

Review/Art

Intimations in Wood of Ritual and Refugee Camps

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MOUNTAINVILLE, N.Y. — The sculptures of Ursula von Rydingsvard, on view indoors and outdoors in a retrospective here at the Storm King Art Center, can bring different things to mind. Some of them resemble giant spoons; others look like thrones or tombs or stretchers or huge rock formations. Her material of choice is wood, particularly 4-by-4 cedar beams, which she cuts, stacks, glues and stains. She uses chain saws the way other artists use chisels. The process, which can involve a team of assistants, is labor intensive and craft oriented.

The result, as this show makes clear, is uneven. But at their best, her sculptures seem possessed by a dark and affecting emotionality.

Ms. von Rydingsvard was born in 1942 on a collective farm in Deensen, Germany. Her father was a Ukrainian-born peasant farmer who, with his wife and children, left Poland for Germany in 1938. After World War II, the family lived in a series of camps for displaced persons until making its way to New York in 1950. Ms. von Rydingsvard grew up in Connecticut. Her family was devoutly Roman Catholic, and the ambiance and ritual of the church clearly left a powerful mark on her art. So, too, apparently, did the camps, with the rugged architecture of their wooden barracks.

Her career began in the mid 1970's. Like other artists before her who had become dissatisfied with what she has called the "antiseptic" character of Minimalism, Ms. von Rydingsvard sought a way to introduce touch and a sense of personal drama into her work. The sculpture that emerged retained aspects of Minimalism, with its essential units like the cedar beams, its rhythmic repetition of elements and its architectural references. But it also alluded to history and myth and individual sensation. An early work like "Song of the Saint" (1979), for instance, consists of dozens of unevenly cut cedar beams corralled within a taller Minimalistic grid of regular beams. The uneven beams recall flickering flames and the regular ones posts of a platform, suggesting a funeral pyre, as if for the unnamed saint in the title.

"Song of the Saint" is only 23 inches high, yet it projects a sense of large scale that Ms. von Rydingsvard would often exploit in her sculpture of the 1980's. "Zakopane" (1987), the most impressive of the indoor sculptures here, is more than 22 feet wide and 11 feet high. It presents an imposing wall of painted cedar, across the bottom of which is a row of wooden containers, like sacks, and across the top of which is a row of diagonal beams projecting into the room. The sculpture can bring to mind a choir stall ripped from a old village church. It has the feel of something at once imposing, even frightening, in its size,



Jerry L. Thompson

Ursula von Rydingsvard's "Land Rollers," cedar, at the Storm King Art Center.

and also ingratiating in its hand-made construction.

Ms. von Rydingsvard's works are very much about sensation, about the tactility of the scarred, chopped, rough wood and the aromatic smell of the cedar. They are also about a process of metamorphosis: she uses not raw wood, but pre-cut beams, which she turns back into evocations of nature. Her goal, she has said, is to make sculpture "look a little as though nature might have brushed through it." She says she wants "to bring it closer to nature but not to repeat nature."

Thus "Girlie Girl" (1991) presents what resembles a tall, craggy rock face with a series of handles that

underscore the paradox of natural and man-made. And the best of the new outdoor sculptures, "Land Rollers," both complements the surrounding landscape and retains its independence from it. It consists of an orderly row of simulated logs poised at the crest of a hill, echoing the great horizontal sweep of the landscape as it extends through an allée of maples in the distance.

Not all of her sculptures are persuasive. Evoking pain, loss and memory, Ms. von Rydingsvard often courts melodrama, as with "Dreadful Sorry" (1987-88), in which a row of shapes resembling giant knives rest in containers that suggest cups for victims' blood. One may admire the artist's psychological and metaphorical ambition, and yet feel that the

jagged and artfully scarred, weathered surface of many of the sculptures becomes a device, a generalized evocation of something expressive that loses its punch when seen over and over again, as it is in this exhibition. Some of Ms. von Rydingsvard's art is so general as to open itself to any and every interpretation. Still, in the end she is a serious artist who has produced some powerful sculptures in the last 15 years, and this ambitious tribute deserves to be seen.

"Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture," at the Storm King Art Center, Old Pleasant Hill Road, Mountainville, N.Y., closes on Oct. 31, although the outdoor works will remain on view through the summer of 1993.