

# Ursula von Rydingsvard sculpts metaphors in wood

THE CONTEMPORARY ARTIST COMBINES PRIMORDIAL FORMS  
AND HIGHLY EXPRESSIVE CONTENT TO PRODUCE HAUNTING  
AND MONUMENTAL WORKS OF UNCOMMON POWER

BY AVIS BERMAN

"THE EASIEST WAY FOR ME TO RECALL MY PAST IS to examine the spaces in which the events took place," Ursula von Rydingsvard has said, and when examination turns into concrete construction, the result is among the most profound sculpture being produced today. Of the generation that matured during the heyday of Minimalism, Conceptual Art and the site-specific object, von Rydingsvard makes massive abstract works of hacked and chiseled wood. But though she came of age in the New York art world of the 1970s, the artist was uncomfortable with what she perceived as the impersonality of the hard-edge movements then capturing the attention of the bigger galleries and museums. She chose instead to mine the deepest veins of memory for her subject matter: layers of joined wood are metaphors for accretions of primal history.

Von Rydingsvard persistently explores childhood experiences, emphasizing the quiet drama of family connections. She also chronicles the emotional attachments to one's environment and the dignity of hand labor and hand tools. Although her sculptures are nonrepresentational and avoid literalism, they function, says one critic, as "a connector between abstraction and the world of real things." Making reference to all kinds of everyday objects and architectural constructions, von Rydingsvard's work evokes barns, sheds, barracks, pews, altars, shovels, bowls and spoons—even the human body. Much of its impact

derives from the authority and intensity of feeling, but each piece is enriched as well by the contrast between a monolithic scale and an intimacy of detail. This commanding fusion of austerity, spirituality and emotional force grabs you at once.

The first time I saw von Rydingsvard's sculpture in her studio, about 11 years ago, I was overwhelmed by a flood of sensations, starting with a dizzying rush from the aroma of the wood. The individual surfaces—worn, gashed, chiseled, scarred, painted and scrubbed—invited touching, even caressing. Yet the power of the spare shapes and restrained color reminded me of Kafka's pronouncement that art should be "the axe for the frozen sea in us."

Working steadily from the mid-1970s through the '80s, von Rydingsvard first started being noticed about a decade ago, yet her sculpture has never been fashionable. During her formative years, she was not invited to participate in the Whitney or Corcoran biennials, those bellwethers of trendiness that can often jump-start an artist's career. That recognition has been fairly slow in coming may be one reason why she hasn't acquired the airs of an art star. Last winter I ran into von Rydingsvard waiting in a long line to get

The densely detailed surface of a work in progress encompasses the artist and the tools she uses to wield her magic on wood.

