

Germaine Richier. Retrospective

November 29 2013 to April 6 2014

Germaine Richier (1902–1959) once said about her art that humanity alone counted. No exhibition showing the developments of sculpture in the 20th century dares to overlook her work. Despite this, Germaine Richier is an exception to the rule as an artist. Her entire body of work is focused on humankind and ways of presenting it appropriately.

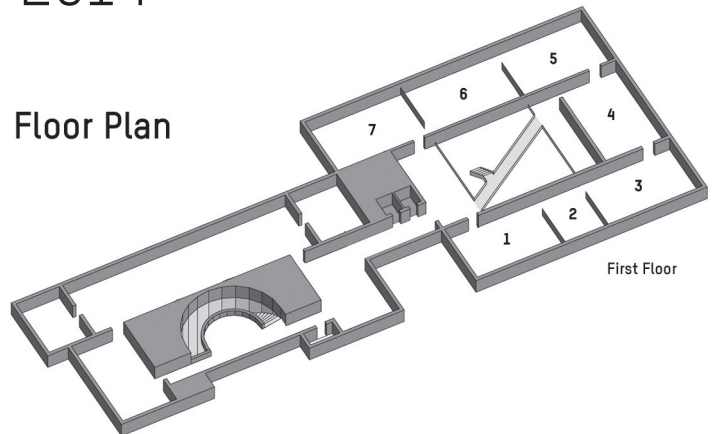
Richier explored the tradition of figurative sculpture in Paris as a private student of Antoine Bourdelle. From the 1940s onwards she pursued a highly independent and outstandingly manifold artistic path, spending periodic sojourns in Switzerland. It is therefore not easy to find a neat label to sum up her work.

Like Alberto Giacometti with whom she studied together in Bourdelle's studio, Richier is viewed by some as a representative of existentialism. The wires constituting the structural framework of her cracked and fissured figures, which reduce man to his existence alone, support such an interpretation. Richier, for her part, felt a close affinity to surrealism. Her *Nachtmenschen* (Nocturnal People), *Gottesanbeterinnen* (Praying Mantes) and uncanny hybrid creatures of women and amphora seem born of the very unconscious that the surrealists were in pursuit of.

Germaine Richier is renowned especially for her insect women, hybrid figures of ants, grasshoppers and spiders with human extremities, faces and breasts. The artist collected natural objects she found such as stones or pieces of wood that she fused into her sculptures. She fostered a fascination for nature while living in the centre of Paris, feeding on the myths and legends of the Provence region from whence she originally came. That is why Germaine Richier can still today be regarded as one of the first ecologically minded artists; humankind is part of creation and does not control it in her art.

The exhibition explores various aspects of her work in seven rooms. It is based on two key works by the artist from the Kunstmuseum Bern Collection. Additionally "guests" have been integrated from the collections of the Kunstmuseum Bern and the Kunsthalle Mannheim to expand the horizon of questions raised by Germaine Richier's extensive oeuvre. From May 9 until August 24, the exhibition is on display at the Kunsthalle Mannheim.

Floor Plan



- Room 1: Germaine Richier and the Figural Tradition
- Raum 2: Germaine Richier and the Divine in Humanity
- Room 3: Germaine Richier and Existentialism
- Room 4: Germaine Richier and Surrealism
- Room 5: Germaine Richier and Nature
- Room 6: Germaine Richier, Color and Technique
- Room 7: Germaine Richier and the Game of Life

Room 1: Germaine Richier and the Figural Tradition

From 1920 to 1926 Germaine Richier studied in Montpellier under Louis-Jacques Guigues, and subsequently, from 1926 to 1929, under Antoine Bourdelle in Paris. In turn, both teachers were students of Auguste Rodin, as was Henri Matisse too. Especially Bourdelle strongly influenced Richier's early work. She adopted his classical technique in constructing a figure by means of a web of triangles. Such a web is still discernable on several of her plaster casts from which she has later made statues of bronze.

The human figure has been the pillar of the art of sculpture since antiquity. In contrast to the fate of ancient painting, many ancient sculptures have survived and provided models for later periods. Thus the canons of antiquity impacted sculpture in particular. Germaine Richier was to remain true to the human figure in her entire oeuvre.

Room 2: Germaine Richier and the Divine in Humanity

In 1950 Germaine Richier created an altar crucifix for the Roman-Catholic church at Assy in Haute Savoie, which involved numerous other artists such as Georges Braque, Marc Chagall or Fernand Léger for its decorations. Richier set the body of Christ and the wood of the cross on a par in her crucifix. Of the small-version model exhibited here she once said: "yesterday, when I arrived in my studio at 5 o'clock in the morning and saw the figure of Christ made of plaster of Paris hanging there — how he spread his arms out over this world of plaster and bronze — I saw therein the invitation to believe in faith." To Richier's horror this artwork brought about one of the biggest art scandals of the Catholic Church. Critics of her work saw it as a slander against Jesus Christ. It was removed from its place

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above the altar and only in 1971 rehung at this location, 12 years after Richier's decease.

