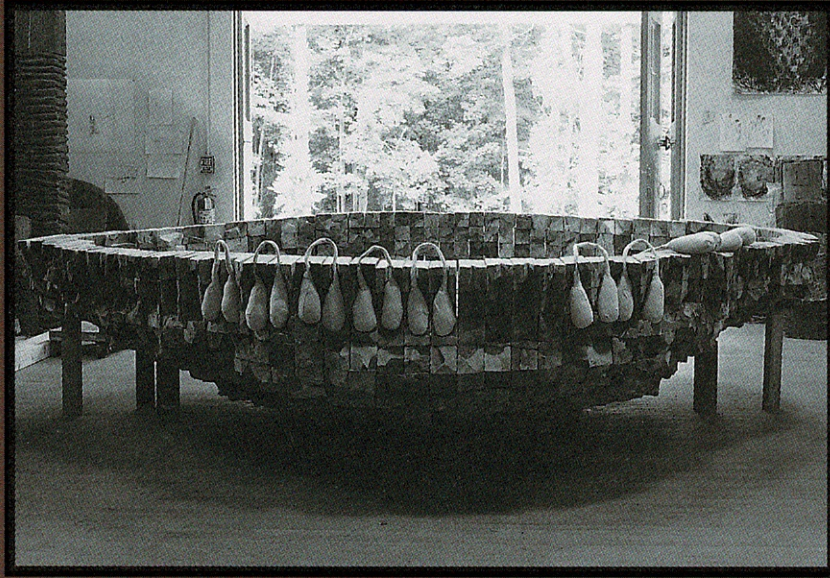


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Sculpture



ursula von rydingsvard



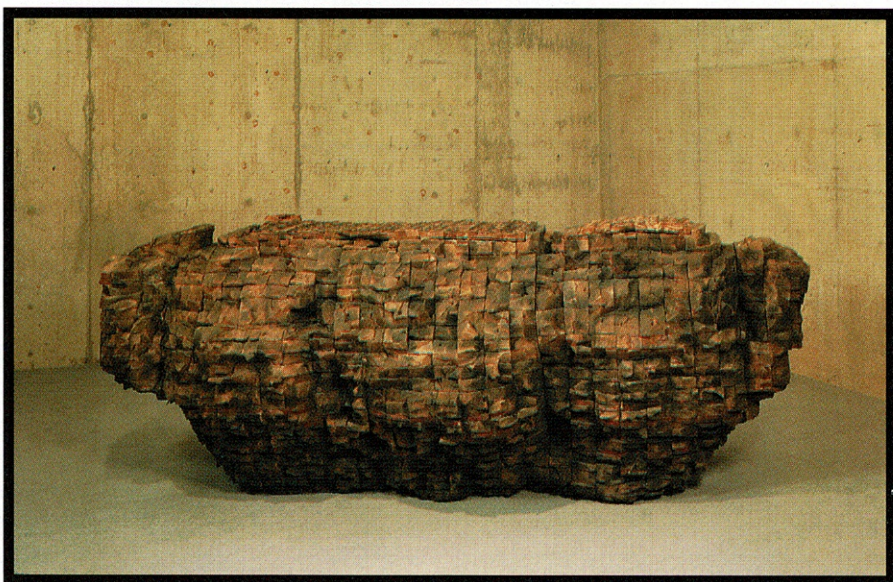
By Anne Barclay Morgan

Earthbound *materials* are
transformed by this sculptor into resonant
metaphors for nourishment, energy, and frailty.

Ursula von Rydingsvard is best known for laminated cedar sculptures that range from massive works with heavy articulation to long and slender pieces that lean against the wall. The rugged surfaces are scored and marked with cuts that seem at times to be wounds. By applying graphite or touches of whitewash to these surfaces, she lessens any direct association with the wood and its inherent seductiveness.

For von Rydingsvard, there has to be "a very real link" between her life experiences and her creation of a work. As a result, her work is emotionally charged by the intensity of her involvement in the sculptural process and by the depth of her personal expression.