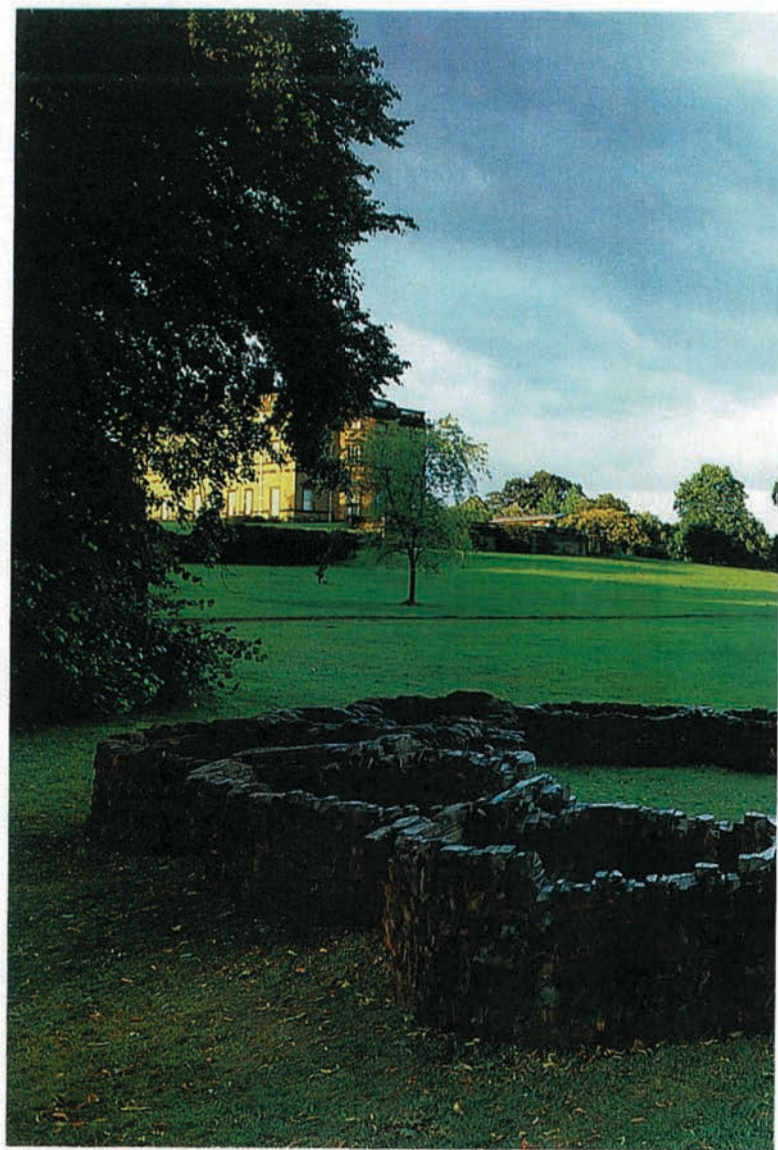


into a show at the Whitney. As an artist whose work has been purchased by that institution, she could have swept to the front, but she didn't. She had forgotten to bring identification and didn't think anyone would know who she was.

Now, however, it would be remiss to overlook her. Von Rydingsvard, at the age of 55, seems to be at the summit of her career. Not only have the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Walker Art Center, the High Museum of Art and the Detroit Institute of Arts acquired her work, but a number of private collectors, as well as the Microsoft Corporation, have commissioned outdoor pieces.

In the summer of 1997, von Rydingsvard installed a group of outdoor works in Yorkshire Sculpture Park, in a part of England near where Henry Moore lived and worked. That exhibition, "Ursula von Rydingsvard," has now crossed the Atlantic and will be on view at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, from May 9 through March 28, 1999; it then travels to the Indianapolis Museum of Art. Meanwhile, a show of her indoor sculpture has been organized by the Madison Art Center in Madison, Wisconsin, where it opened at the beginning of March. After closing on May 10, it continues on to the Hood Museum of Art in Hanover, New Hampshire, the Chicago Cultural Center, and the Contemporary Museum in Honolulu. Stephen Fleischman, the director of the Madison Art Center, thinks that von Rydingsvard "is one of the most significant sculptors of her generation." Similarly, Martin Friedman, director emeritus of the Walker Art Center, who has watched von Rydingsvard's work develop since the early 1980s, says, "She is in the front rank of sculptors today, bringing intense energy and gravitas to sculpture. She is also a key figure in restoring to sculpture its sense of craft. In her work, labor has been elevated to a sacred process."

A visit to von Rydingsvard's studio, in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, where she has worked since 1984, confirms Friedman's observation. The long, narrow room in which most of the construction goes on is entirely functional; the brick walls are covered with a coat of white paint and the floors are stained black, but there is no decoration. There isn't room for any, because wood is everywhere, mainly 12- to 18-foot lengths of four-by-four beams of milled cedar, the primary constituent of her sculpture. Beams are stacked on the floor and in rafters, but smaller fragments are piled in barrels and boxes. These are distinct from chiseled components to be incorporated into future sculptures—grocery bags full of rough-hewn wooden balls the size of grapefruit and flat squares of wood laid out on the floor in geometric patterns like over-size jigsaw puzzles. Hundreds of clamps and rods for glu-



*Hand-e-over* (1996-97), shown here at England's Yorkshire Sculpture Park, was inspired by a Midwestern children's game.

ing the cedar hang on the walls; nearby stand von Rydingsvard's upright pieces, looking much like implements borrowed from a household of domesticated giants. Again, the sweet smell of cedar is pervasive and intoxicating, but von Rydingsvard says she doesn't even notice it anymore.

