

MUSIC/THE ARTS

4C

SUNDAY, MARCH 27, 1988

SUNDAY, MARCH 27, 1988

ART

Mystery, Familiarity In Work Of Ursula Von Rydingsvard

Her cedar sculptures, on exhibit at Laumeier, send messages that conflict intriguingly

By Patricia Degener
Post-Dispatch Art Critic

THE POWER of Ursula von Rydingsvard's sculptures lies in their conflicting messages. The forms themselves (rugged boxes, troughs and shovels) and the materials from which they are made (cut cedar beams treated to appear ancient and weathered) carry suggestions of sacrifice and violence, of survival and endurance. The scale and the materials work together to create pieces that are approachable, tactile, sensuous, natural. The forms bear the comforting familiarity of old-but-simple implements or structures, but the actual objects are iconographic, unsettling, mysterious and even scary.

"Urszulka," for example, consists of five low, wooden troughs with long handles laid side-by-side on a base. Like all von Rydingsvard's work, the sculpture is made from 4-by-4 beams of ordinary, lumber-yard cedar, laminated together. The wood is formed by the artist with chisels, mallets, grinders and circular saws. The troughs are given a coat of whitewash and each trough — though alike in shape — bears its own scars or markings, its own history.

What they most evoke, with their elongated handles, is the human form.

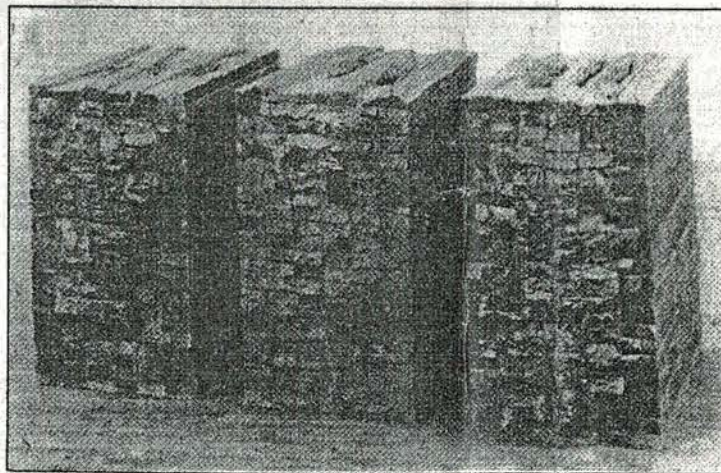
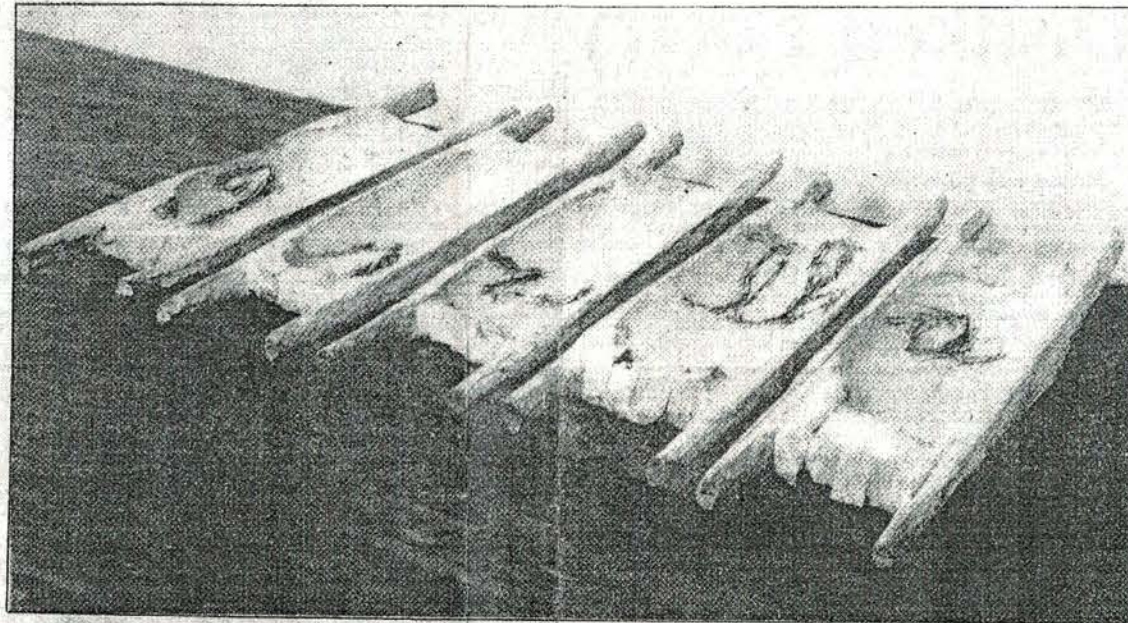
This work is a part of an exhibition of von Rydingsvard's sculptures and drawings at the Laumeier Sculpture Park Gallery, which continues through May 22. The artist is also at work on a site-specific installation work for the park — more about that later.

Von Rydingsvard is a member of the generation of women sculptors that includes Mary Miss, Alice Aycock and Jackie Ferrara. The work of this group has evolved from the tenets of minimalist formalism to include the personal and the mythical. This has widened options available to artists — it has increased the choices of formal means to express the content they are putting forth.

