

sculpture

Kansas City, MO

Ursula von Rydingsvard

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art
Ursula von Rydingsvard's sculptures celebrate human emotions and imagination on a monumental scale. Her giant, misshapen bowls, toy boats with handles, lumpish figures, and wooden rings almost breathe, love, laugh, and grieve. In the terraced 17-acre Nelson-Atkins Sculpture Garden, four rough-hewn wooden forms and one bronze join the giant badminton shuttlecocks by Claes Oldenburg, an Alexander Calder work, and the museum's famed Henry Moore bronzes. Two more

von Rydingsvard sculptures and a video showing the artist at work are on view inside the massive Beaux Arts-style museum building. The colors and forms of Oldenburg, Calder, and Moore stand out on the green turf. Von Rydingsvard's earth-colored sculptures, appearing weathered, old, and wise, blend in.

Like the artist, who with her parents and six siblings spent five years of her life (1945-50) living in German refugee camps for displaced Polish people, her sculptures are immigrants slated to move on. Yet they align easily with the 30-foot terraces, the

trees, grass, and sculpture. Thanks to superb siting by the artist, together with Deborah Emont Scott, chief curator, and Sanders Sosland, curator of modern and contemporary art, the works seem wedded to their sites and in harmony with their surroundings. Even though each piece weighs from 5,000 to 7,200 pounds, all but the bronze cleverly deconstruct into units that can be reassembled. The artist's construction techniques are an important aspect of her work.

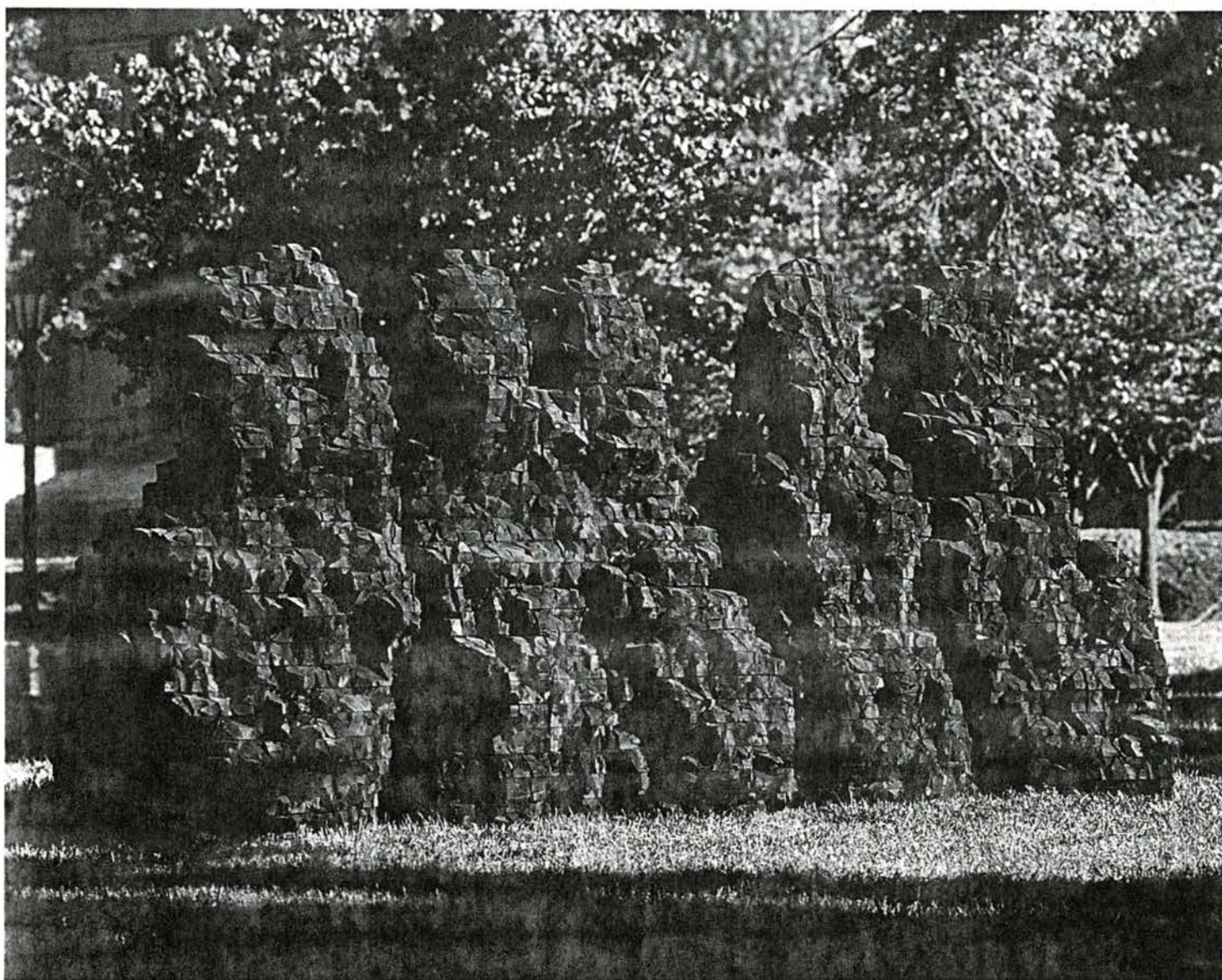
Bronze Bowl (1997), the only bronze in the exhibit, was cast at Tallix Foundry after a cedar