Today, on a foggy morning in early January, the artist and two of her assistants, sculptors Mark Shunney and Chris Romer (longtime head assistant, Polish-born Bart Karski, is away on vacation), are working on a piece that resembles six waist-high ice-cream cones. Arranged in two rows of three, the cones are joined together at the top; a third row of three cones is to be added. A tall, broad-shouldered woman with short brown hair and brown eyes, von Rydingsvard is dressed in a black sweatshirt, jeans and work boots. Her hands are large and capable-looking, with long square fingers. She straps on kneepads, and looks for some goggles and a face mask.



Von Rydingsvard builds her sculpture from the ground up, board by board, cut by cut, deciding as she goes along. She begins with “an image that I get in my head,” which she can neither describe nor draw. Instead, she kneels on the floor and scratches out three chalk circles, each one indicating where a new cone will be assembled, and asks Romer to pass her a cedar beam. She lays it over the three circles and, by eye, decides how big the piece should be. She then sketches curved lines on the wood in pencil, and carries the beam to the other end of the loft, which is filled with power tools and vented by two industrial-strength exhaust fans. She puts on the goggles and mask, and grabs a circular saw, cutting the beam into three smaller pieces according to her pencil lines, then hacking at the ends irregularly to give the edges interest. She and the assistants tend to save time by not carrying the cut wood back to the fabrication area. Instead, they toss it across the room. The

sculptor Judy Pfaff, who worked in the studio below von Rydingsvard’s for years, could hear the floor rumble from the whirl of the saw and the impact of the wood landing after it was lobbed. “When Ursula was on a roll building something,” Pfaff recalls, “I knew it down here. I felt like I was in the middle of a timpani drum.”

The cut pieces have to be matched to the original positions in which they were laid out. To keep things straight, each piece of wood is given a code number. Romer hands von Rydingsvard another beam; she stares at it and makes some more pencil marks. These lines are simple, straightforward diagonals, so she lets Shunney, who has worked for her for more than two years, cut them. He picks up the saw and grinds away, booting three cut pieces back to the other two. Von Rydingsvard stacks the pieces of wood on top of the first pile, now about five pieces wide. She asks Romer for another beam, stoops down and draws some more lines. Each layer of each cone requires about five cut pieces, and each cone is going to have at least 30 layers. The positioning is crucial from the outset. “The bottom is important,” the artist points out. “Some of the pieces will dramatically move away from each other. That initiates the mood of the piece.”

The cutting, stacking, marking, lifting, kneeling, bending and carrying go on for several hours until everyone breaks, about noon, for turkey and stuffing that von Rydingsvard has brought from home. When work is resumed, no one says much: the major sounds are the whine of the saw, the roar of the fans and the crack of the cedar hitting the floor. “This part, the cutting and the building,” von Rydingsvard says, “is the glory of my life, because this is where all the decisions get made.”

After a sculpture is entirely cut and shaped, the assistants make sure that every bit of wood is coded. Next they clamp and glue the pieces of wood together, one layer at a time. When the piece is reassembled, von Rydingsvard rubs the red surface of the cedar with a grayish-black graphite. The variations of shadow and light made by the color imbue the wood with a greater resonance. To attain this patina, she sprays the work with an alcohol-based adhesive before brushing on the powdered graphite. The piece is then scrubbed with a steel scouring pad, both to remove excess powder and to push some of the pigment under the skin of the wood. All of these processes have the effect, in the words of the critic David Levi Strauss, of “adding up to a wearing down.”

Ursula Karolizyn was born on July 26, 1942, in Deensen, Germany. She was one of three daughters and four sons born to Ignacy and Kunegunda Karolizyn, a Ukrainian farmer and his Polish wife, who had lived in rural Poland until they were removed to a slave labor camp and forced

to work for the Nazis. After World War II ended, the family was shuttled from one refugee camp to the next, and from these years as a displaced person in an occupied country, von Rydingsvard would draw the primary imagery for her art. Given her history, von Rydingsvard has earned the right to an art unsparing in its expression of trauma, an art that bluntly exposes raw nerves, but she refuses such emotionalism and abhors the notion of herself as a victim. "One of the things I would be most ashamed of is to have any pathos in my work. Or to have blatant pain, like the kind that Francis Bacon puts in his painting. I want this kind of packed pride, this containment of emotions—like Giotto." Accordingly, von Rydingsvard's sculptures, while brooding and somber, are oddly domestic and comforting—haunting rather than despairing, stoic rather than sentimental. And when she speaks about how she scores and batters her wood, her language is homely. She compares a jutting wood protuberance to an "apron" and calls a chopped, pitted interior "lacework." A work in progress reminds her of a waffle iron. Her constructions enclose space, and so render a hostile world inhabitable, just as the desolate and often menacing refugee camps also represented protective shelters in which her family survived as a unit.

