

# Preview

Preview/Art

## Touchstones of cedar

Ursula von Rydingsvard calls upon childhood memories for sculptural inspiration

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### COVER STORY

**P**eople who enjoy strolling the grounds of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, taking in the Henry Moore sculptures, the giant "Shuttlecocks" and the changing panorama of flowers, shrubs and trees, now have another reason to visit.

The museum recently made a marvelous addition to the area's aesthetic amenities, and to its own Sculpture Park, in the form of five monumental, hewn-cedar sculptures by the internationally renowned Ursula von Rydingsvard, an American artist of Polish descent.

Deborah Emont Scott, the museum's curator of modern and contemporary art, does not overstate things when she says, "This is absolutely fantastic work." The combination of evocative forms and the heady scent of cedar give these sculptures an overwhelming appeal. Scarred yet strong, at once poignant and heroic, they invite us to relate to them as human surrogates.

The von Rydingsvard display represents the latest installment in the museum's plan to establish itself as a major center for modern sculpture. The temporary installation marks the culmination of several years of planning and several weeks of intense — and strenuous — activity.

### Formidable forms

"This is an important show for me," said von Rydingsvard, standing in the Nelson's northeast parking lot on an overcast mid-April day.

Spread out around her was the show-to-be: stacks of hewn cedar covered with plastic tarps that would be assembled into their var-

ious monumental configurations on the museum's south lawn.

It took von Rydingsvard and her head of studio, Bart Karski — as well as Nelson staff and a crew of Kansas City Art Institute sculpture students — the better part of a month to get the pieces in place.

### Sculpture stroll

■ The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Sculpture Park is open free during daylight hours every day. The museum, at 4525 Oak St., is open 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Fridays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays, noon-5 p.m. Sundays and 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays. Admission is \$5 for adults; \$3 for adult students, \$1 for children 6-18. On Saturdays, admission is free. For information, call 751-1ART or visit the museum's Web site at [www.kansascity.com](http://www.kansascity.com).

■ Sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard will give a slide lecture about her work at 7 p.m. May 15 in Atkins Auditorium at the Nelson-Atkins Museum.

■ She also will be present at a free Children's Day of sculpture-related activities from noon to 4 p.m. May 16 at the museum. For more information, call 751-1241.

■ Other, smaller-scale works by von Rydingsvard can be seen in her exhibit of recent sculpture at Byron C. Cohen Gallery for Contemporary Art, 2000 Baltimore Ave. Hours are 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and by appointment; call 421-5665.

Excavation of the sites began at the end of March; the bases were fabricated in the first week in April. The pieces took two days to unload when they arrived April 15; then, under von Rydingsvard's supervision, their surfaces had to be scoured with steel wool and coated with graphite.

The task of actually placing these behemoths — a single sculpture may weigh as much as 8 tons — was accomplished with a megaforklift.

The exhibit, which opens to the public Saturday, features five huge outdoor pieces and two works indoors, one in Kirkwood Hall and one in Gallery 209, as part of an exhibit titled "Woodwork," curated by Jan Schall.

The sculptures came to the Nelson by ship, from a previous showing at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in Wakefield, West Yorkshire. After the exhibit ends in Kansas City in March 1999, it will move to the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

### Sense of place

At the Nelson the outdoor exhibit begins on the tapis verte, just below the south steps, with "Three Bowls" (1990), towering vessel forms displaying the signature craggy contours that the artist creates with a circular saw.

Just south of "Three Bowls" is the second in the grouping, "Slepa

east garden, near Alexander Calder's "Ordinary" and beside a stand of dogwoods that creates a bowerlike effect. The dappled light makes the most of the cedar's coloration, which encompasses reds, grays, slate blues and a rich sienna.

The west side of the south lawn is the location of "Large Bowl" (1997), the sole bronze work in this exhibit. Although its appearance is not that different from the cedar pieces, the use of bronze inevitably provokes associations with memorials.

The last work in the display, "ence pence" (1997), is a row of five elongated hump forms, located at the southern end of the east garden. They huddle shoulder to shoulder, as if in illustration of the principle that strength derives from numbers.

The siting of the pieces was a crucial part of the artist's creative process, according to Scott.

"The placement of her sculptures was always in relationship to the museum, to the plant material, to the other sculptures in the area," Scott said in a recent interview. "It was like she was making a piece of art."

Scott has had her eye on von Rydingsvard for a decade.

"I think she brings to the exhibition schedule and the collection a kind of work we haven't seen before. She's working in a monumental scale in a material that we don't have represented in our outdoor collection. She's bringing a degree of emotional content that we don't have. She's also a woman, which is nice."

It is Scott's hope that the museum will be able to purchase a large outdoor piece by von Rydingsvard for the Nelson's permanent collection.

### Circular logic

Von Rydingsvard is an artist in demand in the 1990s. In the past decade she has fulfilled commissions for museums and corporations from New York to California. Her work is in the collections of numerous museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, Poland. She recently was awarded a Joan Mitchell Foundation grant.

Although von Rydingsvard was born in Germany in 1942, she does not identify with that coun-

try. Her childhood years there were spent in displaced persons camps for Poles, often on former military bases. It was an austere and unpredictable existence; the family was moved frequently, with little advance notice.

When von Rydingsvard was 8, her family moved to Plainfield, Conn. Since 1973 she has lived in New York, where she earned her master's in fine arts from Columbia University in 1975.

That same year she began working with the cedar beams that have become her signature.

Part of von Rydingsvard's attraction to cedar, which she gets from a mill in British Columbia, is its durability. "It's terrific outdoors. It resists insects. It's good with wetness," she said.

Von Rydingsvard has derived her highly distinctive manner of sculpting with cedar. She creates her works from layers of 4- by 4-inch beams, which she carves with a circular saw and then stacks into the configurations she desires.

"I hop all over with the saw," von Rydingsvard said. "I really flirt and become outrageous with the kinds of cuts that I do."

"I think it's because I'm a woman," the artist said, "that I didn't feel I had to make straight cuts and right-angle cuts. I'm using the circular saw in a very unorthodox way. I've allowed myself to make cuts that are more sensuous."

The technical part is easy, von Rydingsvard said. "The hard part is the idea."

The artist's childhood memories are the touchstone for much of her work. Many of her forms reflect her fondness for agricultural implements that she associates with her father, a peasant farmer, and the domestic ladies, spoons and bowls her mother used in the kitchen.

"They're like my icons," she said. "They have the possibility of saving your life, physically and spiritually."