

VEDOVI GALLERY

GERMAINE RICHIER

By Alex Turgeon

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The sculptural work of artist Germaine Richier operates at the intersection between an exertion of degradation and a perpetual state of chrysalis. Rendered in illusory realms while maintaining a self-reflexive approach to making, Richier's sculptures describe the transition from materials into form. The Fourteen bronzes on display at Vedovi Gallery exemplify Richier's innovative pursuits that have spanned her artistic career. These works articulate the artist's fascination with figuration in which the definitions between external and internal subject become obscured.

Having preferred a classical approach to sculpture by working predominantly from live models in her studio, Richier locates an interior narrative within her subject and wrenches it into being through her deconstruction of the figure. The artist incorporates natural processes of decay with that of human existentialism, a theme that dominated artistic discourse during the years following the Second World War. Exemplified in the macabre chess pieces of the pivotal L'Echiquier petit (1953), her work describes moments of metamorphosis and decomposition from human into animal or vice versa as a means of illustrating the dehumanizing effects of war itself. In such works she transfigures her subjects into unearthly creatures by excavating a reflection on humanity in the wake of its own brutality, stating "we decidedly cannot conceal human expression in the drama of our time."¹

In her seminal work, *Le cheval à six têtes, grand* (1954-1956), on view in both large and small scale bronzes, Richier succeeds in collapsing time into a single permanent moment. This horse is quite literally a beast of six heads, however this piece can be described as a horse caught within isolated movement. Where photographer Edward Muybridge captured the stages of a horse in gallop within his pioneering work *Horse in Motion* (1878), Richier achieves movement within intersecting planes of manipulated form, successfully enabling *Le cheval à six têtes* to capture a static moment of motion within the round.

The sculpture of a single horse seems to emerge from the wake of an apocalypse, embodying a scene of panic and anxiety down to the sinewy decaying musculature of its internal armature. Trauma is embedded into the material from which the work will metamorphose, evoking the emotional aftermath that permeated postwar Europe. Richier defines this mythical creature as fantastical and yet familiar in a single breath: "all of my sculptures, even the most imaginary, always arise from something true, from an organic truth"². The artist describes perception as a definition of truth; the horse's many heads provide a rendering of the mythic, while simultaneously a single head repeated connotes a perspective on something found within the realm of the real, which perhaps is as equally unnerving.

Germaine Richier was born in Grans, France in 1902. She studied at the Ecole des Beaux- Arts in Montpellier between 1922 and 1925 under sculptor Louis-Jacques Guigues, a former assistant of the Auguste Rodin studio. After finishing her sculptural training in Montpellier she moved to Paris and was privately mentored by artist Antoine Bourdelle. In 1929 she married Swiss sculptor Otto Bänninger and in 1936, she won the Prix Blumenthal. At the outbreak of the Second World War Richier and her husband relocated to Switzerland where she met artists such as Alberto Giacometti and Marino Marini. She returned to Paris in 1946 and began developing her unique metamorphic style that defines her as distinct from her contemporaries. She continued to work and exhibit internationally until her death in Montpellier in 1959.

¹ Richier qtd in Selz, Peter. *New Images of Man*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 1959, p. 130.

² Richier qtd in Struab, Helena. *Giacometti, Richier, Gutfreund: Bourdelle et ses élèves*, Paris 1998, p. 30 (Translated from French).