Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Land Rollers*, 45" x 171½" x 670" cedar, 1992. Installed at Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY. Photo: Jerry L. Thompson.

URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD

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It may be in part the result of my own childhood experience of the world that the recent, towering, dense wood structures of Ursula von Rydingsvard speak to me with such resounding depth and clarity. I was brought up in the English countryside, where even today the Middle Ages are never very far from the eye. The crumbling ruins of castles and the Gothic towers of churches loom up everywhere, and nature shares the landscape with barns and stables which date back beyond memory. Their rough wood siding is warped and patched, and silvered with the weather of the centuries, and they exude the sweet, pungent smell of creosote-soaked wood which von Rydingsvard's exterior sculpture recalls with such intensity.

During World War II, our neighboring farms were worked, too, with the help of foreign labor—Polish refugees and German prisoners of war, who seemed to us children at once earthy, exotic, and vaguely threatening. Often these men spoke no English, but in spare moments they would whittle such wonders as pecking chicken toys, and pass them on to us with silent, enigmatic smiles. Von Rydingsvard as a child was over on the side they came from, in the infinitely more dangerous, battle-scarred landscape of central Europe which her work also recalls. Born of displaced Polish parents during the war, one of seven children of a devoutly Catholic father, she spent the first eight years of her life on a dreadful family trek through labor and refugee camps—a life which surely exposed her to the primitive roots of the European psyche far more powerfully than my own.

To judge by von Rydingsvard's accounts, the family's survival depended on two things: first, the basic physical skills of mastering the environment—skills as elemental as construction and husbandry; and second, the unitary strength of a family held together by the father's peasant farmer heritage—an iron will and fervent religious faith. This is the deep-running physical, emotional, and spiritual vein which von Rydingsvard mines today. A survey at Storm King Art Center from May through October this year offered the visitor the opportunity to follow the direction her work has taken since the late 1970s, and at the same time made it possible for the artist to generate several large-scale new works specific to the site—a valuable opportunity on both sides.

Some of the earliest work included in the Storm King exhibition made it clear that the artist's aesthetic vision was shaped in the first instance by the heritage of Minimalism. *Song of a Saint*, 1979, for example, is a floor-level sculpture constructed of unadorned upright lengths of two-by-two inch cedar set side-by-side. Its base forms a simple rectangle, neatly gridded by twelve sawed-off pilings of equal length. In between, however, the uprights are somewhat shorter, and of less regular length. Their top ends are hewn into splintered points and bristle upward to meet our gaze like tightly serried spines or flickering flames, subverting the tidy control of the Minimalist block. Their thorny density unsettles us with its evocation of a martyr's pyre, or a bed of nails.

Von Rydingsvard retains this formal context of overall geometric form, serial progression, and the unadorned, even crude simplicity of presentation in all her later work. These features seem to provide her with a familiar framework in which to contain the expressive power and the tightly packed emotional density of her work. As Michael Brenson suggests in the exhibition catalogue essay, based in part on interviews with von Rydingsvard, it is perhaps this density that she admires in Giotto: "She likes 'the ingenious way' he 'was able to contain emotions, emotions that were so complex.' He was able, she says, to share these emotions 'in powerful ways, but again not overwhelm you. They weren't sloppy.' She believes in restraint."

in a way, going out the other side. It also has a unique look, yet I went in with exactly the same kind of format that I have used with all my other sculptures. In other words, I used the same vocabulary.

When I began the work for the Sony Music Campus, I had to get used to the fact that it is *not* an academic campus. That term is simply new architectural terminology for a grouping of buildings. The campus includes buildings which house *Epic Records*, *Columbia Records*, and two world-class Sony recording studios. It is definitely state-of-the-art in all respects.

There is clearly a musical connection between your work for Sony and the function of "The Sony Music Campus"—what is it about?

A musical connection has always been with me. Over the years there has been a reoccurrence of these forms.

