

Entering the world of Ursula von Rydingsvard

The exhibition of more than 20 years of sculpture by Ursula von Rydingsvard, at the Chicago Cultural Center, is a formally beautiful show that is made compelling by some knowledge of the artist's biography.

This needs to be said at the start because the primary approach to art during the years of most of the sculpture on show de-emphasized biographical data in favor of rigorous formal analysis.

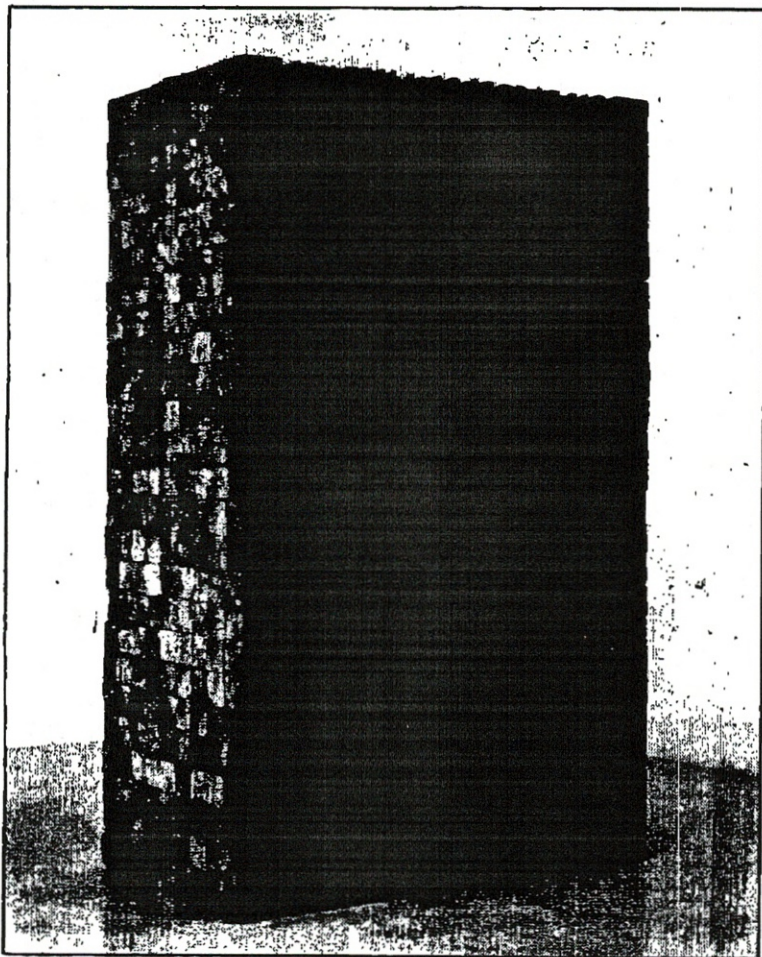
Such rigor has diminished throughout the present decade until we now have reached the opposite pole, where biography — with a special emphasis on issues of race and gender — is pressed into service to elevate

criticaleye

Alan G. Artner

work that can scarcely withstand formal scrutiny.

Von Rydingsvard's sculpture needs no biographical help. It is perfectly satisfying as a series of organic abstract forms in wood that the artist has painted or darkened with graphite. The works' associations with the natural landscape as well as manmade implements also are clear, requiring no obvious personal tie to the artist for an audience to feel aesthetic impact.



Von Rydingsvard's works are organic abstract forms in wood that the artist has painted or darkened with graphite.

This is how it should be. The force of each piece as a visual object always comes first. Yet after the shapes and surfaces (and even smells) of von Rydingsvard's cedar sculptures make their appeal, they are enriched by our knowing the artist was born during World War II in Poland and frequently moved from one refugee camp to another for years after the end of the conflict.

Then, perhaps, we also will know that one of the piece's titles, "Zakopane," refers to a famous town in Poland where both composer Karol Szymanowski and Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, father of the Polish avant-garde, were held in thrall by the robust folk culture of the Tatra Mountains. And maybe, too, we will grasp that the source of a piece called "Maglownica" is a washboard used by Polish peasants to soften bedsheets of the coarsest linen.

Von Rydingsvard has denied ever consciously bringing biographical associations to her work. Yet they are inevitably present in some of her titles and, more important, give the recurrence of certain motifs — mountains, bowls, domestic utensils — a specific resonance that is more powerful than artistic kinship or free-floating obsession.



Von Rydingsvard's monumental spoon or ladle shapes, for example, could easily have come from Alberto Giacometti's figure sculptures that suggest the eternal receptivity of woman, especially since the artist has acknowledged her forebear as a kind of poetic source.

But is there not a greater charge that comes from the child von Rydingsvard wearing a spoon on a string around her neck as if it were a gem? In the poor and unsettled conditions she suffered, the spoon was indeed precious, yet her fascination with it clearly was as something more ornamental and grand than a humble implement. In a sense, the fantasy embedded itself and waited to be released, as eventually it was through the making of sculpture.

In the mid-1970s, when von Rydingsvard made the first of her sculptures on view, their large size and rough appear-

ance could not help but be taken as a sign of assertion by a woman. That seems less important now than it was then, as a more "feminine" sensibility was also present in both the symbolic vessel forms and the extraordinary patience required to create the richly faceted (and colored) surfaces.

They are, after all, what impresses viewers most strongly, for in a highly personal way von Rydingsvard has successfully contributed to a vein of primitivism that began more than a century ago with the carvings of Paul Gauguin. (Through Jan. 31.)

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