These associations inform *Untitled (Felt Box)*, a bathtub-size rectangle of cedar, graphite and gray felt that she created in 1986. The work's compactness and its tightly layered materials convey the idea of a sanctuary and a bulwark. "The relationship of the felt and the wood has to do with the army blankets we were given in the camps," von Rydingsvard says. "They were very warm and durable. We lived in wooden barracks made by the soldiers, and we would hang the blankets up against the walls for insulation. We would put the blankets against the raw wood, so for me there's a wonderful connection between the two materials."

In 1950 the Karoliszyns immigrated to the United States and, in January 1951, settled in Plainville, Connecticut, a small town in the central part of the state. The arrival of



The stark profile of the 1991 wall sculpture Johnny Angel casts patterned shadows.

the new family was so exotic that the event rated a front-page article in the local newspaper, precipitating an outpouring of generosity. "This family that knew no English, that had so many children, won the sympathies of the town," von Rydingsvard remembers. "The day after the article was printed, there were boxes of clothing and pieces of furniture that were put on our front porch without our knowing where they came from. We couldn't believe our good fortune. We opened up a box with 30 ties in it—we had never seen 30 ties in our entire lives. Plainville was a town with riches beyond anything we had imagined."

Nevertheless, adjustment was difficult. Ursula was "an excruciatingly shy" child, and both parents were constantly engaged in making a living. Kunegunda worked 12 hours a day, six days a week as a baker, and Ignacy held down two factory jobs during the week and worked as a gardener on weekends. Ursula was left in charge of the housekeeping, cooking and interpreting. "I recall signing my father's checks to deposit them in the bank, and getting caught when I was in the fourth grade," she says. Von Rydingsvard laughs about this incident now, but the child did not find it very funny.

Entering school shortly after moving to Plainville, Ursula wore the same outfit every day—a top and a pair of

gray felt pants made out of the army blankets the family had brought with them from Europe. On Valentine's Day, her teacher surprised the little girl with a red-and-white velvet-and-lace dress. "I opened up the package and I thought it was just the most magnificent thing," the artist says, her voice soft with wonder, "but I couldn't associate myself with it. I have no recollection of what happened to that dress, but I know I never wore it. It would have been such a dramatic change from this gray felt outfit I was wearing to these very feminine clothes, but the fantasies it evoked were marvelous." To this day, von Rydingsvard habitually wears blacks and grays. "It sounds so nostalgically stupid, but there are things I do that unconsciously connect me with the environment I had a long time ago," she says. "The camps had everything to do with



Built in 1994 for the roof of the Denver Art Museum, *Slepa Gienia (Blind Eugenie)*, top, is composed of a rhythmic series of boatlike structures reminiscent of ancient vessels. *Ocean Floor* (1996), above, combines cedar and pendant pods of cow intestines.

black and white and gray." The neutral, no-color outfits have become part of an armor of stability that she first created to enable her to exist in the world, but now they have evolved into an aspect of her work.

In 1960, von Rydingsvard enrolled in the University of New Hampshire as a painter, and then transferred to the University of Miami at Coral Gables to marry Milton von Rydingsvard, a premed student whom she had met in Plainville. After earning her B.A. and M.A. in Florida, she taught art at a local high school, and in 1969 their daughter, Ursula Ann, who is now a producer for CNN, was born. The Rydingsvards ended up back in Connecticut, but separated in 1971. Ursula continued to teach school, but she wanted to become a serious artist and started putting away money toward more advanced education.

In 1973 the couple divorced, and Ursula moved to New York with her daughter to enter the MFA program at Columbia University. She had saved \$4,600 from teaching, which she hoped to make last two years. "Finances were an issue in the extreme," she says. "I paid \$190 a month for rent to Columbia, and had an additional \$40 to spend for the rest of the month. I had to focus on that to an unbelievable extent, or I wouldn't have been able to survive. We never had candy. I never took a subway unless it was absolutely necessary. I did get some scholarships, but I had no money for art materials, so I used things like pipes that people threw away from furnaces.