Germaine Richier never represented triumphant humankind in the way the Christian traditionalists saw it. She approached human nature from below as we can witness in the early figure of a nude woman she called *Le Crapaud*, the toad. With this title she also undermined the eroticism we associate with Auguste Renoir's or Edgar Degas' washerwomen, who in a similar way cower on the ground. Consistently the artist sides with the underdogs and less fortunate of society.

Room 3: Germaine Richier and Existentialism

The wires with which Germaine Richier constructs a support around some of her figures remind us of Francis Bacon's "cages". For example, in his portrait of *Pope II* a cagelike structure of lines describes the space in which the figure sits. Therefore Bacon's painting is often viewed as being connected to existentialist philosophy. The lines appear to function as a support while at the same time also qualifying and controlling the sitter. Existentialism seeks to make humankind conscious of the confines of its existence in order for it to acquire more freedom. Richier's use of wired web constructions can likewise be explained as the structural elements of the webs she had learnt to use from her teacher Antoine Bourdelle. In the case of *Araignée I* the wires are self-explanatory in that the spider weaves its web.

Room 4: Germaine Richier and Surrealism

Towards the end of her life Germaine Richier once classified her art stylistically for herself: "essentially my work is surrealist." The poet André Breton wrote the *Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924 and predicated surrealism on "psychic automatism". The surrealists, among whose few female followers Meret Oppenheim was one, sought to deactivate the control of reason to find a reality buried in the unconscious. In this reality things are combined in surprising ways. Like them, Richier put together things that otherwise appeared to be unrelated. Furthermore, she was strongly interested in the dark side of human nature. She transformed in *L'Homme-forêt* and *La Forêt* pieces of wood into body parts or gave a bust the title *L'Aigle*. However, Germaine Richier's art is not a product of spontaneous surrealistic inventions but rather the relentless exploration of mythical sources.

Room 5: Germaine Richier and Nature

Already very early in her childhood, Germaine Richier felt a strong affinity to nature. Her niece Françoise Guiter reported that "in her studio you could find a great diversity of insects, pieces of wood and stone, as well as herbs and plants that she collected over time. They were stacked one upon the other and in piles on the shelves together with all other kinds of things. Many of the items come from the area she grew up in, from the beaches near Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer where she loved to go and hunt for stones. These flotsam and jetsam were both a source of inspiration and an integral element of her sculptures."

In Richier's artworks nature was no longer simply beautiful as artists had generally perceived it for generations. The truth of Germaine Richier's reality embraces all the facets of life — also the strange, the uncanny, the ugly and the unfathomable. Breaking with conventions in this way demanded great strength especially for a woman because the aesthetics commonly expected of female artists and their work were very rigid, as they still often are today.

Room 6: Germaine Richier, Color and Technique

At the beginning of the 20th century, color was mostly not applied to sculptures. But Germaine Richier experimented with colored surfaces. Additionally she began to create figures within square-backdrop structures that were painted by artist friends such as Hans Hartung or Zao Wou-Ki. But at the same time she explored novel ways of making sculptures. For example, she soaked strands of hemp in molten wax and covered them with plaster, in this way creating delicate structures in the casts, such as in the perforated wings of *La Chauve-souris*. She also occasionally used lead

instead of bronze to cast statues, taking cuttlefish as molds (cuttlefish casting).

Room 7: Germaine Richier and the Game of Life

After a period in the late 1950s in which Richier, afflicted by illness, produced mostly only small sculptures, she made one last effort in large-format sculpture and executed *L'Echiquier, grand* in 1959, the year she died. The chessboard of these five playing pieces is the entire room. The life-size pieces of the king, queen, bishop, rook and knight highlight that we too are part of the game.

Biography Germaine Richier

1902

December 16: Germaine Richier was born in Grans near Salon-de-Provence (Bouches-du-Rhône). Her father came from the Provence region, her mother from Languedoc. She had four siblings.

1904

The family moved to Castelnauld-le-Lez near Montpellier, where Richier grew up on the family estate "Prado".

1920

She enrolled in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts of Montpellier, where she studied under Louis-Jacques Guigues (1873–1943), a former student of Auguste Rodin. She graduated with the "premier prix".

1926

Moved to Paris. She worked in the studio of Antoine Bourdelle (1861–1929), likewise a student of Rodin. There she remained until Bourdelle died.

1929

On December 12 she married the Zurich sculptor Otto Charles Bänninger, who was also employed in Bourdelle's studio. In her own Parisian studio (from 1933 onwards on Avenue de Châtillon in Montparnasse) she taught sculpture and art to students.

1934

First solo exhibition at Max Kaganovitch Gallery, Paris.

1936

For *Buste no. 2* Richier was awarded the Prix Blumenthal for sculpture of the Franco-American Florence Blumenthal Foundation.

1937

At the 1937 Paris World Exhibition she received the Médaille d'Honneur for *La Méditerranée*.

1939

Exhibitions in Paris, Brussels and New York. When World War II broke out in September, Richier was on holidays in Switzerland. She decided to remain there with her husband and rented a studio in Zurich. There too she took on students, among them Robert Müller.

1942

She created *Le Crapaud* with which her preoccupation with nature began. Solo exhibition in Winterthur.

