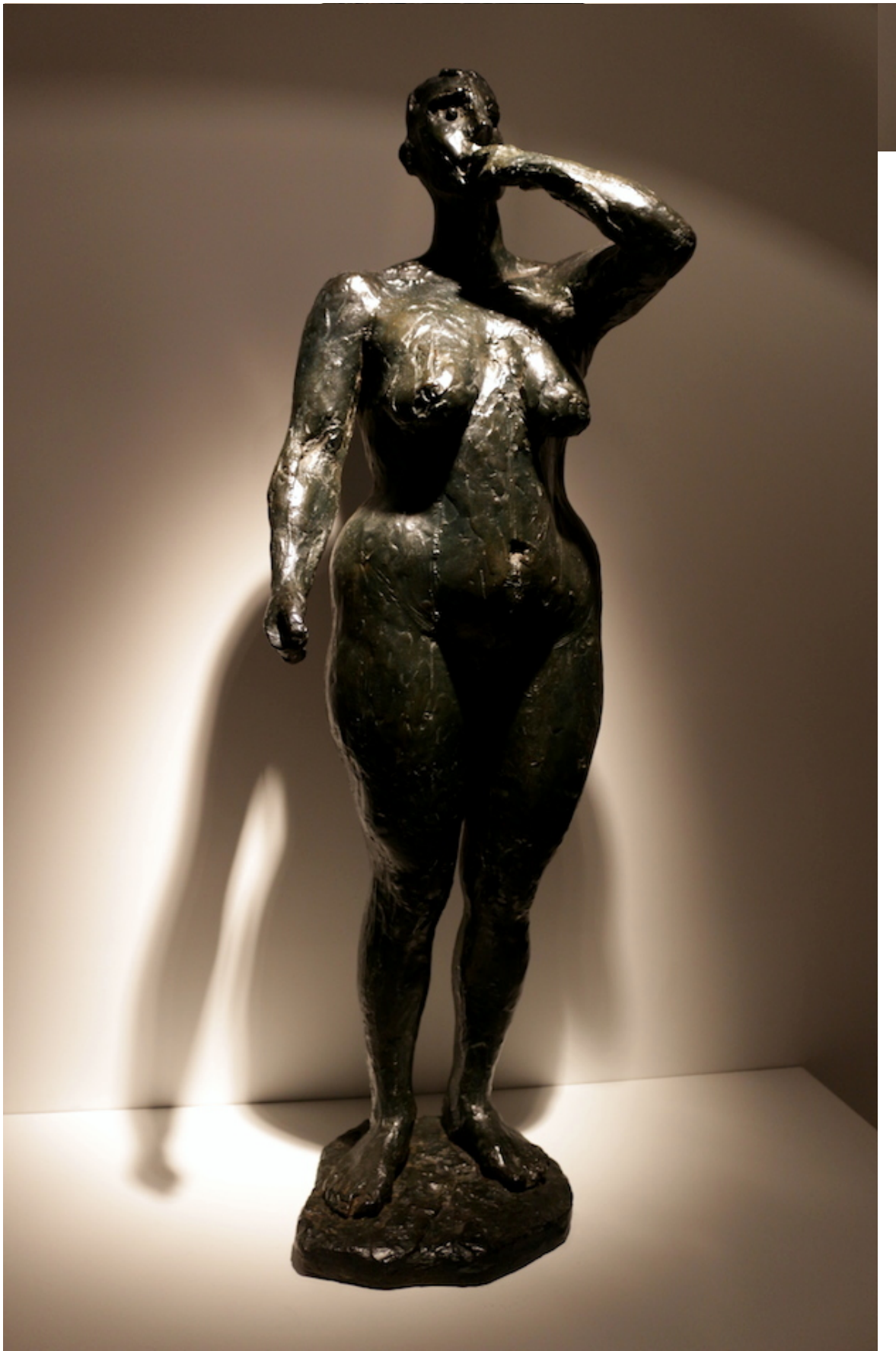
Germaine Richier, partial installation view of 'L'Echiquier, grand' series of large-format chess pieces (photographs of Richier's work by Brassai in the background)



Germaine Richier, "L'homme-forêt, grand" (1945-46)



Germaine Richier, "Le Berger des Landes" (1951)



Germaine Richier, "La Pomone" (1945)



Germaine Richier, installation view

[Germaine Richier](#) is on view at Dominique Lévy and Galerie Perrotin (909 Madison Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through April 12.

[Sculpture by Nicola Hicks](#) is on view at the Yale Center for British Art (1080 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut) through March 9.

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