

ARCHIVES | 1988

## Review/Art; Setting Free the Images In Big Beams of Wood

By MICHAEL BRENSON APRIL 1, 1988

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems. Please send reports of such problems to [archive\\_feedback@nytimes.com](mailto:archive_feedback@nytimes.com).

Ursula von Rydingsvard was born in 1942 in a village in north central Germany. Her father was a Polish peasant farmer with a feeling for wood who had been brought to Germany to labor on a collective farm. After the war, the parents and their seven children spent seven years in German refugee camps for Poles as they inched their way north to the port city of Bremerhaven, from where they sailed for the United States. The barracks in which they lived were made of wood. When Ms. von Rydingsvard became a sculptor in the mid-1970's, wood was her material. Her subject is memory.

Her sculptures at the Exit Art gallery are as uncompromising and physical in their own way as those of Richard Serra. Some are massive. The artist does not start with ovens, planks, chopping blocks, coffins and other images of claustrophobia and oppression; using wood almost as a psychoanalytical black forest in which she carves, chips and hacks away, she finds them. Her sculptural process has a great deal to do with release. Release is one of the effects she is after.

Ms. von Rydingsvard begins with 4-by-4 cedar beams as long as 24 feet. The wood is clean, naked, without the romance of tree trunks, without the precious associations many wood sculptors feel they have to work against. She attacks one beam, then another, with an array of tools, including circular saw, mallet and chisel. Sometimes she pieces strips and chunks together. Sometimes she builds with them as if they were children's blocks. Often she bonds them with glue. At the end, the beams are transformed. They suggest human and architectural bones. They seem inhabited. The dependence upon identical, serial shapes and the feeling for repetition grows out of Minimalism. But, like many post-Minimalist sculptors, Ms. von Rydingsvard wants the language of Minimalism to accommodate dimensions of experience it was determined to exclude. Louise Bourgeois's obsessive involvement with her personal and cultural past -and invention of environments in which visitors would be trapped in her past with her - seem to have given the younger sculptor a way of approaching Minimalism on her own terms. What interests both these European-born artists is not the sculptural skin, but the energy and violence repressed inside it.

The exhibition includes sculpture on walls, against walls and on the floor. Since Ms. von Rydingsvard's works are strongest when they enclose or contain space and cease to be objects, the reliefs are the least successful. In a more pointed way than the larger pieces, they seem part liturgical, part torture instrument. In the part-relief, part-freestanding "Grzebyk II (Comb II)," even a comb seems to be an active participant in a sculptural ritual in which violence and worship are intertwined.

One of the best freestanding pieces is "Umarles (You Went and Died)." It is more than 10 feet long and 6 feet high. Its nine upright blocks suggest a vertical section of a catacomb turned on its side. Each opening is also like a house that has been broken into, or a violated grave. But the power of the negative space is such that the houses and graves still seem full. From the back, the wood has ridges and swells that suggest the "Backs" of Matisse. Everywhere there are signs of a reality we cannot see.

The sculpture that makes the show and carries Ms. von Rydingsvard's career to another level is the last one she did. It consists of six upright, roughly conical forms, side by side, all about five feet tall. Each was made by cutting beams into small blocks, then carving and chipping away and assembling them into beehive-shaped structures that suggest ovens and bulbs and huts. The surfaces are coated with

graphite, which makes them seem airless. The forms seem to be marching toward us. The work is as menacing and enchanted as a Central European fairy tale.

The sculptures of Ursula von Rydingsvard remain at Exit Art, 578 Broadway, at Prince Street, through April 30. 'Blue Angel: The Decline of Sexual Stereotypes in Post-Feminist Sculpture' A. I. R. Gallery 63 Crosby Street Through tomorrow

This traveling show sets out to "shatter the stereotype that feminism is in any way monolithic," in the words of Juli Carson, who organized the show with Howard McCaleb. Its title comes from the film starring Marlene Dietrich, "whose sexual flaunting of man's mythological woman" is seen by Ms. Carson as a "deconstruction of patriarchal values." Once the exhibition declares that it is about the diversity of sculpture by women with roots in the feminist movement, however, the selections seem arbitrary. Choosing artists who, according to Ms. Carson, exemplify a "specific aspect of feminist-related sculpture" also gives the show a restricted quality that undermines its argument for the existence of a new kind of openness.

The high point in the show is the dialogue between Faith Ringgold's "Three in a Bed" and Maren Hassinger's "Blanket of Branches." Ms. Ringgold fabricates and composes with small dolls. In "Three in a Bed," a black woman is reading to her three children, who are listening in rapt attention while sharing a convertible bed with a teddy bear as big as any of them. It is a work of humor and flair in which everything, including the fabrication, scale and characterization, has a point. Ms. Ringgold pulls her blanket over the children; Ms. Hassinger pulls her blanket of twigs over the gallery, suspending it just below the ceiling. While Ms. Ringgold's sculpture is taut and specific, Ms. Hassinger's installation is generalized and expansive. It uses fragile natural forms to bring to the show a general urgency and calm.

The tension between general and specific may be the real subject of this show. Deborah Masters's sculpture is one of several works involved with sexual and social stereotypes. It brings to mind the earthy, idealized women by Maillol. But Ms. Masters's woman is heavy-set, and her Hydrocal seems not smoothly modeled but almost hacked into shape. The modesty of this different kind of woman is monumentalized by her large scale. The works on paper by Mary Ting are more abstract. They have a gentleness, spaciousness and calligraphic quality that suggests Chinese painting. But they are also filled with lines and shapes that are tough and cutting. The tension between something very specific and very general gives these

works a welcome edge. Sandi Slone Stephen Rosenberg Gallery 115 Wooster Street  
Through tomorrow

This show charts a journey that is leading Sandi Slone further and further from her Formalist roots. The earliest paintings grow out of a trip to China, during which the artist was captivated by the shapes, surfaces and ritual purpose of Chinese vessels. The spaces of her paintings of pots are unencumbered, the surfaces plain. Then the number of pots increases. Lids and vessels begin to suggest bodies and heads.

When Ms. Slone went to Barcelona, Spain, her surfaces began to be encrusted in a way that suggests Gaudi. Embedded within them are pictographs inspired by contact with Catalonian wall paintings and perhaps with French semiotics. Like her paintings of pots, these works swirl. The speed of the movement increases. There is a sense that it will not stop.

Finally, there are the more recent abstract works. They are still heavily encrusted. One painting is called "The Story of the Eye," surely an allusion to Georges Bataille, the influential French philosopher and poet. Sensuality and violence swirl in a way that is almost vertiginous. These promising and provocative paintings are about desire so strong that it can no longer be contained within them.

A version of this review appears in print on April 1, 1988, on Page C00032 of the National edition with the headline: Review/Art; Setting Free the Images In Big Beams of Wood.