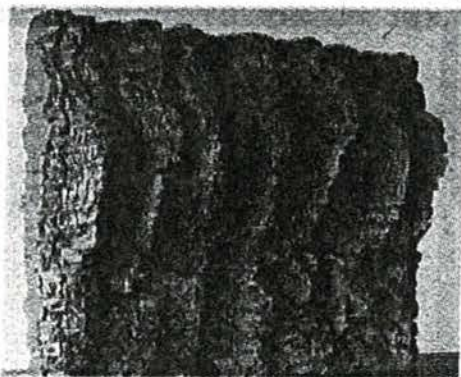


Living Arts

THE BOSTON GLOBE

SEPTEMBER 4, 1998



Von Rydingsvard's "Lace Mountains" is a gnarled wall with flattened ends.

Sculpted forms that evoke nature's forces

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

HANOVER, N.H. — Ever look at some complex geological formation and think that nothing so intricate

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could ever be created by a human hand? Ursula von Rydingsvard's art may make you think again. Von Rydingsvard, who ranks among the foremost living American sculptors, is the subject of a show at Dartmouth's Hood Museum, an exhibition of work of such mind-boggling intricacy that Nature herself might be envious.

Twelve pieces make up the show.
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Sculpted forms evoke a force of Nature

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Von Rydingsvard works big and bigger, and while the display spreads over three large galleries, it comes close to feeling cramped. The works are rich with allusions – to archeology, architecture, landscape, tools, utensils, and the human form – yet they are tantalizingly elusive, impossible to categorize as either “abstract” or “representational.”

Von Rydingsvard has stayed remarkably loyal to a single material – cedar, which she cherishes for its softness and malleability, its readiness to respond to her hand and her circular saw. On the fine 20-minute videotape made during her 1996 residency at the Rhode Island School of Design and now showing in the Hood galleries, she talks about her wood of choice. “It doesn’t resist you,” she says. Oak, she says disparagingly, does. She likes the neutrality of cedar as well, its lack of flashy grain, knots, or pronounced color, and she praises the neat rectilinearity of 4 X 4’s. The tape shows her crawling over a studio’s worth of them, drawing on the timbers with graphite, telling her burly helpers where to cut. When she speaks, she gestures not only with her hands, but her torso, too, adding her weight to her words.

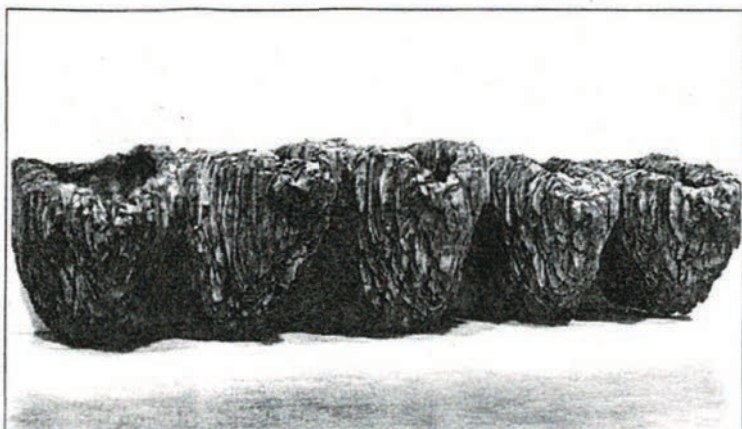
Her physical involvement with making her sculpture echoes in the results, which bear many anatomical references, generally oblique. From certain angles – and von Rydingsvard’s works demand that you view them from all possible perspectives – you’ll see a craggy profile, gaping jaws, a yearning arm, or the imprint of an entire body emerging from wood that has been stacked, laminated, and then eroded to create those complex textures. Giacometti is an influence here. Her bruised and bruising surfaces are related to his dreamy, gouged-out figures. In their ruggedness and anonymity, von Rydingsvard’s works are also related to the headless tribes of another great

contemporary woman sculptor, Magdalena Abakanowicz. In the idea of the body’s imprint on nature, they’re kin to Ana Mendieta’s “earth-body” sculptures.