The bowl is 12.5 feet tall. The bronze surface shows the process of making the original cedar model with a circular saw. Each side of the bowl has stories to tell, forms that jut out and retreat, seeming weary, difficult, wounded, brave, and haunting. From a distance, the jagged forms merge into one monument that seems noble and enduring.

Slepa Geniu, 13 boat-like forms with handles, suggests varied symbolism. These could be alligators

Ursula von Rydingsvard, *ence pence*, 1997. Cedar and graphite, 89.5 x 186.5 x 72 in.

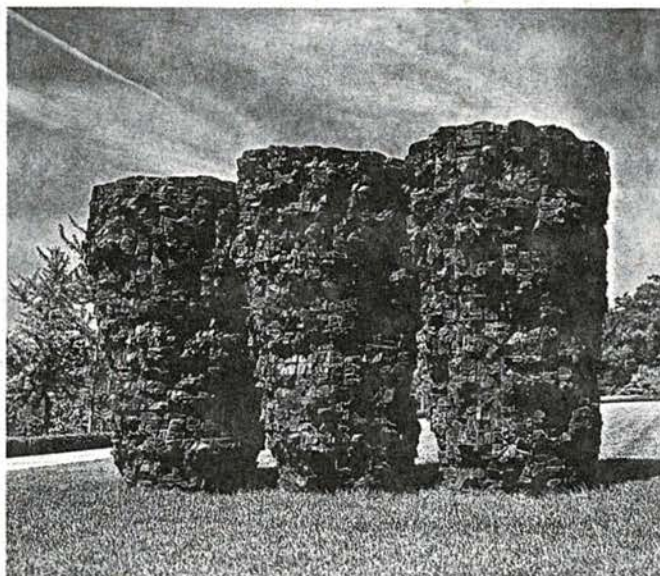


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on the prow, gunboats, or provocative sensual interconnecting lingam and yoni shapes. The dot patterns made by the circular saw on the boats' outer surfaces break up the linear horizon lines and establish a playful, intimate rhythm. In the catalogue essay, Michael Brenson says that they are "aligned on the ground like Mexican handcarts or stretchers at the front, waiting to be used." The artist determined the size of the vessels by outlining the body of Bart Karski, head of her studio and production team.