It is clear from recent exhibitions, such as the 10-year retrospective at the Storm King Art Center in 1992, that von Rydingsvard has continued to experiment with her vocabulary of materials and ideas throughout the 21 years since her first group shows. Recently, she began working with cow intestines because, she says, the material "is so vulnerable," with "overtones of being something that was quite disgusting, something that couldn't be easily idealized." Ironically, while preparing the intestines, she discovered the beauty of the material, in which she saw a resemblance to the delicacy, fragility, and opaqueness of a bride's lace veil. The use of such unorthodox materials, as well as her handling of wood, is her way of get-



ting away from an idealization that can ultimately "make something more simple than it is."

Von Rydingsvard begins her highly evolved, labor-intensive process by drawing graphite lines with a large, soft, leaded pencil on a cedar beam, to indicate where the wood should be cut with a circular saw. She refers to these pencil marks as "crescendos." When the resulting form begins to take shape, with numerous hacked cedar beams precisely stacked, the sections are laminated together with a glue formulated for her by a chemical company in Long Island City, New York. In order to strengthen the larger works, layers of beams are doweled together, after meticulous analysis, so that they can be transported in sections and reconstructed on site. The

wood surfaces are rubbed with spray adhesive and graphite powder, using a stainless steel scrubber, until her sculptures acquire the colors of rich soil, penumbral and fertile. The works are marked by rough cuts, angles, and lacerations, but even when they seem brooding or menacing they retain the sense of being sheltering or embracing.

Von Rydingsvard frequently uses the language of food to describe her work. Cooking metaphors are deeply embodied in her sculpture: nourishment and

Opposite, above and below: *Ocean Floor* (detail), 1996. Cedar, graphite, and intestines, 3 x 13 x 11 ft. Above: untitled (three baskets), 1995. Cedar and graphite, 40 x 103 x 47 in.



sustenance are suggested by bowl and vessel shapes and by stirring implements. Childhood memories of survival in German refugee camps and the role food played in sustaining a large family inform the work, as do other early memories of wooden churches and simple wooden sheds and dwellings.

Contained in the solidity and durability of the sculptures is a sense of history, of a personal and a collective memory, a memory of the land itself. Working with the land, as did her father and both sides of her family for many generations, requires repetition, effort, and passion to reap the rewards of harvest. These are all characteristics that predominate in her own process as an artist.

While rooted partly in agrarian memories, her works have a much broader metaphorical resonance. Her outdoor pieces hug the land. Even the massive *For Paul* (1990–92)—her husband is Paul Greengard, a biochemist at Rockefeller University—which rises

14 feet in the air, seems to be a part of the land it sits upon. As Dore Ashton states, it functions as “a stand of trees” with “coruscating surfaces that bespeak enormous energy, barely contained within.”¹ *Ene Due Rabe* (1990), which David Levi Strauss considers one of von Rydingsvard’s “most persuasive sculptures,”² is composed of an uneven grid of 98 containers or cups, waiting expectantly on the ground. For the Oliver Ranch in Sonoma Valley in northern California, she created *Iggy’s Pride* (1991), her largest work to date. Nine long wedges extend horizontally out of the gently rolling hill.

In her large, light and airy studio near New Paltz, New York, she spent this summer finishing two major projects. Commissioned to create an outdoor work for the new T.F. Green Airport near Providence, Rhode Island, as part of the state percent-for-art program, she constructed her first public artwork. A large chalice-shaped sculpture will sit on a mound in front of the

entrance to the airport. After the shape is cast in bronze, she will burnish the surface with chemicals to get the desired color; “tender, not showy—very matte.” Simultaneously, for a show at Exit Art in New York in September, where a group of artists were invited to make works referencing sound, she worked on a huge open bowl shape with roughly delineated concentric circles in the interior. In spite of size, this sculpture has a sense of liberation and lightness. She also added small sacks or balls made of cow intestines. These pendulum-shaped appendages were attached two by two, each ball fitting into hollow cuplike spaces around the rim of the work, while the loops of the balls peered above the rim. To create the sacks, shapes filled with peat moss were covered with intestines in a characteristically labor-intensive process, and then smeared with graphite to deemphasize the beauty of the material. In the recessed spaces, the suspended sacks resemble punching bags or teardrops. She had started the work with the idea of “worn, woolen mittens,” but while constructing the piece she began to think of the form as an echo chamber and to refer obliquely to sound.

