

ArtSeen

# Germaine Richier

By [Richard Kalina](#)



Agnès Varda, *Germaine Richier dans son atelier*, Mars 1956. © Adagp, Paris, 2022. © succession Agnès Varda.

ON VIEW

**Centre Pompidou**

March 1–June 12, 2023

Paris

**Musée Fabre**

July 12–November 5, 2023

Montpellier, France

Germaine Richier's retrospective, recently closed at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and opening in July at the Musée Fabre in Montpellier brings back into public view a twentieth-century sculptor whose work feels especially relevant today. Richier (1902–1959) was well-known and well collected during her lifetime (she was, for example, the first living woman to be given a retrospective at the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris), but it was her misfortune to be compared to her exact contemporary, Alberto Giacometti—someone whose personality fit more easily into the mold of the troubled, romantic artist. After her premature death from cancer, her star faded and she slipped out of view. Richier's work bore some similarities to Giacometti's later elongated and highly worked figures, but she was very much her own artist, and her work seems more in tune with other significant contemporary women sculptors like Kiki Smith and Louise Bourgeois.

Richier was born in the small Provençal town of Grans, and raised in Montpellier, about seventy five miles to the east. Always a determined woman, she defied her family's wishes and studied art, first in Montpellier, and then in Paris, where she worked closely with Antoine Bourdelle, a prominent sculptor and student of Rodin's. Her time in Bourdelle's studio gave her a strong set of technical skills, necessary in an especially difficult medium. She successfully merged Expressionism with Surrealism in her cast bronze work, which found some of its most vivid expression in the creation of hybrid human and animal forms. The animals that she chose were rarely your typical domestic or heroic ones. No cats, dogs, polar bears, or tigers, but bats, grasshoppers, praying mantises, cuttlefish, ants, cicadas, and—like Bourgeois—spiders.



Germaine Richier, *La Chauve-souris*, 1946. Bronze naturel nettoyé, 35.8 × 35.8 × 20.5 inches. © Adagp, Paris 2022. © Musée Fabre de Montpellier Méditerranée Métropole. Photo: Frédéric Jaulmes.

*Large Mantis* (1946–51) is a human-scaled creature, executed in dark patinated bronze, and like so many of Richier's figures, has a scarred, prodded, and torn surface. It—or we might say, she—has four limbs (as opposed to an insect's six) and sits on her tail, her long arms folded at their claw-like hands. She has two breasts, one pendulous, the other shrunken, and leans toward us, her triangular head jutting forward aggressively. While not entirely accurate, it is a common notion that the female mantis devours the male after mating, something that the surrealists, fascinated by the nexus of sex and cruelty, found very much up their alley. Richier however, celebrates the mantis as a positive figure. Just as Bourgeois saw spiders as powerful and maternal, Richier depicts the mantis as a strong and assertive female.

Richier often used wires in her sculpture both to add a linear, geometric element, and to extend the figure by delineating the structure of the negative space it encompasses. Her *Spider I* (1946), for example, is a four-limbed female with hanging breasts and defined hands. Attached by her legs to a vertical section of log, she launches herself outwards, constrained (or supported) by the wires of her web. Wires also play an important psychological and formal role in *The Ant* (1953). The sculpture gives us a vertical creature with long, spindly legs and a striated back who seems to be playing a game of cat's cradle with its supporting wires. It is a disturbing image, but not as frightening as *The Devil with Claws* (1952). Inspired by Provençal folk tales, the figure—complete with an eagle's talon protruding from his right elbow and triangulating wires joining his hands and feet—hangs from the ceiling as if ready to swoop down and carry you away. Similarly affecting are the pierced and tattered *The Mandolin (Cicada)* (1954–55) and *The Bat* (1946), a torn, ragged, and sharp-edged bronze animal with spread wings and a naturally golden sheen: dead and desiccated, yet still menacing.

When Richier dealt more directly with the human figure, as she often did, her work tended to evoke the archaic and archetypal. *Storm Man* (1947–48) portrays a hulking, life-sized figure, pitted and roughly gouged out, seemingly formed from the earth itself, while *Water* (1953–54) replaces the neck of a headless female figure with an amphora shape, complete with handles. The surface of this vessel-woman's body is marked by the seaweed that Richier collected from a beach on Normandy and pressed into the wet clay before casting. With its full body, and spindly legs and arms, the sculpture possesses an archeological aura, as if it were recently excavated from some damp and ancient site.



Installation view: *Germaine Richier*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée Fabre, Montpellier, 2023. Courtesy Centre Pompidou.

A key task for modern sculpture has been to remove itself from stasis and objectness (and this, paradoxically, includes the work of Donald Judd and John McCracken, who accomplish the job with great elan.) For a sculptor like Richier, working out of the longer tradition of Rodin, the interplay between surface and form, materiality and metaphor provides a way of fully exploiting dimensionality, of producing an open-ended work that is not just a thing, a likeness, or a proposition. Her retrospective, which also includes drawings, prints, and paintings, presents an historically important artist in full command of her processes, sources, and materials. Richier, as this show makes abundantly clear, produced a body of work that is thought provoking, beautifully executed, and emotionally engaged.

## **Contributor**

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