And so, with this new commission, you began to work on the refinement of musical symbols and images that had been a part of your vocabulary for some time?

Yes, I started to bring them back into the manner in which I draw shapes. It has been a matter of going into that and working with my personal body of information—and then turning it back out again in a new way. As I started to work on the gates for Sony, they began to have quite a unique appearance that had music and movement to them. And, depending upon who looks at them—they get a really heavy musical hit. If you really look at the work, that sensibility is quite literal, and at the same time, it doesn't actually exist!

Do you play an instrument?

I used to play, but not significantly. I really enjoyed making music. I guess I stopped because of...other focusing. It wasn't a life force for me the way sculpture is.

That's interesting, because the other day when we were looking at the works in your studio, and you said "I don't want to work that edge," clearly you were conscious of that musical edge—and that is perhaps what makes the difference. There is a world of difference between what is literally *a musical symbol and what is* referential*—which of course must take into consideration the fact that musical notes are symbols to begin with.*

I *considered* the *literal* use of music in the work. My friend Andy Summers, who is a very experimental musician, and I talked about a piece of music that would be based on the model. But even though that reference seemed very interesting, the more I thought about it, the *less* connection I wanted with music. I wanted the piece to be devoid of visual references that are pinned down to some other discipline. I wanted to stay completely in the realm of the visual, and not have this heavy anchor to qualify it. I have never needed that qualification.

How did you come up with the concept of Sculptural Gates *as opposed to simply a gate?*

Historical artists have adorned gates, and it seemed kind of pointless to do that again. I needed to have a new set of rules that I really felt strongly about. I changed the rules around a bit so that you have to *penetrate* the sculpture in order to get onto the site. Now: true, it is *still* a gate and there *is* a moveable section, however I didn't approach the rest of it that way: they are not gate apertures, and they are not a series of repeated shapes; they are, however, interconnected works.

The essence of sculpture—its reason for being—is that it exists in physical space. An *energy* has to exist there somehow, or it becomes just an illusion. I feel very strongly that sculpture has to be responsible for the space it consumes. This is what has always been very seductive to me about making sculpture—because it is a factual placement of real things on the earth, and they consume space. Now, some pieces work better than others, and I think it has something to do with how sculpture draws the viewer in. It is a matter of a somatic relationship with the work: you can *feel* how things go. In our bodies we feel how shapes look: sharp pointed objects we feel somewhere in our solar plexus—and the placement of certain weights on certain levels we feel in our shoulders. There are all kinds of figurative references to that, but specifically, we do understand and feel weights.

I like the result of a composition that comes about from a series of elements that are in the process of holding and balancing and positioning, as well as tearing themselves apart. "Where are you going to *take* this, and how are you going to *get* there?" Part of the system of choices is based on the answer to those questions. For example: I make *this* choice because it will make *that* work. I sometimes think that this is a very arbitrary situation. A lot of it is the simple fact that I could go back and look at some of my earlier work, and *prove* to you which choices have worked. Because it is about choices—it's about thinking it through ahead of time. I go through all the mental files in my head when I make choices—but I do it on a less than conscious level. It's about what *not* to do, it is not about what *to do*. I am still trying to figure that one out. But I do know now alot of what *not* to do.

Because I do not make sculpture, I have no verbal way to ask this question—but I am fascinated about where images come from...

So far, I think I know where images come from—but I don't know where they are *going*. So, you see, you just can't ride that out all the way at full speed. And that is where I have to slow it down, and make selections about which one to take, and how far to go with that.

Where do images come from? I contend that there is a lot of mystery involved. A lot of it I don't understand. It is not as if I were looking for a solution to adjust a composition, to make things really fly—or to make *this* end of a work have the kind of weight it needs to correct the relationship at *that* end. It is not as if I am doing as a computer does—reviewing a set of possibilities. I actually wait for something to occur—which is what I don't understand...I project into my system certain kinds of possibilities, and I'll try *this*, and I will try *that*, and I will try *another* thing. It's isonometric. I jump through all the choices and I will whiz by them, and what will happen is that I will end up with a situation where I am having a dialogue with the work, and the information is coming back to me, and the work is talking to me, and then I can actually come up with a series of choices.

