

# NY ARTS

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

Spain Pts 850  
France FF 50  
Germany DM 17  
Great Britain £ 4  
Japan ¥ 750  
Canada \$ 6.95  
U.S.A. \$5.00

Vol. 5 n° 6

Ursula von Rydingsvard



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When you arrive at Ursula von Rydingsvard's studio in the Williamsburg area of Brooklyn your senses are overwhelmed by the aroma of wood; this brings you back to the time of monolithic monuments. Sculptures, fragments of future sculptures, and four-by-four beams of milled cedar bring to mind the original cosmic ordering. We are at the start of a poetic journey that reconciles the mythic and the daily.

Von Rydingsvard's sculptures encourage interpretations that are linked to life. Multilayered, ambiguous, and contradictory they are not easily read. They speak of the iconography of natural geological



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Bowl in a Bowl*, 1999. Cedar, Graphite. Photo: Jerry L. Thompson. Courtesy Artist.

formations as well as of prehistoric sites where ritual was the essence of life.

I walked into her studio on a raining morning. Her persona, like her sculptures, is solemn, decisive.

**Ursula von Rydingsvard** - This is the part of the studio where the cutting is done; here are the two fans that exhaust the tremendous amount of sawdust that we make.

**AMT**- Do you do everything here?

**UR**- I have another studio upstate. We are here nine months of the year. So in the summer I go upstate with my guys for three months. The summers here get brutal. It is much easier to make large commissions there. But, yes, I make everything, nothing gets fabricated.

**AMT**- You seem to have the habit of challenging your own assumptions. Pieces that were initially smaller are sometimes transformed into large-scale sculptures after they return to the studio.

**UR**- It is true. I don't think I can really see the work in the gallery. There is a lot of anxiety involved when I get it out to the gallery—especially in New York. You have a lot of vulnerability, in having your thoughts displayed so publicly. When it is out there I am worried, and think, "oh my god! what kind of reaction is it getting." I don't worry about that here, in the studio. I can experiment. I am safe but in the gallery everything is cleaned up and it is not my psychological or physical space. I feel stronger about how I can manipulate the work here.

**AMT**- Since 1990 you have been developing ambitious ideas for large-scale projects. You are currently working on a major commission for the Queens County

Courthouse?

**UR**- Yes, this is a part here of the piece for the Queens County Courthouse. This is just one one hundredth, or one thousandth of it. The final result is not going to be made out of cedar. But, I will build the whole thing out of cedar first. We are just doing this for an exper-

iment so we can put plastic on it—vacuum formed and I can fool around with this plastic surface. Here this is the surface, it looks awful now, but I will sand blast it to take off the shine — this is just to give you the idea.

AMT- Why did you decide to change material?

UR- The Courthouse has an open atrium. There will be escalators that will take people up four floors through this space and there is a forty by forty-foot skylight above. The light comes through the skylight and I want the light to carry through the piece. The piece is going have a dome, a very funky cap, about 20 to 22 feet in diameter. There will be ribbons that will go on either side to the escalator. It cannot be made in cedar because it would block the light. It would be too oppressive.

AMT - Your cedar works are made out of layers of small elements. Forms repeat, yet they are freely shaped and never identical. Are you doing the same with this piece, making it in pieces and then joining it together?