A bit of biography is in order. Born in Germany to Polish and Ukrainian parents, von Rydingsvard, now 56, spent her early years in German refugee camps before her family emigrated to America in 1950. She studied art at several US universities, including Columbia, where she earned an MFA in sculpture in 1975, the year she also began using the cedar that was to become her signature. She met minimalists including Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt; she traveled, taught, and began an impressive string of commissions and solo shows. She developed a style that combined the incremental repetitions of minimalism with the seemingly chaotic gestures of abstract expressionism.

Formative years spent in bleak erstwhile army barracks left its mark on her sculpture. In his beautiful essay in the Hood show’s catalog, Martin Friedman writes that “a particularly vivid childhood memory she has is of a spoon suspended from a string her mother tied around her neck so she would not lose it. She not only ate with it, but wore it to the Polish kindergarten in a nearby barracks and while playing outdoors.” Variations on spoons later turned up in works including the 1987 “Paul’s Shovel,” a tall, totemic piece that gazes down at you from the wall where it hangs. As with all von Rydingsvard’s work, it juxtaposes the large and the little. The shovel’s outsize bowl is adorned with cutouts that have the daintiness of paper doilies.

Von Rydingsvard’s works are slow, static, and stately; you never lose the sense that they’re made by hand, laboriously, over long periods, the artistic equivalent of geological time. The earliest piece in the show, the 1976 “Untitled (cones),” is an ensemble of nine roughly conical cedar shapes, evenly spaced in three rows



The five vessel shapes of “Krasavica” could be small objects blown up to heroic proportions or giant hunks of topography scaled down.

of three, looking as if they’re about to launch into a formal court dance in which they’ll retain their spatial relationship to one another. The rounded cedar planks curve together at the tops, like tulip buds about to bloom, or ball-gown skirts, or crumpled paper bags. Irregular bulges in the wood suggest some force inside, trying to get out.

Like the cone piece, the 1992-93 “Krasavica” is composed of vessel shapes. In this case it’s a string of five, opening at the top, clinging to one another for support, scarred with deep vertical ruts. As with other von Rydingsvard works, these could equally be small objects – baskets or bowls – blown up to heroic proportions, or giant hunks of topography scaled down. The topographical aspect is particularly strong in the interiors, craters filled with intricate shapes that might have been carved by thousands of years of wind and water.

In “Zakopane,” von Rydingsvard approaches architecture. A 22-foot-long wall of planks, the piece has a row of sagging, udderlike shapes at the bottom and a top that looks like flying buttresses in search of something to hold up. It is a mournful presence, made of wounded wood, evoking medieval choir stalls along a nave or Shakespeare’s “bare, ruin’d

URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD: SCULPTURE

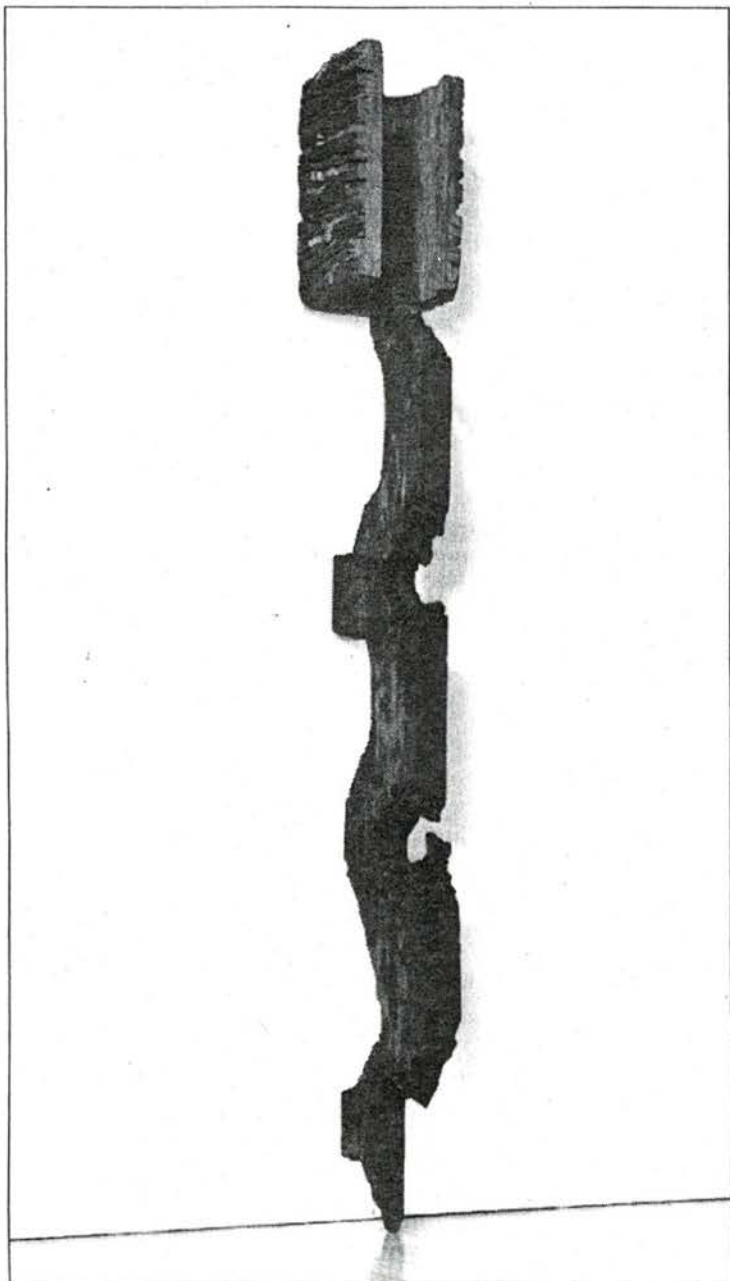
Organized by the Madison Art Center,
Madison, Wis.

At: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth
College, Hanover, N.H., through Oct. 4.
Programs: On Thursday, Oct. 1, 5 p.m.,
von Rydingsvard gives a free public slide
lecture in Dartmouth’s Carpenter Hall,
Room 13, at the corner of North Main
Street and Webster Avenue

choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.”

The commanding 1989 “Lace Mountains” is a free-standing wall, all gnarled forms until the ends, which are neatly flattened, as if someone had sliced off a hunk of a mountain range to move it inside. The squared-off ends create that most essential minimalist structure, the grid. Unlike, say, the rational, pristine geometry of another notable woman sculptor working in wood, Jackie Ferrara, von Rydingsvard’s grids are rough and romantic. They’re closer to Chuck Close’s handmade paper pulp grids, where faces fight their way through to the surface.

Von Rydingsvard subtracts more than she adds. She does, however, often blacken the wood with graphite, accentuating its contours and



"Johnny Angel" combines the incremental repetitions of minimalism with the seemingly chaotic gestures of abstract expressionism.

making it look charred, which contributes to its overall weathered effect. Less often, she adds whitewash, so the wood looks snow-dusted. In "Maglownica," named for the board traditionally used by Polish women to batter rough linen sheets into softness, she stretches dried, translucent cow intestines over a tall plank that leans against the wall. Painful-looking protrusions from under the taut membrane make it look

about to tear.

A wealth of contradictions contribute to the continuing hold von Rydyngsward's sculptures maintain over the viewer's imagination. The works are gawky, yet graceful; looming, but also detailed. Among the many virtues that make the show well worth the trip to Hanover, there's one that few art exhibitions can boast: Because of all that cedar, it smells wonderful.