I don't work straight out of my head—I have to *see* it. I have to *think* it, *do* it, and then *see* it—that is my proof. I think sculpture is about proof.

Did you start as a painter?

I painted in school, yes. But, going back to images, I like the idea of trying to figure out where my images come from! You see, there is this body of information that I use, and I am always looking at it. I have divided myself into these separations which—for lack of a better word, I call *series*. They are always closely tied to the next body of work I do. That body is like a diurnal arc. I haven't found the outside edge to that yet. I suppose when I do, that will slow down, but all the same, all of the sculpture done in the wake of the Sony Piece—the smaller ones I call "Notes from the Campus Gates"—are coming out *effortlessly*. It unnerves me a little bit, because they are just *flowing out!* The older I get the more I trust myself. When I was in my twenties and I made work, I thought it was the end, and that I'd never find another idea!

We have talked about many crucial aspects of sculpture, but we have not talked about materials. How do you decide upon a particular material for a given work?

With the forms and the materials I use, I like to keep them as close to original as possible. I really get delight in seeing them cross the line from what they *were* to what they are, and what they *are* is not what they *were*. At that point, what they are is what they were transformed *into*.

You can rationalize if you want to, but I like it when you are pulled just to the other side, and the truth is that it isn't *that* any longer, but you can still recognize *that*. I like that link-up because we are so far away at that point from what we might call "plain and regular"—and yet that is a *part* of what makes things work—because they are so close to being "plain and regular"—but they have

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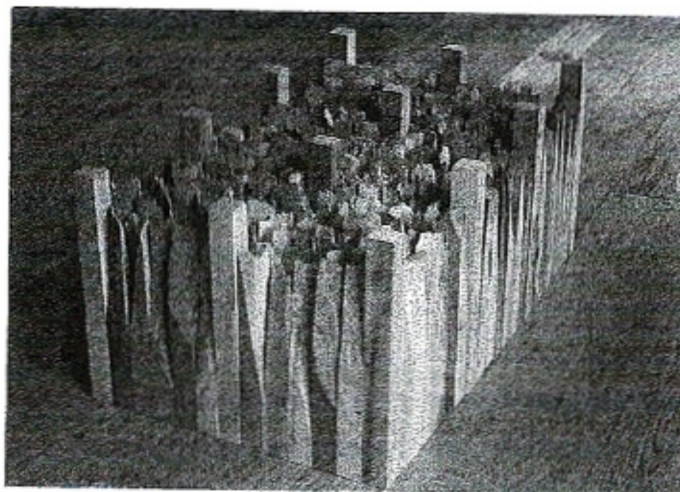
It's a restraint von Rydingsvard needs, given the nature of her thematic raw material, and she demonstrates it in the smaller works as well as the monumental. The vertical *Paul's Shovel*, 1987, for example, is a wall-mounted piece, narrow, and close to seven feet in height, which resembles the tool referred to by the title. It is as plain as a Quaker tool, though more roughly crafted, and it recalls perhaps the vital, life-saving ritual of labor from her childhood. But von Rydingsvard is not a figurative sculptor, and her images are never singular in their associations, any more than in the emotions which they evoke. *Paul's Shovel* brings other real-world objects to mind: a paddle, an instrument of punishment, a mace, an icon, even a cross. It's an object which, in its quiet restraint and its refusal to transform literally into any of its metaphorical references, gives off a kind of intensity of fervor, demanding not only our contemplation but our veneration.