These artists have also chosen an architectonic vocabulary. They are, therefore, concerned not only with materials and methods of construction but also with exterior surfaces and interior spaces.

A minimalist stringency and the repetition of like, individual parts still inform this work. Von Rydingsvard, for example, hates color. She builds her pieces of neutral elements, gluing together beams of exactly the same dimensions. It is her transformation, her manipulation of surface — the wearing down, the staining or painting, the violation of the soft cedar — that imparts the element of the passage of time, of nature and of humanity to her work.

The long, low, rectangular "Box With Sliding Top" has irregular-edged walls; it looks like a slice taken from a cliff of slate. The smooth, flat-topped slides open like the top of an old-fashioned pencil box, which actually was

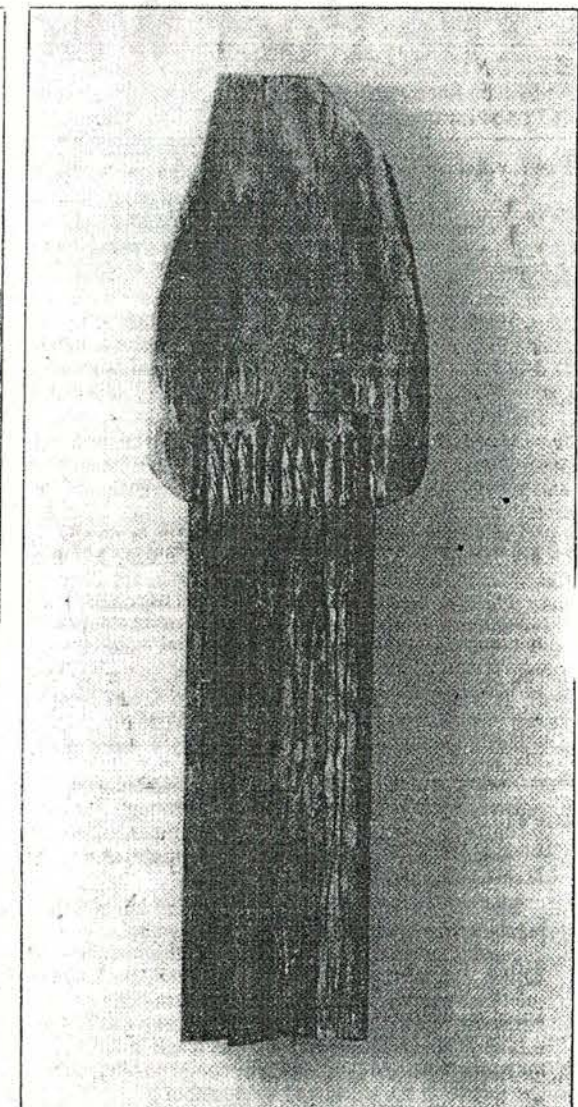


Among recent works by artist Ursula von Rydingsvard on exhibit in the gallery of Laumeier Sculpture Park are:

ABOVE: "Urszulka," cedar and paint, 1'6" by 10'7" (1986).

LEFT: "3 Boxes," cedar and graphite, 3' by 6'6" by 3' (1986).

RIGHT: "Untitled," painted cedar, 6'1" by 1'9" by 6" (1987).



its inspiration. It is a homely reference for a piece so strange and primitively tomb-like.

What, you ask, could it have once held? Do you want to know? If it is usual to speak about the space surrounding a piece of sculpture or the sculpture's relationship to space, these works seem to me to be surrounded by silence.

Von Rydingsvard describes her materials as honest and direct — wood, occasionally lead and gray felt. But both the forms and materials she has chosen relate directly to her childhood.

She was born in Poland and spent seven years in a German refugee camp before she came to America. Her father was a farmer and woodsman in Poland, and she equates her worn, rugged and totemic sculptures of shovels with her image of her father. That imagery — taken from the Polish farm — is a rural, peasant vernacular. When she uses felt, it is a reference to the

gray felt blankets hung on the walls of the refugee barracks for insulation.

The artist has written of the shock of coming to the hard, gray-cement world of New York when she was 9 years old. She writes she couldn't imagine the interiors of the huge brick buildings that lined the streets; she could not believe that they could serve as homes.

This is perhaps the reference in her "3 Boxes." The sculpture consists of three solid wooden boxes, all the same size but with the butt-end surface of each treated differently. The tops are crudely sawed open to form a grill, giving the boxes the appearance of cages. Though ancient and weathered in appearance, these objects have clearly been made with an intent. The mystery is the nature of the element of control evidenced by that intent.

Both the manipulation of surface and the element of catharsis in her work have been compared

with the work of German artist Anselm Kieffer. Kieffer's physically ravaged landscapes carry the violence of history in their markings, as do von Rydingsvard's surfaces. Both artists, sharing Northern sensibilities, let wood carry all its mythical and historical references. But von Rydingsvard uses no overt literary or historical references in her work. It is more intuitive, direct and personal.

The piece she is planning for the park consists of similar open wooden boxes, constructed of laminated cedar and layered rubber arranged in rows and placed on graphite-darkened concrete bases. The site is in a valley in the wooded area east of the main building. A stream flows through this valley and the sculpture will be built on a flat wedge of land east of the stream bed.

Underbrush is going to be cleared so that the work can be viewed from a path along the Eastern ridge; there will be footpaths through the rows of boxes.