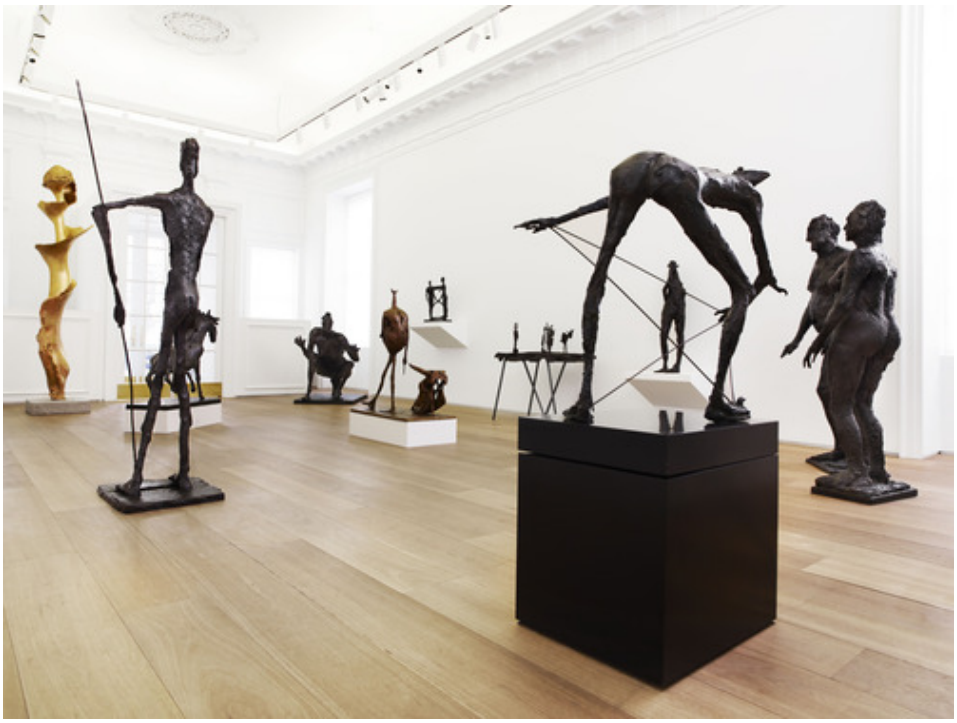


Solo Exhibition
Germaine Richier
Dominique Lévy Gallery
909 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10021
February 27, 2014 - April 12, 2014

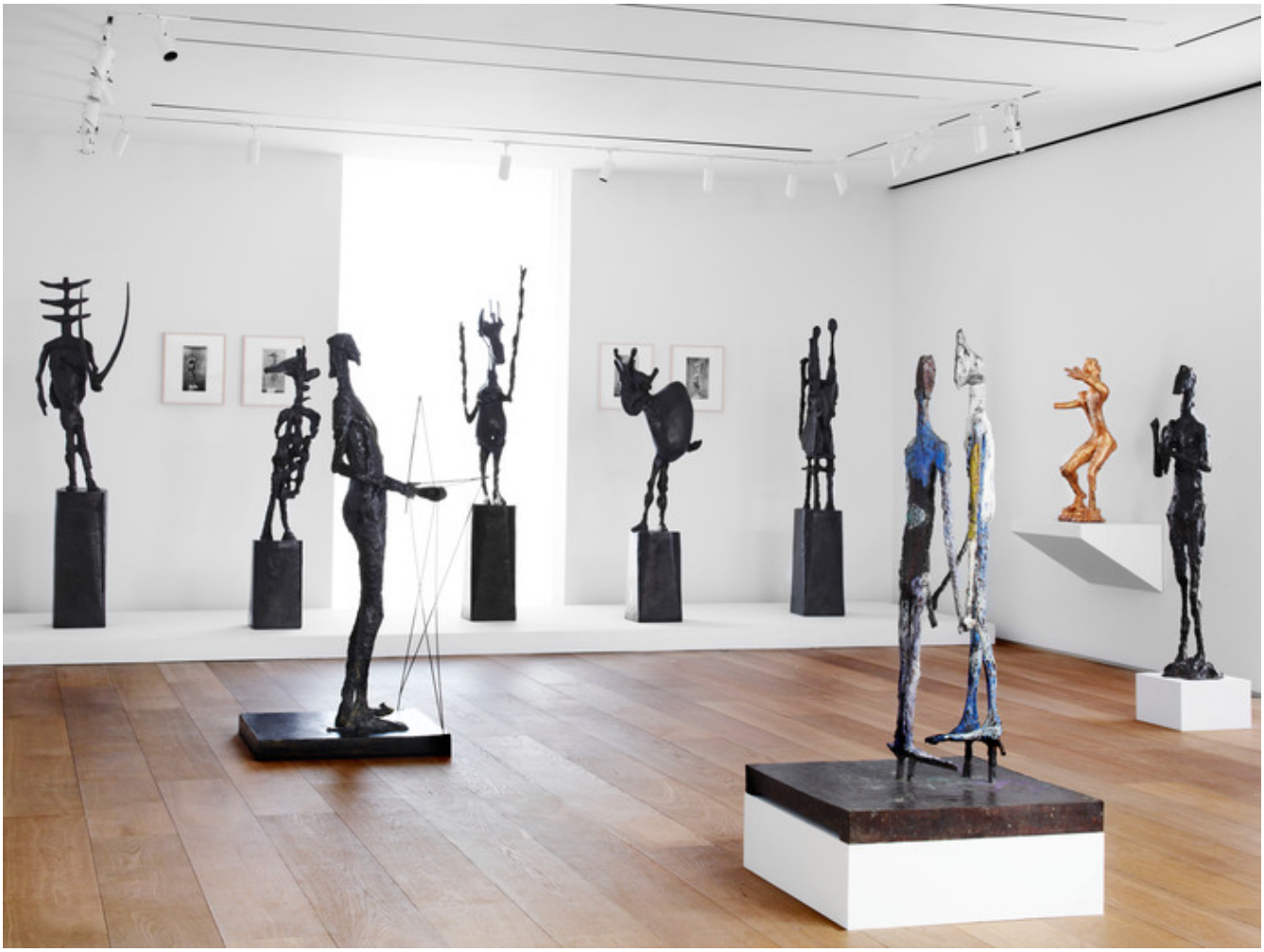
Rediscovering Greatness: the sculptures of Germaine Richier