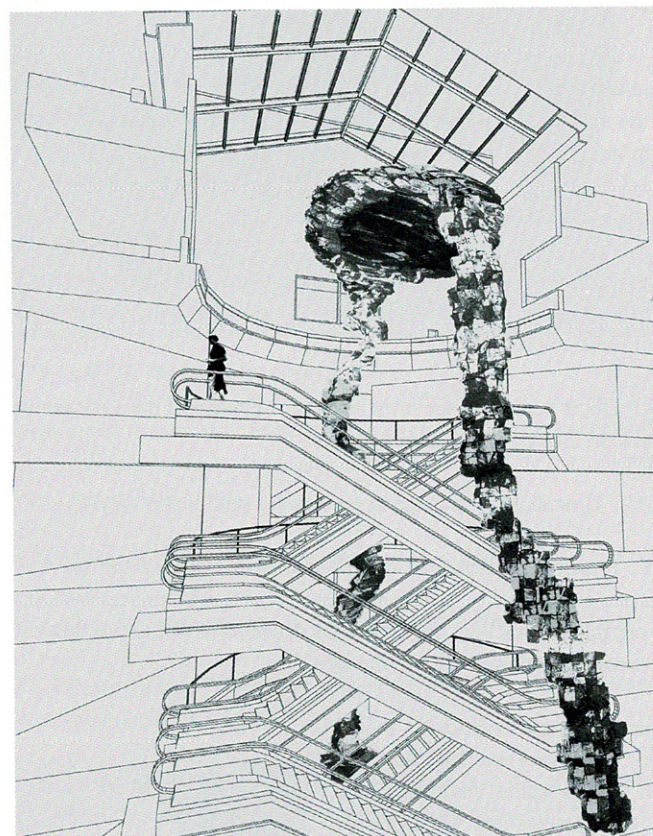
UR- Yes. That it is right. There will be vertebrae on the inside of this piece because there will need to be a structure from which to suspend the piece. The engineer and I will work on that. There will be a lot of stainless steel for that but I can work it up so that is not so obvious. And each of the plastic units will have wire that will hold it to the frame. It is going to be complicated. As long as I can keep my part really energetic I think that it will work. I think I can find a way to make the plastic speak that is soulful. I will spend as much time to figure it out as needed.

AMT- Is this the first time that you are using plastic?

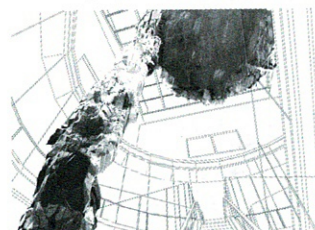
UR - In some way it is the intestine of the animal that led me to the plastic. When I sand blast it I think I can get some more delicate effects. I will use a lot transparent painting that you will be able to see through, like water painting. I am going to California the first week of June and will do nothing but experiment with that plastic. I am going to feel my way. We are going to have many small casts so it is possible to experiment and put them up to the light, then I can get closer to what I want.

AMT- You had stated on previous occasions that you begin work with “an image that I get in my head;” you don’t draw or make models. How did you manage to make a presentation for this commission?

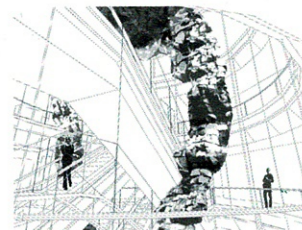
UR - I must say for this County Courthouse commission they forced me to do models. All of it is a boring and stupid formality because in



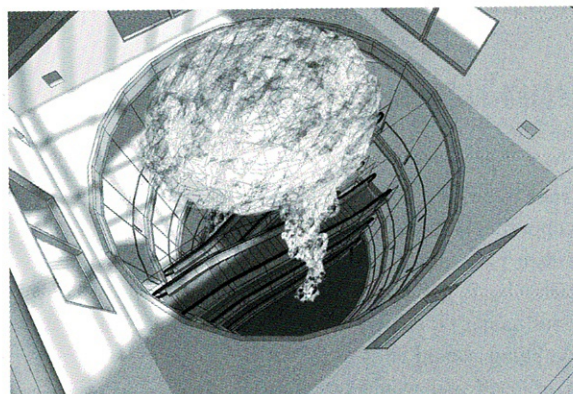
Ursula von Rydingsvard, Court House Sculpture. Perspective from top escalator, Graphics: Zitron. Courtesy Artist.



Perspective in Atrium Cutaway.



Perspective from Third floor.



Perspective from above

the end I will start by making the whole thing out of cedar and it will go the way it needs to go. I think it is because they need to know what I am doing so they can make decisions and be helpful. But I don't know myself and not knowing yourself is sometimes very exciting because you are not locked into an absolute.

AMT- This is a concern that artists have about working with public art, that there is this heavy bureaucracy pushing against them and their creative process.

UR - Oh, it could kill the artist in you. It could kill the very reason you went into art if you aren't careful

AMT - How did you manage to go forward with this project?

UR - I made a presentation to the Mayor's Commission on the Arts. These are supposedly very professional people who understand public art, this is what they do, they make decisions about things that will have a visual consequence in the city.