Thirteen forms also appear in *Hand e over*, an irregular circle of shallow adjoining tubs. The title refers to a Midwestern children's game. The artist has said that she sees the circular forms as "unwieldy, awkward elephant feet" implanted into the ground with their toenails bulging out. In the video about the making of this piece in collaboration with the artist's team and students from the Rhode Island School of Design, the artist states that the forms are related to two large shallow plates she exhibited at the University of Massachusetts Art Gallery in 1995. These, in turn, were partly inspired by Bernard Rudofsky's text *Architecture without Architects* (New York Museum of Modern Art, 1965) and its topographical images from the Chinese province of Kanzu. One of the artist's strengths is that her work has topographical features which are in dialogue with varied surroundings; it is surprising that this facet of her work has not received more critical attention. In any event, viewers can experience the work's sense of play without needing to know that it also simultaneously refers to a depression-era children's game, elephant feet with toenails, circles that form inner and outer circles, and landscape patterns.

Von Rydingsvard's titles often use Polish games or rudimentary implements from daily rural Polish life as signs or icons. *ence pence* refers to the saying, "once pence,



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Three Bowls*, 1990. Cedar and graphite, 112.5 x 190 x 96 in.

w ktrej rence," which roughly translates into a Pavlovian game in which an adult asks a child to guess which hand holds a surprise treat. The five triangular mounds reminded me of five portly grandmothers having tea; other viewers will undoubtedly have their own associations. Each pyramid has curious details, indented areas, and circular saw patterns.

Like an old-fashioned carpenter, the artist brings wood to life, yet the structures have unique, sometimes mystifying properties. *Ocean Floor* exemplifies the artist's method of building forms with rhythm and resonance. Built in layers cut with a circular saw from cedar beams, the form spirals and inches forward with jagged, irregular rhythms, then moves around itself, snake-like. The upper lip forms a parabola whose shape loosely recalls a cross-section of the internal surface of the base of the skull. The rough-hewn outer bowl shelters a softer inner surface that literally echoes when the viewer speaks into its hollow. Von Rydingsvard related, "I was desperate to make it impossibly light and impossibly heavy. I had in mind the ripple of a stone on

the surface of the water or children's snow-caked mittens. It feels to me quite risky and new. It's a mixture of two materials, the cedar and the intestine. There's something light in the way these stitches hop from one four by four to another, a domestic rhythm."

During the processes of cutting, placing, labeling, stacking in reverse order, gluing and clamping, sectioning, moving, reassembling, and aging with a coating of graphite, the structure acquires its own biomorphic identity. The bowl is a synthesis of its making and the associations rising from its shape. Among these, von Rydingsvard's studio has an old sheepskin hat with earflaps, one that her father wore in Ukraine: leathery outside, woolly within. The hat is unified around a hand-stitched central circle. If the form is seen as an upside down hat or as a bowl, its scale is monumental. If seen as the earth's core, or as an ironic construction freeing the staid symmetry of a Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome, its scale is microcosmic.

The bowl is intimately related to the sacks along the edge. These, too, have many associations. In addition to associating them with children's mittens, the artist recalls seeing leather-covered

berry pounders at an Indian museum in Illinois. A Cree game similar to lacrosse (pictured in Stewart Colin's *Games of North American Indians* in the artist's studio) employs two oblong buckskin bags weighted with sand and connected by a leather neck. Cree women played this game by using sticks to toss and carry the double ball to goals about a mile apart. Von Rydingsvard covers her game pieces—hand sewn muslin sacks filled with earth—with cow intestines, turning the images associated with this material inside out. The shape and feel of the sacks recall work by Eva Hesse.

Ocean Floor is a descendant of circles and cycles in history, stemming from the periods and the objects named above yet encompassing other things and time frames, one being the tree rings in Brancusi's carved bowl at the Museum of Modern Art. Von Rydingsvard's bowl fractures time, then pieces it together to incorporate several historical points of view. Like Beethoven's symphonies, the artist's sculpture magnifies themes about our moments on earth.

—Jan Garden Castro