

Vulnerability and ritual live in cedar forms

Ursula von Rydingsvard was a child of the camps, a displaced person from her birth in 1942. Her parents were Poles who had been taken from their village by the Nazis to labor on a collective farm in Germany. After the war, the family lived in refugee camps,

moving from one to another until 1950 when they were allowed to immigrate to the United States.

"As a kid, you feel like a helpless victim," she says now. "You are at the mercy of larger forces." Comfort and security had to come from within, from her parents and six sisters

and brothers, from her church and the simplest rituals of daily life.

It is on these conflicting emotions — tremendous vulnerability, mastered in the end by the closest of human ties and rituals — that von Rydingsvard bases her art. Her large-scale wood sculptures, on exhibit at the Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum through April 9, are mesmerizing and touching. Intensely personal because they relate von Rydingsvard's own experiences, they are also archetypal in their forms. They invite the caress of the hand yet exude a self-inflicted violence. They take a child's vantage point of wonder but mix it with fear. Their scale is overwhelming or comforting — or sometimes both simultaneously. They are magical, private talismans, and yet they are public and direct.

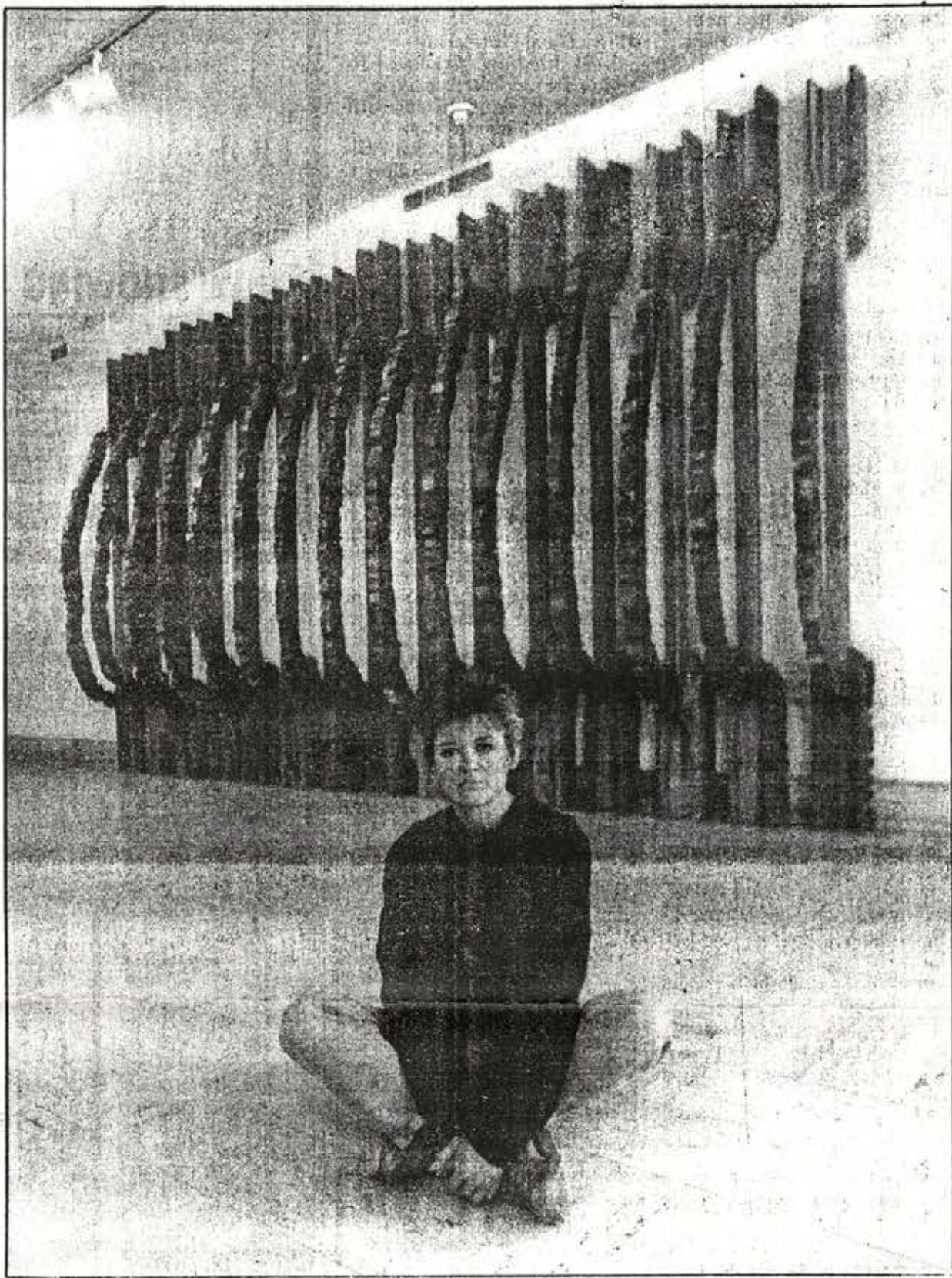
"I grew up in a situation where words didn't count a lot," she says. "My parents were more or less illiterate. Spoken words were usually connected to basic existence. So the environment and objects were more my reality. I was tremendously attached to objects like butter tubs or washboards, wooden spoons or shovels — objects that had nothing to do with machinery and everything to do with the hand. Many of the buildings were very basic, built by the soldiers, often of raw wood."

