

NEW YORK

Germaine Richier

DOMINIQUE LÉVY/GALERIE PERROTIN

Recently, Dominique Lévy and Emmanuel Perrotin gave over their joint gallery spaces to a challenging, taste-transforming exhibition of more than forty sculptures by Germaine Richier (1902–1959), many of them textbook familiar, others complete revelations. It was the first New York exhibition of the French-born artist's work in more than a half a century.

In the 1920s, Richier had been a student of Antoine Bourdelle, then the reigning counter-Rodinist, an artist widely admired for a type of "heroic," quasi-geometric realism that paralleled the monumental platitudes of Aristide Maillol. Richier has long exemplified the kind of student who, if not surpassing her master (though today, most would think she had), certainly became his equal. Her works' aggressive intrusion of torn, disjunctive patches of space into sheer, unifying mass, for example, seems to turn inside out the tamped-down classical conventions typical of the 1930s in which she was formed.

By the postwar '40s and '50s, masterpieces abound, works marked by a disturbing pictorialism and perhaps best referred to by their French titles, owing to their odd wordplay. Among these pieces, we find *L'Orage* (The Storm), 1947–48, and *L'Ouragane* (The Hurricane), 1948–49, together with a kind of hulking Adam and Eve; *Diabolo* and *Le Diabolo*, both 1950, and *Le Griffu* (Man with Claws), 1952, all three nightmarish versions of the cup-and-ball game; *La Tauromachie*, 1953, an incinerated, striding Egyptian figure juxtaposed with a horned bull's skull, reminiscent of Picasso's wartime still lifes; *L'Eau* (Water), 1953–54, a seated female figure whose body is a massive meridional amphora; and *Le Cheval à six têtes, grand* (The Six-Headed Horse, Large Version), 1954–56, a paraphrase of the many quadrigae found throughout tourist-snapshot Paris, such as those atop the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel or the Grand Palais.

Richier's work has long been viewed through the interpretive prism of unabashed Expressionist angst, of humankind barely surviving the Holocaust and atomic annihilation. (The sculptor herself was, in considerable measure, insulated from the real devastation of World War II by virtue of her withdrawal to neutral Switzerland—an act made possible by her marriage to the sculptor Charles-Otto Bänninger, a Swiss national.) By now, the existential interpretation of the work is the standard mode by which her forms are read and rationalized.

Much of Richier's oeuvre also derives, of course, from the Surrealist insect repertoire, in particular that of the vampirish praying mantis, whose female of the species, following copulation, feeds upon the male. The Surrealist commonplaces of insects and spiders are obviously also crucial to the work of Louise Bourgeois (the artists' careers overlapped in France before

Bourgeois came to New York in 1938). Another Surrealist motif typical of Richier's work is the often crouching, insect-segmented figure playing cat's-cradle games with string (represented in the sculptures by wire). See, for example, *La Fourmi* (The Ant), 1953, a work recalling the opening of Jean de la Fontaine's rhyming fable known to all French children: "*La Cigale et la fourmi ayant chanté tout l'été . . .*"; again Bourgeois leaps to mind. Indeed, one could easily think of Richier as the bridge to Bourgeois, whose work, after all, has always sat uneasily amid the Constructivist aspects of Abstract Expressionist sculpture (typified, say, by David Smith), a discordance that long marginalized Bourgeois in the United States. With respect to a putative stylistic affiliation between Richier and Bourgeois, both cryptically code Expressionism as female, Constructivism as male—quite an achievement. In short, this awesome survey—let the teenage catchphrase pass—provided a new road map to contemporary sculpture, one filled with works that, unlike that demanded by today's conventional preferences, are totally without Conceptual irony and do not privilege Constructivism.

—Robert Pincus-Witten

Fortunato Depero

CENTER FOR ITALIAN MODERN ART

CIMA, the Center for Italian Modern Art, is a research resource that opened this past February in New York City. Its inaugural exhibition, which remains open until June 28, focuses on Fortunato Depero (1892–1960), a second-tier figure within Futurism, a first-tier art movement. Depero is a particularly apt opening choice, since his career is punctuated by two American sojourns, the first between 1928 and 1930, when his stylish fusion of Futurist motifs and Art Deco design seemed to predict a certain success here in skyscraper New York. The stock-market crash dashed those hopes. Following World War II, Depero briefly returned to the US, to New Milford, Connecticut, of all places, then still a milk stop for the state's waning dairy industry.

A provincial from Rovereto, in the Trentino region of Italy, Depero arrived in Rome in 1913, a bit after the glory years of Futurism; there, he fell in both with F. T. Marinetti, whose vile social values—masculinist, militaristic, and totalitarian—are memorialized in his inflammatory, still-influential Futurist Manifesto (1909), and with the more genial Giacomo Balla. Futurism, built on a Symbolist/Divisionist mode, came to encode signs of energy, speed, and movement, qualities ultimately replaced in the art of both Balla and Depero with a geometric fusion of the representational and the mechanical. In Depero's case, this particular aspect of his work emerges in the late 1920s and leads to daffy amalgamations oddly predictive of recent animated films such as *Toy Story* or *Cars*. His painting *Motociclista, solido in velocità* (Biker, Solidified in Speed), 1927, for all its nominal obeisance to Umberto Boccioni—think *The Dynamism of a Soccer Player*, 1913, for example—falls in line with the values of an Italy gearing up for Mussolini's brutal Abyssinian campaigns, as well as with an emerging worldwide fetishization of murderous airplane warfare.

The CIMA show mostly sidelines Depero's art of the 1930s, perhaps owing to its enthusiastic sponsorship by the Fascists; rather, the heart of the exhibition is Depero's more disarming work circa 1920. Deeply dispirited by Sergey Diaghilev's rejection of his stage decor and costumes for Stravinsky's *Le Chant du Rossignol* (1916–17)—the commission went instead to Matisse—Depero left Rome in 1919 and returned to Rovereto, where he and his wife cocreated a quasi-folkloric Futurism, inaugurating a period when he produced his best work, at least in the CIMA version of events. The couple set up a workshop for weaving, tapestry, cushion cases, applied designs of all sorts, a crafts-oriented

Germaine Richier,
L'Eau (Water),
1953–54, dark
patinated bronze,
57½ x 24¾ x 39¾".