"But," von Rydingsvard hastens to add, "that would be a terrible way of summarizing those years. They were the beginning of my life, or a life in which things began to be



*Last year Microsoft selected von Rydingsvard to create an outdoor sculpture for the corporation's headquarters. The result, Skip to My Lou, is a meandering circular form that invites passersby to nestle into its curves.*

possible." She took art history courses with Meyer Schapiro, heard Philip Guston lecture and dropped painting for sculpture, studying with Ronald Bladen, George Sugarman and Jean Linder. Von Rydingsvard saw how actual artists functioned, and her confidence was reinforced by Bladen's tutelage. "He gave in a way that was so tender and so absolutely aware of the effect that he would have on my psyche," she recalls. "He would go into my studio and be amazed at what was there, and in retrospect, not a whole lot was there. Somehow he was able to see the potential, and in seeing it, he gave me permission, given how I felt about myself, which then moved me."

At Columbia, from which she graduated in 1975, von Rydingsvard was fusing sheets of welded steel with small steel bead made from heating a rod and dripping it onto the sheets as it melted. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this period was the discovery of a craft-oriented process for manipulating an industrial material and giving it a hand-worked texture: she pierced the sheets with holes, hung threads through them, shined them. But the rigidity of steel continued to vex her. In 1976 the artist Michael Mulhern gave her some cedar beams to work with, and she has been faithful to milled lumber ever since. At the time, Minimalism was a reigning influence on many up-and-coming artists, but von Rydingsvard distrusted the assertion that an artist could strip an object of its associations. "The Minimalists were too antiseptic and too elegant and too smart for me," she explains. "I wanted something more vernacular. Their attitude put them almost into the realm of philosophers. I like more the carnal, the physical presence of something, rather than the implications of that presence." Where the Minimalists preferred industrial materials and extravagantly smooth finishes, von Rydingsvard embraced the lush organicism of wood and a heavily detailed, expressively textured surface, purposely marked to appear scarred, furrowed and eroded. "I want

to take something man-made and have it look as if it isn't.

"To find ways of saving myself in the camps," von Rydingsvard reflects, "I would behave as if I didn't exist." The habit of self-effacement died hard, and it wasn't until she rid herself of it that her art became authoritative. Her first mature work, produced in 1979, was *Song of a Saint (Saint Eulalia)*, a procession of 180 totemlike cedar posts scattered over a hillside at Artpark in Lewiston, New York. "It was the first piece I made in which I was aware of engaging people physically with my work," she recalls. "I was always so worried about what things I should or should not do. There I became outrageous in terms of size." Whenever she can, von Rydingsvard has worked outdoors. "I love working with the land," she says, "making relationships between my piece . . . and the curves of the earth."

Wood was also the key to unlocking the autobiographical and ancestral contents that she has since transmuted into metaphors. In von Rydingsvard's sculptures, an idea about a specific person takes on architectural dimensions; bones become beams and rafters, constructed forms seem to stand for human effort and need. *Ignatz Comes Home* (1986), a spreading rooftop with logs leaning against it, was occasioned by her father's leaving his nursing home for a visit with his wife. The piece is based, she says, "on a kind of vernacular architecture that I append not just to him but to the history of people he was born into." *Zakopane* (1987), a wall piece named for a town in Poland, resembles a choir stall in a rural church and distills the artist's memory of row upon row of peasant women at prayer. *Ursie A's Dream* (1988), triggered by a dream that her daughter had of walking through a row of confessional booths, draws its power from the receding perspective of its base, an extended platform that appears furrowed, like a roughly plowed field. Von Rydingsvard thinks that her way of handling wood is akin to how her father worked the earth with his shovel and plow, and in this sculpture she



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links three generations—daughter, mother and grandfather.

In the mid-1980s, while von Rydingsvard was evolving her unique visual syntax, the circumstances of her personal life were changing as well. She had continued to teach to support herself, working at different universities around the city until 1982. Then she was appointed assistant professor, and later associate professor, of sculpture at the Yale School of Art. There she also met Paul Greengard, a neuroscientist on the medical school faculty who is now a professor at Rockefeller University. They were married in 1985. Then in March 1988, Exit Art, a gallery that often features artists whose work has been underexposed, gave von Rydingsvard a solo exhibition that transformed her career. The show was a breakout event, financially and critically, with the reviews nearly unanimous in their appreciation of her work's power, presence and autonomy. Von Rydingsvard resigned from Yale later that year and has been able to make a living from her art ever since.