Her sculptures are either objects, abstracted and in multiples, that resemble scoops, plows or carts, or basic architectural forms, recalling rural buildings, that are part tent-like or semipermanent and part vernacular design.

The work is always of milled cedar beams because they are sheered of natural beauty, allowing von Rydingsvard to add the character. Cedar is also soft, fragrant and without much grain so she digs into it, carving forms, making marks with chisels, saws, grinders and mallets to add handmade textures and so bring life back to something man made raw. "I think the tactile is one of the things that saves you," she says. "(You) know you are a person (when you) have a surface you can feel. . . . My surfaces save me."

Her sculptures look used because she paints them with a coat of graphite or whitewash. "It is use that is appropriate, and I guess there is a little of abuse, too," she says.

She often will do the same form over and over, partly to exorcise the memories and partly for rhythm and



GEORGE WALDMAN/Detroit Free Press

Ursula von Rydingsvard and her sculpture "Oj dana Oj dana," which is one of her works on display at the Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum through April 9.

ON DISPLAY: *The Cranbrook Museum, 500 Lone Pine Road, Bloomfield Hills, is open 1:30-5 Tue.-Sun. An exhibition of smaller works by von Rydingsvard opens Saturday at the Feigenson-Preston Gallery in Birmingham.*

emphasis. It's an idea that grew from her interest in American minimalist art. "Oj dana Oj dana," which consists of a row of tall, double-scooped digging forms, is one example of how she repeats forms. "It's more powerful with multiples," she says.

"Untitled," a wonderful, tall, narrow little house with a landscape carved on the outside and a cupboard filled with forks, spoons and dishes carved on the inside, is loaded with nostalgia for the security of hearth and home. "My mother came from hill people known for their whittling and their homes," von Rydingsvard says. "They were very cozy, with handmade lace curtains and the woodwork all

carved. I went back there a few years ago and found her home."

The sculpture recalls those places. It's also shaped like an altar, with carving that begins low enough for a child to view directly. Its emphasis on eating is important in von Rydingsvard's world; mealtime was a central ritual of the camps.

The other two sculptures in the show — "Ignatz Comes Home" and "3 Boxes" — show a more violent side. "Ignatz," a triangular roof form, has the grayness and gnawing devastation of a landscape riddled by war. The boxes look like prison cells.

That Von Rydingsvard can make both tender and harsh sculptures is her way of dealing with and triumphing over the past. Her work has the authenticity of first-person experience. And even if you don't know the specifics of her life, the message of her work — about surviving on the edge of despair — is wrenchingly clear.