I made one presentation to them. They were very excited, but they told me to come back to make another presentation. Which I did. They are concerned about my working with plastic. It seemed that what they said had validity but that there wasn't trust in my, not enough faith in my, ability. They liked what I had done in the past, the cedar work. But, they were worried about what was going to happen in plastic — I'm worried about what is going to happen in plastic.

AMT - What did interest you about this commission?

UR - I wanted to take the commission as an opportunity to deal more with light than I have in the past, not to absorb it but to deflect it and see if I could transfer it somehow. The whole thing would still be spiritually oriented and would be

humanly oriented. That is extremely important to me. I cannot just change that thinking because I am working with another material. And it doesn't mean that you are going to lose soulfulness. I told them that this is the same brain that operated to make the cedar pieces. They also didn't like that the piece is hanging from the ceiling. There is nothing else you can do with that space. I thought in my head, who in the hell are you to tell me not to make it too plasticity or to hang it? How could you have so little faith? You don't even understand. They are going to approve it. But that they even feel they have a right to enter in that realm of my work — that is mine, that is really my decision. Without being able to make these decisions why would I want to do the project? Why would I want to take on this huge job, which is what it would be then, if it didn't have the possibility of ending up adventurous?

UR - Would they tell an architect such a thing?

AMT - They would.

UR - I cannot think of another circumstance where someone would be



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Bowl with Folds*, 1998-99. Cedar, Graphite. Indianapolis Museum of Art. Photo: Jerry L. Thompson. Courtesy Artist.

so judgmental about your work while you are trying to figure it out and think about it. You know the last thing in the world you want to think about is what they told you to think about so you have to hold onto yourself. Then of course you will, because otherwise why are you in this. It happens a lot that people buckle under to the demands, because the demands are tenacious.

AMT- When something new happens in the neighborhood people feel like they have a right to say something about it. That can be architecture, another large project or a large piece of art. It becomes a question of how you involve the neighbors and explain to them the project or push them away. Have you been in this position?

UR - I did a presentation at a community board that is in Jamaica, Queens where this courthouse is going to be built. The woman who is the project director, she presented the project; it was really the main thing on the agenda for that evening. We went out to Jamaica. I was happy to see this kind of democratic process going on, people were very vocal. It seemed open in terms of the people getting their say. We had presentation boards ready.

Anyway, when it came time for me to make my presentation they didn't want to hear me. They were angry beyond belief. It is the closest thing I have ever experienced to being booed off the stage. It was, as we were discussing, that they had never had a chance to be part of the process of choosing me. I was presented as a fait complete. They didn't want to know about the work, I never said a word. They wanted an African American artist; for this amount of money they wanted maybe 10 or 20 artists to do pieces. Some part of me wanted to say take it and do what you think is best, do what you think will make your life the richest. I couldn't. There was already too much of a commitment to this project and I couldn't walk away from it. I think that the technical procedure is beyond my understanding but there is a profound lack of communication between the artist and the community in the choosing process.

AMT- In addition to the Court House project you are working on several other projects.

UR. This table is for another project, for a performance. There will be five or six of the tables with the performers, women, standing in front of each hole. In each hole there are going to be small intestines, in a big ball like yarn. Each woman is going to have a white generic dress. She will iron the intestines and it will stick to the bottom of the iron.



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Doolin, Doolin*, 1995-97. Cedar, Graphite. Courtesy Artist.

Then she will tear it off and she will move on. The performance will be finished when she gets through the ball. There will be a smell but it won't be too bad.

AMT- Where and when would this performance take place?

UR - I am not so sure yet, but P. S. 1. would be a good place for it.

AMT- I think for many artists the title of the piece is very important. How do you decide to name your work?

UR- Sometimes it is before I start, sometimes it is in the process and sometimes it is months after. I don't know how important they are, they are attached, but tangentially attached. So, they get born in different ways, and in the end they are not so important compared to what you feel. The titles are something I play with and have a good time playing with.

AMT- Like a game

UR- A private one

AMT- Most artists creating public sculpture are men, do you feel different about it because you are a woman?

UR. I feel that I have been very lucky. It is very hard for me to tell if there are prejudices against me as a woman at this moment. There is more of a prejudice against age. This society allows one queen and that is Louise Bourgeois. But that shouldn't be true because there are a lot of other women who are doing extremely well.