

The New York Times

Staging a Rescue From Obscurity

We live in what might be called the era of “no artist left behind.” It’s a period of sometimes exhilarating excavation and rediscovery during which art history has become larger and more inclusive. It encompasses more kinds of people from different parts of the world and all kinds of backgrounds — as opposed to art-school educated white men from the United States and Europe. It also encompasses more mediums, from ceramics to performance art.

ROBERTA SMITH

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

All this is mostly to the good, and I’ve been just about as happy about it as anyone, but there are drawbacks.

For one thing, rescuing artists from the past — mostly those who emerged during the post-war period — has become something of a fad. A decade ago, there were just a few galleries that specialized in such resurrections. Now, it seems as if every gallery reaches into the past once or twice a season, if not more.

This season alone, New York has seen exhibitions of Konrad Lueg (at Greene Naftali), Paul Feeley (Garth Greenan), César

Continued on Page 29

“La Sauterelle, grande,” by Germaine Richier at the Dominique Lévy-Galerie Perrotin show.



GERMAINE RICHIER/2014 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; ADACP, PARIS

(Luxembourg & Dayan), Candy Jerigan (Greene Naftali), Julije Knifer (Mitchell-Innes & Nash) and Richard Van Buren (Garth Greenan). Some were convincing, others felt pumped up.

History — or the test of time — is not always wrong. Not every artist whose work languishes in obscurity is unjustly ignored. The work of some more or less died with its time and exists as retro artifact or interesting historical evidence but doesn’t give off much heat now. The idea that an overlooked artist is by definition a significant artist is sometimes based more on wishful thinking than on actual looking.

So is the conclusion that a forgotten artist is somehow purer for being untouched by the market and its skyrocketing prices. This “purity” appeals to many who are put off by, or feel guilty about, the current prominence of money in the art world, but it shouldn’t be forgotten that a neglected career can also represent a new market opportunity. And sometimes the emphasis on the past begins to feel like an avoidance of the present, which can’t be good for new art.

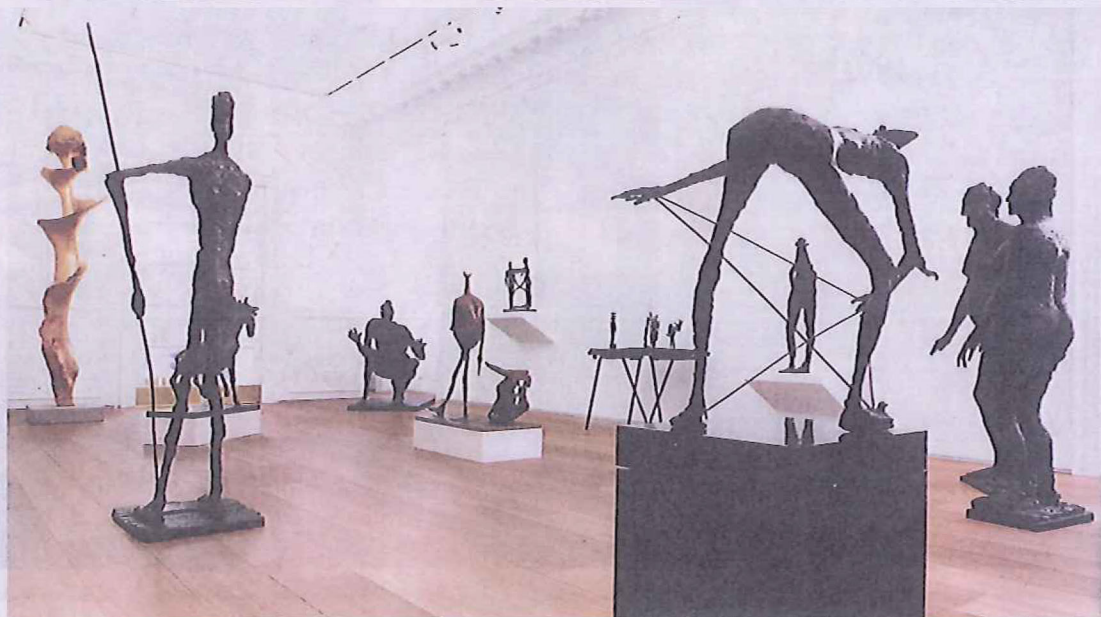
In New York right now, the latest candidate for resurrection is the French sculptor Germaine Richier (1902-59), whose ostentatiously gloomy, mostly retrograde figurative works are the subject of a lavish retrieval effort at the galleries of Emmanuel Perrotin and Dominique Lévy, which share a refurbished former bank at Madison Avenue and 73rd Street. Richier had a fairly big career in the late 1940s and ‘50s. She exhibited in Zurich (where she spent World War II) and Paris and was included in five consecutive Venice Biennales.

Her first American exhibition was at the Allan Frumkin Gallery in Chicago in 1954. She had her first New York show at the Marsha Jackson Gallery in 1957. But her reputation began to fade after she died of cancer in 1959.