If the tools and furnishings of the labor camps are evoked in works like *Paul's Shovel*, *Urszulka*, 1986, a series of five stretcher-like objects roughly gouged from laminated cedar blocks and laid side-by-side, may additionally serve as an eloquent reminder of the unity of the family. Child-sized and scrawled with the inscription of the artist's nickname (the work's title), the five objects lie side-by-side like siblings in a litter. And, for all their stillness, they imply transport, evoking the solidarity as well as the discomforts of the family's journey. Like the shovel, though, these forms cannot be held down to the single association: they double as troughs, or grinding bowls, or water-basins, suggesting life-giving qualities—or, more darkly, as coffins for the dead. Thanks to the almost primitive roughness of their finish, it's almost impossible for us to ignore the process of their making, or the human presence of their maker.

Indeed, von Rydingsvard's sculpture implies, even requires, the human presence at every level. Its sheer labor-intensiveness—particularly in the monumental works—draws attention not only to the artist's hand, but also to the cooperating hands one imagines to be involved in their construction. (*New York* magazine critic Kay Larson goes so far as to refer to them as "performances.") But more than that, the works seem to invite and somehow even *need* for us to fulfill a role in their completion. A shovel calls for the presence of the digger, and a stretcher awaits its bearers as well as its wounded occupant. Confronted with scenes that are fraught with the absence of the human actor, our hands experience a powerful impulse to reach out, as though to complete the action with our own. Brenson identifies it astutely as a "readiness" in the work, which we perceive even in such environmentally-scaled structures as *Zakopane*, 1987. Here, the architectural suggestion is of a rough, labor camp dwelling, a long barn wall, or perhaps a row of chancery pews. Under its dark, protective overhang and its baffling row of thigh-high, primitively carved containers (are they mangers, or udders? Praying figures? Wombs heavy with pregnancy, or urinals? Baptismal fonts?) our role becomes that of habitation, utilization, or the fulfillment of some unspecified ritual. Sensing its power, we are driven to occupy the stage the artist has prepared for us and help fulfill its destiny.

There is, then, something commanding, even willful about these works—a quality we may associate with the ever-vigilant, ever-protective father who summoned the strength to guide the family through its trial. Yet if the work appears sometimes to have an overwhelmingly male presence, as in the colossal, craggy monolith *For Paul*, 1990-92, that appearance proves deceiving. From ground level, this piece seems like a mountainous outcrop, its face gray with the graphite used to tone the wood, and slashed and hacked into a surface that appears as hard and impermeable as rock. The second floor of Storm King's art center, however, offers an alternative view of *For Paul*. From above, we gaze down into a series of vast and seemingly bottomless recesses, gouged out to give the work a dark interior emptiness. It turns out to be not the forbidding, solid block we had imagined from below, but an aggregate of deep, rough bowls, whose hollows penetrate the work and humanize it. Brute size and strength are balanced against vulnerability on a massive scale.



Ursula von Rydinsvard, *Song of a Saint*, 17" high, cedar, 1979. Photo: David Allison.

I thought alot about Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* at Storm King. The child's journey that Kosinski describes takes place in the same Central European landscape as von Rydingsvard's. Although his was deprived of the comforts of family solidarity, in some ways its nightmare qualities are those that haunt the shadows of her work—the specters of brute medieval peasantry, of a sometimes fervent, sometimes tortured Catholicism, of guilt and innocence, transgression and punishment, of ancient pagan blood ritual and racial prejudice. Even its benign images share that same ring of worn antiquity: bowl, tool, shelter, bed. These are the basic needs and fears of humankind, over which our modern civilization has succeeded only in casting a light veneer.

And here, in the tension between desire and fear, lie both the action and the spiritual gravity of her work. She speaks in precisely these terms of the process of its making, as a struggle whose outcome is determined by the matter that she's dealing with: "The piece," she explains, "has this tremendous need, and actually as long as it has that kind of a need there's an anxiety on my part that really connects me to that piece until the need is removed." For those of us who follow after her, into the work, the lasting evidence of that struggle is what gives the work its strength and compels our deep response. ☐

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Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Urszulka*, 18" high, cedar, paint, 1986. Photo: David Allison.