by Gabrielle Lipton

Forty-six of French artist Germaine Richier's sculptures fill the three floors of the Dominique Lévy gallery in a solo exhibition of her work. A collection of silver gelatin photographs of Richier and her studio taken by her creative companion Brassaï provides a grounding backdrop for the sprawling show, which encompasses multiple decades of Richier's work, allowing visitors to see how Richier's artistic vision evolved throughout her life.

It's a matter of comparison. Female sculptors are rare to begin with, and within the category, few are widely recognized – Louise Bourgeois claims what might be the sole celebrity status in the field. This coupled with the fact that Richier's work hasn't had an exhibition in the U.S. since 1957 (two years before her death) places Richier at the tip of a double-edged sword; her obscurity grants her the prestige of an artifact being rediscovered, but the lack of prior exposure makes it difficult

to quickly recognize which of her works are truly great. Or, is she truly great at all? Or just one of the best in an under-populated category? Most will claim the former, but only after having given the works patience to slowly reveal themselves as more than just spindly bronze figures.



Germaine Richier, Installation view*;* Courtesy of the Dominique Lévy Gallery

The abundance of work serves twofold: to make up for lost display-time and to evoke the sense of being in her cluttered studio (of which Brassaï's photographs give visual testament). Being sucked into the world of Richier, however, makes for a curious headspace. An intensely emotional artist's work could not be displayed in this fashion without feeling overwhelming, but Richier's slightly haunting, stick-like figurines are more about rational relationships – those between humans and animals, humans and nature, humans and self – than waterfalls of feeling. And, of course, the primary relationship here is the relationship between the works themselves. Restrained in both physical and passionate substance, Richier's work is most powerful in numbers, and this exhibition capitalizes on that.

Her work is far from abstract. After training classically during the twenties at the École des Beaux Arts, Montpellier, Richier moved to Paris and studied privately under Antoine Bourdelle, a protégé of Rodin. Some of her earlier pieces look like Tim Burton takes on Greco-Roman sculpture – frugal, sinister characters in classical gestures and postures. As World War II took hold, Richier moved to Switzerland and the South of France, and the focus she found in refuge shows in her mastery of this crossbred style. *La Forêt* (1946), which she made at the end of this period, wavers between being man or tree with a branch-like arm bent up toward the forehead in a gesture of faintness, as if exhausted of existence.

However, when she moved back to Paris after the war – and the viewer moves to the second floor of this exhibition – she began experimenting more, toying with the human form in almost mystical realms and incorporating glass, paint, and enamel into figures' flesh. Stances get more awkward, bodies get ganglier, and pitchfork-like extremities hang from places they don't belong. *Don Quichotte* (1950-51) stands life-size, knees caved fluidly inward beneath arms bent in Egyptian-like rigidity, one holding a long lance and a head devoid of facial features. The war's desolation is visible in this phantom of a being standing guard to some dark depth.

Sculptures by Germaine Richier in her Paris studio; Photo: Brassaï, Françoise Guiter Collection;

Richier also cited a trip to Pompeii in the 1930s as a major influence on her vantage point. Seeing the charred remains of

human beings affected the way she thought about flesh. The roughly dimpled texture of her bronze seems to smolder, giving her figures complexity, as if time ate away at them like a termite until they reached their chewed-down gauntness. But some of her most captivating work lacks this destructive tendency. She could, in fact, make things classically beautiful. *La Spiral* (1957) stands more than nine feet tall as an elongated, polished bronze seashell that looks like an antique gold treasure out of Poseidon's palace.

Or, tucked off to the side on the second floor, a motherly woman, *Le Crapaud* (1940), kneels with her back bent over the ground, as if lost in thought about a former love while going about another day of household chores. Her quiet grace resonates louder than most of the crowd's.

—Gabrielle Lipton

(Image on top: **Germaine Richier**, Installation view; Courtesy of the Dominique Lévy Gallery)