



# Mystery amid the landscape

Ursula von Rydingsvard brings a very European touch to Yorkshire, writes **William Packer**

**T**he Yorkshire Sculpture Park is a perennial and insistent draw, not least for the independent nature of its policies and the consequent and generous variety of its exhibitions. It has never been a slave to critical fashion and the latest thing, and in consequence has always tempered a natural interest in emergent talent with a sustaining and more reflective encouragement of the established or neglected reputation, against which the young must always be measured.

One particular and rewarding aspect of this approach is a marked inclination to look abroad, not just for what is already celebrated, but for work of equal quality that is less well-known, and showing it in the UK often for the first time. The latest recipient of this compliment is Ursula von Rydingsvard, an artist born in wartime Germany into a family of Polish extraction, which was displaced in the aftermath of the war and finally settled in the US.

While it would be wrong to lay too specific a reading upon her work in terms of meaning and reference, there hangs over it an

ambiguous aura, a numinous presence, redolent of ancient and buried associations, that is decidedly European. She would not so much repudiate as simply pass over such matters as of no conscious concern of hers, leaving others to take them up as they choose. "If I set out to make a landscape," so she tells us, "I become way too specific, too stupid; I don't slide around within metaphors that feel divergent and interesting enough."

For her part, her overt interest remains largely formal and practical, and if a general sense at least of the organic and the ecological is there to be discerned in her work, it comes there by the processes of sculpture, the materials she uses and perhaps the vessel-form upon which she works so many intuitive variations.

Wood is her principal material, augmented in but one case by animal intestine stuffed with moss that is hung as a fringe round the rim of a huge asymmetrical dish, a sort of giant's coracle. She takes regular lengths of cedar-wood, about 4in square in section, which she pins together, two or three at a time, before working freely into their composite surface with saw

or chisel. The final surface is then treated with powdered graphite, well rubbed in.

She first lays down a patten or matrix, that might be a simple circle, letter or perhaps a word traced upon the floor. From this base, by a process of slow, almost organic accretion, these forms, these sometimes towering edifices are built up, at once absolutely regular in

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their residual stratification, and yet as natural as a long-eroded cliff or sea-stack, the remains of a boat left rotting into the mud of the river-bed.

But really we must not insist too far. We must respect that distance that von Rydingsvard requires for herself, even as we violate it. Whatever else we may choose to do in

our response, we must first take the remarkable and intriguing things she makes for what they are, as they are, beautiful and mysterious beneath the trees in a landscape they make their own.

Janet Nathan, whose touring retrospective, first shown at the Concourse Gallery of the Barbican, is now at the Graves Gallery in Sheffield, is another sculptor whose work is both directly of the landscape yet physically and formally apart. And in working entirely in relief, and fairly flat and shallow relief at that, with all the pictorial connotations that inevitably come with it, she makes the contradictions all the clearer.

The consistency, both technical and creative, with which she has been working for 20 years is clear enough. The things she makes are very much the things they are, physical assemblages in part found and modified objects, in part elements made to the purpose. With often a strong horizontal emphasis in the composition, the pictorial hint towards landscape is inevitable, made often the stronger by a hovering disc, that might be moon or sun hanging in the sky or reflected in water.

But then the formal corrective is applied by the imposition of flattening or lateral elements, confounding the implicit pictorial space by leading us away across the surface, setting element against element, texture against texture. But wait a moment: that serpentine figure might be a road or river, that system of enclosing, irregular lines may be a pattern of fields and hedges. The whole may be in sort a map – and we are back again with the landscape.

But then a map is not a landscape at all, but a formula and an idea. And these are not maps, but things of wood and paint and plaster put together on the wall. Thus, in the most intriguing way, we are tossed knowingly and teasingly back and forth by Miss Nathan's sophisticated, endlessly various and beautiful constructions.

**Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Bretton Hall, Wakefield, West Yorkshire: Ursula von Rydingsvard – in the open air until March 1, and in the Pavilion Gallery until November 16. Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield: Janet Nathan – constructions 1979-97: until September 27, then to Sussex University.**