

LEISURE & ARTS

SCULPTURE

Without a Drop of Irony

Germaine Richier

Dominique Lévy
Through April 12

BY PETER PLAGENS

New York

Agonized sincerity does not sit well in today's art world, where irony—albeit sometimes diluted to the homeopathic strength of just a little too much knowingness—is a standard ingredient. This is especially true in sculpture, as opposed to painting, where assemblage—the cobbling together of disparate parts of varied origin—is the predominant manufacturing method. So what will this city's art cognoscenti make of “Germaine Richier,” the Dominique Lévy / Galerie Perrotin show of about 40 cast-bronze sculptures—in an old-fashioned crowded installation—of alternately spiky and bulbous, existentially distorted and distressed human figures, some of them veritable animal or insect hybrids?

At the least, we should reopen our aesthetic to the possibility that what might appear, to superficially sophisticated eyes, as mere mawkish modernism is actually profoundly tragic art. And we should recognize that Germaine Richier (who was born in 1902 in Grans, in the south of France, and who died in 1959 in Montpellier) was—with some ups and downs—a great sculptor whose depth, passion and skill we could use more than a bit of today.

After studying at the art academy in Montpellier, Richier moved to Paris in her mid-20s and entered the studio of Antoine Bourdelle, a sculptor of bombastic, classic-modernist public works who also taught Alberto Giacometti and Henri Matisse. From Bourdelle, Richier learned everything there was to know about modeling in clay and casting in bronze. (Traditional craft is visibly operative in even her most contorted pieces.)

She was married twice, the first time—and for more than two decades—to Otto Bänninger, a good but not great Swiss sculptor, and then, for the last few years of her life, to the surrealist poet René de Solier.

Although she had to teach in order to afford to work in bronze, Richier was quite successful, especially after World War II. (She and her first husband were able to sit out the war in Switzerland, returning to Paris in 1946.) From 1948 on, she participated in five Venice Biennales in a row, and her postwar exhibition record includes solos at such prestigious galleries as Maeght and Berggruen, and a 1958 retrospective at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. All of which is to say that Richier was anything but neglected in her day. But her last solo gallery exhibition in New York, at Martha Jackson—where the likes of

Christo, John Chamberlain and Sam Francis made their New York debuts—took place 57 years ago. That was just about the time the art world was starting to veer from Abstract Expressionism toward Pop, and heartfelt figuration was increasingly perceived in the quarters that counted as—to be blunt—corny. Stateside Americans hadn't been as close to the blitzes, bombardments and mass killings of World War II as had Europeans, and our artists didn't feel nearly as strongly as did Richier about the psychological as well

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as aesthetic problem of reviving, let alone maintaining, the credible presence of the human figure in sculpture. Perhaps she'd already formed the basis for her sculptural vision from a visit to the ruins of Pompeii in 1935, but it was the war that prompted in her an idea of human devolution—from the most advanced mammal back down to bats and birds and, finally, insects. The crouching, frightening “La Mante, moyenne” (1946)—the exhibition titles are in French—is a wonderfully pessimistic example.

Not that Richier didn't have hope. In 1950, she completed a

commission for a crucifix for a church in Plateau d'Assy; the sculpture (not in the exhibition) was a stark, almost stick-figure Christ, whose tortured surface came from a verse in Isaiah about “a man of sorrows” having grown up “as a root out of dry ground,” without “form or comeliness.” The work was denounced politely as “liturgically insufficient” and not so politely as “an insult to the majesty of God,” and removed in 1951. It most likely didn't help that the artist was a woman. In 1962, however, the Vatican II reforms decided what was called “the quarrel over sacred art” in favor of the kind of cry-from-the-heart modernism that Richier represented.

The artist's best pieces in this mode, in this show—among at least a couple of dozen very good ones—are “Le Couple peint” (1959), a tall, poignantly thin (from the pressures of the world, not lack of food) man and woman; “La Tauromachie” (1953), a walking, hollow-stomached figure accompanied by a bull's skull; and the startlingly inventive “l'Echiquier” (1959). That last work, which tackles the cliché of the chessboard in modern art, features the king, queen, knight, rook and bishop; each piece displays a different semia-abstracted human gesture and—this is Richier's magic—is somehow moving. At Dominique Lévy, the large version consists of a row of figures deftly installed on a low platform; on another floor sits the smaller work, with the

‘La Tauromachie’ (1953).



figures positioned on a partial chessboard.

In spite of the fact that Richier's art deeply influenced not only such contemporaries as the “geometry of fear” English sculptors Reg Butler and Lynn Chadwick but is a clear inspiration for Louise Bourgeois's giant spiders, she's not had the obviously obligatory major retrospective in Paris. The reason is Giacometti, of whom some unfairly judge Richier to be a variant, if not imitator. While there are similarities, the two artists are as different as, say, Joan Miró and Paul Klee.

Richier is, in bronze, quite an original artist and, in words, one of the better thinkers about sculpture. “What characterizes sculpture, in my opinion,” she says in a gallery wall text, “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.”

When London's Tate Modern opened in 2000, in the famous former power plant on the Thames, it installed in a prominent place a painted plaster—and quite joyful—iteration of Richier's “l'Echiquier.” London, at least, had it right.

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