

Art/Kay Larson

INSIDE OUT

“... Within nature, Von Rydingsvard's cedar performances find a sympathetic circumstance, one she subliminally recognizes. . .”

IN JUNE, AS ANYBODY WILL TELL YOU, indoors and outdoors are two separate genres. What translates well in one may be slightly at odds in the other—like black tie at the beach. The line is drawn with some force at Storm King Art Center, in Mountainville, north on the New York State Thruway from Manhattan. Indoors, in the old mansion, are episodes in the decade-and-a-half career of Ursula von Rydingsvard. Outdoors, where perfect chartreuse lawns roll languidly toward forests and mountains, there are four massive hewn-cedar monoliths poised like natural artifacts within earth and sky.

To someone mainly (or entirely) familiar with Von Rydingsvard's work inside a gallery, the metamorphosis of her outdoor sculpture is fascinating. The two aspects are related like caterpillars to butterflies: genetically identical, yet different in kind. Her sculpture indoors generates arguments, pro and con, about the organic and metaphoric bases of her art. But the outdoor work stops arguments altogether; it's a massive and unquestioned presence—as though, like the best outdoor sculpture, it has been mashed together out of the stuff of the universe.

Von Rydingsvard arrived in New York in the seventies, at a point when some of her fellow artists had begun to run out of patience with the cold, serial, industrially fabricated look of minimalism. Not quite ready, perhaps, to drop out and grow vegetables on a commune, this new batch of sculptors nevertheless turned to older, more romantic, more handworked construction methods, and to the kind of earthy humanist metaphors their predecessors had deliberately scrapped.

So Von Rydingsvard starts her sculpture with a minimalist construction unit—a cedar four-by-four—but then stacks, dowels, and glues it, all the while flailing away with power saws. A video interview at Storm King shows her marking cedar pieces with a pencil and tossing them to her workmen, who chop them in a frenzy of electric mayhem. The outdoor works and some indoor pieces are then scoured with powdered graphite and wire brushes, leaving a silvery-black skin. The process is massively labor-intensive, visceral, and concentrated—something like playing professional tennis, you imagine.

Like much of the other organic-based



FORM WITHOUT FUNCTION: The artist's ENE DUE RABE.

sculpture originating in the seventies, these pungent stacks of perfumed wood send off a message about touch and craft meant to reverberate down long corridors of history and usage. The inside pieces hang on the wall (a shovel, a trough), stand on the floor (a chair, a set of bowls, stacked cones); or lie down (a set of coffins or stretchers). Always, they point in half a dozen directions at once. *Zakopane*—in Polish, the word means “to bury something forever”—appears torn from the wall of an ancient timbered stable, with its long row of troughs under a diagonal brace of roof rafters.

Zakopane, the best of the indoor works, is filled with a subsonic roar of alienation, almost a medieval disquiet. It relates back to the hewn-beam architecture of peasant-built Europe, a place of pigsties and mud, of hard labor under brute conditions, of physical limits constantly met. In medieval paintings you can sometimes get a sense of the clamor of that life, so clotted with the physical—with unanesthetized childbirth, disease, and death—that the promise of transcendence was the mind's only freedom.

Von Rydingsvard, now as American as any of us, was born in Germany of Polish émigré parents and spent most of her first

decade in European refugee camps, a history that doubtless gives her an unusual feeling for origins. There is anxiety in her work, also mourning and loss—sometimes a little too much of it. Symbols this emphatic are obliged to be obvious: coffins, boats, bowls, and so on. In her smaller pieces, she is frequently carried away by this need to say something. The stories bear a freight of sentiment and, therefore, constantly skirt the sentimental. The absence of mystery is caused by the presence of too much thoughtfulness.

Organic sculpture categorically looks a little odd in the clean, dematerialized, intellectual white space of a gallery or museum. It's a clash of fundamental forms: ancient intuition versus the modern microchip mind. So it's interesting to see what happens outside, in a genuinely primal place.

There, where trees and rocks grow cell by cell and mud layer by mud layer, this nomadic work somehow finds its peace. Nature is incremental but not orderly. The local mountains are built of shale that voluntarily splits into sheets. The trees leaf out in tiny units of cellulose and chlorophyll. Within nature, which performs its own version of stacking and eroding, Von Rydingsvard's cedar performances find a

naturally sympathetic circumstance, one the artist subliminally recognizes. The lesser themes and distractions drop away. Thus the dignity and wholeness of the outdoor pieces. Part (cedar) tree, part (pulverized graphite) stone, these pebbled eminences seem to have sprouted like mushrooms from the wet earth.

The two horizontal works hug the ground line and, for that reason, retain some echo of human use. *ENE DUE RABE* (Polish for "one two three") is a thick paving of boatlike units, seven across and fourteen deep, but its function is obscured and it's simply intense, like a set of unexplained excavations. Farther out on the lawn, poised at the peak of a long hill, is *Land Rollers*—a kind of "corduroy road" of logs (really, glued-up cedar simulations of logs)—which serves to funnel the force of the horizontal dimension down the distant allée of maples in Storm King's meadow and out into space.

But the thrust of the local landscape is skyward, and so the two pieces that lift themselves upward are the most momentous. *Five Cones*, which resembles five people jammed shoulder to shoulder, has a lighter-than-air presence, like side-by-side tornadoes. Both characteristics have something to do with the work's humanity: The human shape and the force field of energy, together, make an identity.

In the end, Von Rydingsvard stops counting. *For Paul*, a massive stack of eroded cedar, is roughly the size of a giant redwood stump, but layered and weathered like a mountain gully. It's both sculpture and natural presence. To make a work so "about" nothing takes nerve. More nerve, in fact, than you can imagine. The sculptor has to be ready. *For Paul* is a summation and, ideally, a propulsion into sculpture's first rank.

To discover what "first rank" is about, you can take the hint offered by *Land Rollers* and walk down the hill, through the maple allée, to the far end of Storm King's property, where there is a new, permanent installation by **Richard Serra**, premier minimalist. *Schummunk Fork* is four thick steel sheets, partly buried in a gentle hillside. Cold-rolled by machine—not handcrafted or romanticized—the steel shares its monumental indifference with the landscape it occupies. It emerges from the ground like an outcropping, yet it's been consciously and purposefully placed (along eight-foot topographic lines descending the hill). It's not "about" anything, either, but it commands both space and time in its wild meadow.

Sculpture that tells no stories but its own is a sculptor's final aim. But as *For Paul* demonstrates, you can get there from many roads. (Storm King is about an hour and a half by car from Manhattan. For directions, call 914-534-3115. Von Rydingsvard's outdoor sculpture is on view through the summer of 1993.)