Nestled in the woods, her country studio was built according to her design, with white walls that rise 14 feet high before the windows appear. One-third of the space is intended for drawing, but as she ruefully acknowledges, “it always gets invaded with my sculptures.” There persists a pervasive, sweet smell of wood combined with glue. The numerous rooms and crannies of her large, but crowded, Brooklyn studio are filled with experiments, works in progress, finished pieces, and works she calls “failures.” Some lean against the wall, others rise up off the studio floor. One piece still in progress, *Mother’s Purse*, is topped by long troughs in which rest uneven wooden balls resembling peeled potatoes. Scattered around the space, long-handled spoon shapes have acquired conglomerations of peat moss, glue, and soil. Corrugated paddle shapes are covered with intestine, in a pattern that resem-

Below, left: *Maglownica*, 1995. Cedar and intestines, 148 x 14 x 3.5 in. Below, right: *Slepa Gienia (Blind Eugenie)*, 1994. Cedar and graphite, 3 x 3.3 x 14 ft. (each of 13 pieces), 3 x 14 x 150 ft. overall.

bles vertebrae. She describes one such work, *Untitled (Three Baskets)* (1995) as having "a thick wet blanket that hugs the surface, like a pancake." Among other new directions are large, sprawling, horizontal letters, built up with hacked two-by-four beams, rather than her usual four-by-fours, in order to give finer definition to the work. The letters are not meant to be read, and have a tentative, quavering quality. She describes



them as "lying there almost informally, like a cooking pot that ran over." Other new works include smaller cast iron pieces covered with intestines, sewn with wire, and topped with cedar that slides back like a lid.

Her art historical roots are multi-faceted. Michael Brenson has said that von Rydingsvard "kept the architectural vocabulary and repetition of Minimalism and put introspection, psychology, and myth back."³ In what he calls her "sculptural theater of wonder and loss,"⁴ he suggests that "the classical qualities of dignity, decorum, and restraint" are mingled with anxiety and awe, claustrophobia and darkness.⁵ Dore Ashton relates von Rydingsvard's religious childhood and her youthful desire to achieve a state of grace to her contemporary artistic striving for authenticity, truth, and beauty. Von Rydingsvard's language, according to Ashton, is "the language of emotion."⁶

Although her work consists of repetitive forms, such as containers, undulating walls, and hollowed-out shapes, von Rydingsvard has increasingly extended her vocabulary. Elongated horizontal elements that resemble giant rolling pins emerged in her 1992 outdoor piece, *Land Rollers*, for the Storm King Art Center. In her work for the roof of the Denver Art Museum, *Slepa Gienia (Blind Eugenie)* (1994), these elongated forms have double handles and carved-out interiors, suggesting a litter or boats. Though this repetition takes on a ritual quality, she says that when she repeats ideas or forms too closely, she gets "tremendously restless."

The artist's return to the familiar and the familial in her use of daily implements of family life might also be seen as part of a reevaluation of women's roles and a re-appreciation for the role women have played in history. Her work is also infused with a sexuality, which accesses the spiritual through raw physical substance. All of these elements in her work remain implicit rather than didactic.

Order is an inherent quality in her

work, but it is an earthy rather than a pristine order, to which she strives to add "a lot of mischief." This enigmatic and feminine order is not smooth or soft, but rough, worked, pragmatic, and emotionally charged. With increasing forth-



rightness, she aims to make work that is personal, vulnerable, and mysterious. She yearns to work more directly with earth, in order to face nature "head-on," she says. Moving away from epic themes, her current work tends toward what she refers to as "frailties, wanderings, and uncertainties." There is nevertheless a growing lightness, as well as a sense of exploring new inner dimensions and new possibilities, in her search for sculptural expression. **S**

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¹ In Dore Ashton, Marek Bartelik, and Mitti Megged, *The Sculpture of Ursula von Rydingsvard*, NY: Hudson Hills Press, 1996, p.13.

² David Levi Strauss, "Sculpture as Refuge," *Art in America*, February 1993, p.92.

³ Michael Brenson, "Ursula von Rydingsvard's Sculptural Theater," catalogue, Storm King Art Center, 1992, p.30.

⁴ Brenson, p.19.

⁵ Ibid, p. 24.

⁶ Ashton, p.5.