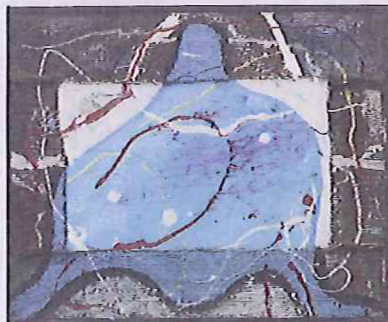
Much as I admire the determination of any woman who succeeds in the art world, I have long thought that Richier’s obscurity is an accurate reflection of her achievement, and this exhibition doesn’t do much to change my mind. But see for yourself (through April 12) while keeping in mind that the Perrotin-Lévy show is also interesting as an exercise in promotion.

The exhibition is dotted with images of her work and studio taken by Brassai. It is accompanied by an impressive catalog — but a largely useless one in terms of any arguments about Richier’s art and its place in history. Much is made of the fact that one of Richier’s male models also posed for Rodin (“The Kiss,” no less), which actually seems kind of insulting.

“Germaine Richier” is on view through April 12 at Dominique Lévy and Galerie Perrotin, 509 Madison Avenue, at 73rd Street; 212-722-2004, dominique-levy.com, and 212-212-2502, perrotin.com. “Tsuyoshi Maekawa” is also at Dominique Lévy through April 12.



CULLAUME ZICARELLI



DOMINIQUE LEVY GALLERY

Scant, if any, attention is paid to other sculptors who, like Richier, attempted to modernize the human figure in the years after World War II by turning it variously angular, insectlike and ravaged or otherwise rough of surface, while maintaining an almost total — and homogenizing — loyalty to bronze. Spindly legs, swollen torsos and partial or animalistic heads were commonplace, making a simplistic equation with the war’s dehumanizing savagery. These included Kenneth Armitage, Lynn Chadwick and Reg Butler of Britain; the American Leonard Baskin; and

the Italian Marino Marini, several of whom were, like Richier, included in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1959 exhibition “New Images of Man.”

American sculptors like Ibram Lassaw, Herbert Ferber and Seymour Lipson intersected occasionally, but tended to be more abstract. The only artist who really transcended this — in a style that began to form before the war — was Alberto Giacometti, whose eaten-away figures remain the quintessential representations of postwar angst and the existential condition.

The exhibition occupies two floors

(Perrotin’s and Lévy’s) with a dense installation intended to recreate the jumble of pieces in Richier’s Paris studio. In addition, it spills over onto a third floor, where Ms. Lévy has mounted a display of seven relief-like paintings from the early 1960s by Tsuyoshi Maekawa, a little-known Japanese artist and second-generation member of the postwar Gutai group. Made from repeatedly slashed and ridged burlap highlighted with paint, his fossil-like topographies have a freshness and vitality that further point up the archaic inertness of most of the Richiers. Maekawa’s pieces rejoin the present on their own steam.

The earliest Richier works here give a partial but engaging picture of a promising young sculptor whose initial treatment of the figure is distinctive if conventional. This is suggested by two imposingly eccentric nudes from 1939 and 1945 and, best of all, a crouching woman from 1940 very much like one of Degas’s bathers but with distended arms. These pieces suggest an independent-minded young artist confident in three dimensions and fully familiar with a figurative tradition that included not only Degas, but also Maillol, Matisse and Picasso, as well as Antoine Bourdelle, with whom Richier studied from 1926 until his death in 1929.

The later works in the show suggest that after the war, Richier gave in to her least-interesting artistic instincts. Trying to respond to the devastation of World War II — and perhaps feeling guilty that she spent the war in relative

comfort, marooned in Zurich — she turns to mawkish, melodramatic figures and hybrid creatures, as did many of her male contemporaries. Her misshapen sculptures refer to ants and spiders in their titles and sometimes sprout clawlike hooks from their elbows. Their rough shapes and surfaces conjure a general sense of unpleasantness or decay, but hardly tragedy. They adhere to a generic Surrealism, even when more cheerful, as in a figure that is part tree.

Sometimes, one senses a facile evocation of cave painting, especially a bronze of a six-headed horse. And literary cliché is not abjured, as in three sculptures of Don Quixote. They are conservative compared to what artists like David Smith, Louise Bourgeois and Louise Nevelson were doing at the same time.

There are definitely moments in the works from the 1950s, among them the crouching woman, “La Sauterelle, grande” (especially her thick outstretched hands); the pastel paint applied to the scrawny male and female forms of “Le Couple peint”; a tall golden spiral in polished bronze, “La Spirale,” whose form is part bone and part flower; and a small figure in painted and folded metal that pits itself impressively against Picasso’s cut-out sculptures.

I don’t think that Richier would have become “a very great sculptor,” as her friend César said she was. But had she lived and worked longer, her current resuscitation might seem less contrived.