The visibility provided by the Exit Art exhibition led to a 1992 retrospective of her outdoor work in the sculpture garden at Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, New York, and to several invitations to install permanent outdoor sculptures. In 1990, Steven and Nancy Oliver, long-

time patrons and collectors who purposely commission for their ranch in California's Sonoma Valley works that "will never be a commodity because they can't be sold or transported," invited von Rydingsvard to add a sculpture to their land, which now contains installations by Judith Shea, Martin Puryear, Richard Serra and Andy Goldsworthy. Von Rydingsvard's sculpture—*Iggy's Pride*—consists of nine wooden wedges inserted into the slope of a hill; the number of wedges alludes to the nine members of her family. When seen from a distance, the work resembles a geological formation.

The Olivers were used to working with artists, but they were not prepared for von Rydingsvard's methods. "She had no drawings. She gave us a verbal description and said, 'You'll just have to trust me.' She was on the ranch for over a year, because of the nature of the work," says Steven Oliver, who is in the construction business. "We had from 7 to 13 people, all doing things with tools that my people were taught not to do." To which von Rydingsvard adds, "Steve and Nancy and Ann Hatch [another private patron] were so at ease with this process, which is so invasive of your time, your space, your life. This is very different from purchasing a piece and putting it inside your house. I warn them that I'm coming with my crew. We are very respectful, but we're there for months. We camp on their land, we use their shower, we eat with them, we send them to the hardware store. I give them immense credit for having this kind of courage. These were huge financial commitments, and it's not work they can sell."

In the 1990s von Rydingsvard's sculpture became less overtly derived from the uncertainties of her childhood. She began to draw instead on archaic Greek sculpture and on non-Western sources of art, such as Asian, Oceanic and African art. *Krasavica*, from 1992-93, is a grouping of five hollowed-out forms whose shape was inspired by a pair of cast-iron samurai stirrups. The incising of the wood (opposite) suggests the rippling of pleated fabric, like an ancient Greek chiton. Two years later, von Rydingsvard made an even greater departure from her past work, experimenting with a new and strange material.

On a visit to a museum, the artist saw a Native American shirt made out of walrus intestines that had been sewn together horizontally. Intrigued by the opaqueness and texture of the material, she was eager to bring those qualities to her own sculpture. Obtaining walrus intestines was, of course, out of the question; the closest available equivalent, it turned out, was cow intestines, which she buys from a meat packer in upstate New York. Von Rydingsvard sews this curious fabric into pendulous "sacs," which seem to connote vulnerability and fertility. One of the most successful integrations of these intestinal pods occurred in her



1996 work *Ocean Floor*, an enormous bowl in which some 50 pairs of sacs are suspended from the upper rim. The sculpture appears tribal in its fetishistic and ornamental aspect, and manifestly tender. The vessel shape hints at metaphors of nourishment and sustenance, and its huge interior space, as well as the swelling roundness and softness of the sacs, alludes to the female body with a forthrightness von Rydingsvard had not previously attempted.

Last year Microsoft's art committee selected von Ryd-


on the top of the piece, and what people would see when they overlooked it."

Von Rydingsvard isn't sure if *Skip to My Lou* represents a sustained new direction or a tangent in her work. But that distinction isn't an issue for her. "No matter how corny this sounds, my whole world deals with feelings," she says. "A lot of the decisions that I make are intuitively based. The stuff that starts being academic or pedantic I just can't weave my brain into, and I really choose not



This detail of *Krasavica*, a five-part wall sculpture from 1992-93, reveals the complexity of its deeply carved, textured surface.

ingsvard to create an outdoor sculpture for the corporation's headquarters in Redmond, Washington. The result, *Skip to My Lou*, was installed in December 1997. A meandering circular form, 67 feet in diameter but just 36 inches high, the sculpture invites passersby to nestle into its curves. Since it snakes around a mound of land surrounded by an office complex, the artist explains that she "had to concentrate

to. I hope more than ever to be able to dip into that which is not so consciously controlled, to be able to trust myself where things are less predictable. That's where the fun is for me, and that's where I want to go." 

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