



## Cedar sculptures leave impression of beauty, protection and foreboding

By Corinne Abatt  
staff writer

If you told Ursula Von Rydingsvard that you felt secure and protected in the shadow of her large cedar sculptures, she'd be pleased. They're part of "Sculptural Contrasts," an exhibition at Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum through April 8.

There's something comforting about some of these large works of wood with the pale interior flesh exposed and the exterior lightly toned with graphite or washed with paint.

One exception is the three large cedar boxes with narrow openings in the top. They are intimidating in their suggestion of container-like holding places with barely room to move and no way out. Rydingsvard came from her home in New York City to supervise the installation of her four works in one of the largest galleries in the Museum.

It looked like enough lumber to build a log house except that each piece of wood is carefully numbered, shaped, marked with cuts from her circular saw, toned or painted.

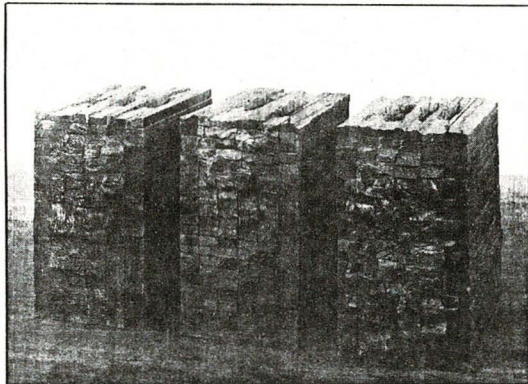
She said she likes to work with 2 by 4s which she glues together and then cuts, chisels and coaxes into becoming part of a large rugged sculpture that is reminiscent of some form or structure from the past, but not readily identifiable.

**SHE WAS BORN** in 1942 to a Polish farm family who were quickly swept up and forced to live in forced-labor and refugee camps in Germany. They managed to come to the United States when she was 10 and settled in Plainville, Conn., a name she said aptly described the community as she knew it.

"I come from Slavic peasant farmers for many generations," she said with an air of pride.

It's possible to draw parallels between her background and her art — the purposeful rough edges, the constant suggestions of strength and durability, the organic material, the respect for the medium, the earth colors and the sheltering, protective attitudes which some of her works have. Yet, there are those boxes — those strange, unsettling boxes.

While she comes out of a mini-



Large boxes with openings at the top illustrate the beauty of the cedar and the sculptor's fine eye for surface texture, but they have an intimidating presence.

malist art background, her works have human relationships, they are part of a world occupied by people and this occupation is suggested in many ways.

She stood beside a long triangular, floor piece that was about to have large semisculpted and painted pieces laid on one side and some different pieces placed in corresponding positions along the other side. Each viewer brings a different point of view to this sculptural Rorschach — fortress, stockade, sod shanty or ominous line of prisoners before a firing squad.

"I have a tremendous liking for vernacular architecture — what these people needed and felt about the earth," she said.

She quickly passes through the years she studied painting at University of Miami (Coral Gables) and University of California and her first marriage to make her strongest statement, "My life began in 1973 in New York City."

**THAT WAS** when she went to Columbia to get her MFA and began to work as a sculptor. At first she worked with steel, but wasn't comfortable with it. Then a friend at the university found some cedar on sale and brought it to her.

The attachment was immediate. "Cedar keeps still," she said a hand resting on a piece of it. "The

dark on the outside contrasts with the inside almost like an open wound or an open mouth. It's easy to cut. It doesn't resist. There's no grain to detract."

But why does a person so inherently linked to the land by her ancestors and so conscious of that link in her art live in New York City and have a studio in Brooklyn?

"It is extremely important that I live in the city," she said with startling intensity. I keep reacting to it — it's tough, relentless. . . ."

It is those strident, jarring city forces which move her to build the softer, wood forms. She questioned whether she would continue to work in the same way if she moved out of the city, "I need it so much."

**HER LARGEST** work in the exhibition, which occupies a sizeable part of one very long wall, has a long line of tall cedar stanchions against the wall which support arcs made of blocks from 2 by 4s that bow out into the room. It is massive, unrefined, captivating and strangely, almost irresistibly graceful.

She is adamant when explaining why she glues the 2 by 4s together, often into log size pieces rather than simply starting with a log in the first place.

Being able to manipulate and arrange the elements is a major rea-



Ursula von Rydingsvard touches up a section and circular saws to mark the surface and of a three-sided sculpture that visitors may shape her large works of art. She uses chisels, mallets, grinders

son and the most pragmatic. But there is an emotional reason as well, "I would feel impotent in the face of this wondrous thing," she said quietly.

Her works are in the collections

of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum. She was formerly on the Yale University faculty and now teaches at the School of Visual Arts of New York. She had a National Endowment for

the Arts grant in 1986-87 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1983.

Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, 500 Lone Pine, Bloomfield Hills, is open 1-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Admission is charged.