1944

Exhibition in Basel together with Marino Marini, Fritz Wotruba and Arnold d'Altri.

1945

Exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zurich (together with Swiss female artists) and at the Kunsthalle Bern (together with Marini, Wotruba, Auguste Rodin, Aristide Maillol and Charles Despiau).

1946

In October Richier returned to Paris where she again taught students, primarily from Switzerland. She moved in literary circles associated with the influential journal *La Nouvelle Revue française*, among people such as André Pieyre de Mandiargues. Exhibitions in Geneva and Montreal. She began work on the now famous insect women such as *La Mante* and *L'Araignée I*.

1947

First show at "Salon de mai", where she continued to exhibit until the end of her life; exhibition at the Anglo-French Art Center in London et al.

1948

She completed *L'Orage* and began work on *L'Ouragane*. Exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel together with Hans Arp and Henri Laurens; exhibition at Maeght Gallery, Paris, et al.

1950

Her *Christ d'Assy* was set up behind the high altar at Assy, the church in Haute Savoie with decorations by Léger and Matisse and others. Exhibition at the 25th Venice Biennial et al.

1951

The *Christ d'Assy* was removed from the church due to strong conservative intervention. The piece of sculpture was only returned to its original and intended site as late as 1971. At the 1st São Paulo Biennial, Richier was awarded the first prize for sculpture. Arthur Rimbaud's *Une Saison en enfer* was published in Lausanne as an illustrated edition with 25 of Richier's etchings.

1952

Richier executed one of her most famous artworks, *Le Griffu*. She began working on joint projects with painters such as Hans Hartung and Zao Wou-Ki. She produced her first sculptures in lead. Exhibition at the 26th Venice Biennial et al.

1953

She executed *L'Eau*, her most surrealist artwork in the sense of the Parisian core surrealist group, whose methods of alienating the everyday comprised replacing a familiar entity (head) with some other commonplace object (jug).

1954

Married the author René de Solier. Exhibition together with Roger Bissière, H.R. Schiess, Maria Helena Vieira da Silva and Raoul Ubac at the Kunsthalle Basel.

1955

Richier's niece Françoise Guiter joined her in her studio after having often previously worked together with her aunt over a long period. Solo exhibition at Hanover Gallery, London, and at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, with Vieira da Silva.

1956

Exhibition at the Musée national d'art moderne in Paris.

1957

Critically ill, Richier moved close to Arles where she lived together with De Solier until her decease. Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

1959

Germaine Richier died on July 31 in Montpellier. Exhibition at Documenta I.

ACCOMPANYING PROGRAM

Public guided tours (in German)

Sunday, 11 a.m.: December 1 / 15 / 29, January 26, March 2, April 6
Tuesday, 7 p.m.: December 3, January 7, March 25

Guided tour with curator Daniel Spanke (in German)

Tuesday, February 11, 7 p.m.
No bookings required, admission free

Visites commentées publiques en français

Mardi 14 janvier, 19h30
Dimanche 16 mars, 11h30

Introduction for teachers (in German)

Tuesday, December 3, 6 p.m.
Bookings required: Tel.: 031 328 09 11 or
vermittlung@kunstmuseumbn.ch, price: CHF 10.00

A dialogue between art and religion (in German)

Sunday, March 2, 2014, 3 p.m.
Adrian Ackermann (Roman Catholic Church)
and Daniel Spanke (curator),
entrance fee: CHF 10.00

Beetle Workshop (in German)

Saturday, January 18, 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., in our art education Inspired
by Germaine Richier's sculptures we will create our own beetles,
ants and praying mantises out of aluminium, wire and much more. For
children from the age of 6 and adults.
Bookings required: Tel.: 031 328 09 11 or
vermittlung@kunstmuseumbn.ch, fee: CHF 10.00 per person

Into active station in the exhibition

By means of a computer program adapted to the exhibition you can
follow how Germaine Richier measured out her objects and figures
with the help of lines. In a playful way our visitors can adjust a vir-
tual triangular web system for themselves.

INFORMATION

Curators

Daniel Spanke, Jean-Louis Prat

Admission fee

CHF 18.00/reduced CHF 14.00

Private guided tours and schools

Tel.: 031 328 09 11, vermittlung@kunstmuseumbn.ch

Opening hours

Tuesday: 10 a.m.–9 p.m.
Wednesday–Sunday: 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

Holidays

December 25, 2013: closed
December 24 / 31, 2013 / Jan. 1 / 2, 2014: 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

CATALOGUE

Germaine Richier. Retrospektive / Germaine Richier. Rétrospective.

Eds. the Kunstmuseum Bern, Matthias Frehner, Daniel Spanke and
the Kunsthalle Mannheim, Ulrike Lorenz, Stefanie Patruno. With
contributions by Matthias Frehner, Corinne Linda Sotzek, Jonas
Jecker, Stefanie Patruno, Jean- Louis Prat and Daniel Spanke.
German and French, approx. 200 pages and approx. 90 illustrations.
Wienand Verlag, CHF 35.00.

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His excellency Michel Duclos, Ambassador of France in Switzerland