Germaine Richier Biography

Germaine Richier

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Biography

The French sculptor Germaine Richier (1904-1959) explored the metamorphic dimensions of the insect-animal world. Technically, she exploited the deteriorating surface and the interior, felt structure of things.

Born in Grans near Arles, Germaine Richier enrolled in the School of Fine Arts in Montpellier in 1922. After completing her studies in 1925, she left for Paris, where she became a private pupil of the sculptor Antoine Bourdelle for the next 4 years. Her work of the 1930s won several awards, including the Blumenthal Prize of 1936, yet the forms were essentially extensions of the more classical sculpture of her teacher.

In the 1940s Germaine Richier began creating the sculptural vocabulary for which she is best known, the classical rendering of the figure undergoing dramatic changes. *L'Eau* (*L'Amphore,* 1944) is partially a female form and partially a Greek vase. Similarly, the working of the piece changes from skeletal support in the lower portion of the piece to full female shape in the upper portion. This metamorphosis was carried further in the Insect series (*Spider* and *Small Grasshopper,* 1946) and found full expression in the *Bat Man* (1946), possibly the most powerful image of her career. Projecting from a central core are gauzelike wings, thinly threaded planes that suggest decay. This method of construction--an approach that defies both the material and gravitational limits--is one of many experimental techniques she used.

A more traditional freestanding figure conventionally modeled can be seen in the male *Thunderstorm* (1948) and the related female *Hurricane* (1949). These large metaphors of violent natural forces are now tamed, the expressive qualities being revealed in the expressionistic surface and dangling appendages. Another figurative treatment, closer to the eviscerated skeletal structures of Alberto Giacometti, can be seen in the *Large Don Quixote of the Forest* and the *Shepherd of the Landes* (both 1951).

Germaine Richier's formal language continued to enlarge and develop during the 1950s. She worked in stone, carving compact shapes with angular projections, as in the *Shadow of the Hurricane* (1956), seemingly an outgrowth of the more abstract "Bird Man" series of the early 1950s. Another set of problems, that of creating a context in the form of a perpendicular plane acting as a background or foil for smaller shapes played off against this plane, also found currency in her work at this time. She died in Montpellier.