



Ursula von Rydingsvard: Mama, your legs, 2000, cedar, graphite, steel, approx. 9 1/2 by 15 1/2 by 12 feet. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, David Allison. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

Stasis and Agitation

Ursula von Rydingsvard, known for her large-scale sculptures made of laminated blocks of cedar, surprised visitors to a recent New York show with a huge motorized work.

BY JANET KOPLOS

Ursula von Rydingsvard's large sculptures, laminated blocks of cedar carved into simple shapes with complicated surfaces, have a characteristic somberness. Faceted in abrupt, agitated planes or nearly shredded by freehand slices made with a circular saw, the exteriors are darkened with sprayed graphite and recall early Cubist painting.

Although she has developed a recognizable style, von Rydingsvard is not one to be pigeonholed. Surprisingly, her wood sculptures can endure outdoor exposure, and she is currently creating a piece made of resin, to be suspended over a bank of escalators in the atrium of a new courthouse in Jamaica, Queens. Still, no one who knows her work would have dreamed that she'd devise a massive motorized sculpture. This unexpected work occupied an entire room in her spring show at Galerie Lelong in New York: within a 9-foot-tall metal armature, seven rows of five coarse wooden mortars placed on the floor received pendulous wooden pestles attached to offsetting crankshafts that allowed each to strike individually.

The piece seemed to operate in slow motion. In a softly lit environment pervaded by the sweet, sharp pungency of fresh cedar, each pestle dumbly rose and fell, lurching to the side, striking the wall of its mortar with a jarring, hollow thud. Each occupied its own place in a rhythmic din too complex to sort out. The work evokes an antiquated industrial machine, the slowness suggesting its imminent halt. At the same time, the thrust and withdrawal of the parts has a natural analogy to sexual intercourse. But the pestles' movement, with its sense of weight and pause, is more suggestive of a pained body; the effect is not erotic but sorrowful. You might think of one foot sloggingly placed after the other, exhaustion refused by determination. This association may be supported by the cryptic title, *Mama, your legs*.

Von Rydingsvard's sculptures are striking for their size, their roughness and their ability to evoke sensations in the viewer that seem to arise out of preverbal intelligence. Her textured masses never seem to be simply formalist constructions, even when viewers don't know her history. In fact, her art is rooted in her childhood as a displaced person, born in 1942 to Polish/Ukrainian parents in a German work camp, the fifth of seven children. The family emigrated to the U.S. in 1950, and von Rydingsvard grew up in Connecticut. She started out as a painter, and she worked in metal before discovering wood's aptness for her ends. She now creates her gallery pieces and commissions with a team of assistants at studios in Brooklyn and upstate New York.



Untitled Brush, 2000, cedar, dried cow intestines, 116 by 39 by 11 inches.

The pieces are striking for their size, their roughness and their ability to evoke sensations in a viewer that seem to arise out of preverbal intelligence.



Above, bowl-in-a-bowl, 1999, cedar, graphite, approx. 4 by 6½ by 7 feet.

Right, Bowl with Folds, 1998-99, cedar, graphite, 12 by 16 by 16 feet; at the Doris C. Freedman Plaza. A Public Art Fund project. Photo Dennis Cowley.

Her works do not expostulate on art issues or complain about a difficult early life. Instead they are the equivalent of a clenched jaw. She adopts essential, timeless and largely impersonal forms: surrogates for the body such as hand tools, protective elements such as walls and functional domestic objects such as bowls. Bowl forms dominated her Lelong show.

Among the many cupped shapes was the broad, stable floor work *bowl-in-a-bowl*, nearly 4 feet high and an almost-round 6½ by 7 feet across. This sculpture exploits the easy receptiveness of the vessel form, which we all know as an ancient and durable human invention for storage or display, its rounded involution traditionally associated with female contours. Here it is magnified and made fierce: the sculpture looks like two stacked bowls—if bowls can be rugged, heavy and huge (big enough to climb into).

The largest fixed sculpture at Lelong was a wall-like structure more than 8 feet tall and 10 feet wide, and a daunting 3½ feet thick. At various points, usually head height or above, narrow gaps allow a mere glimpse into that mysterious front-to-back depth. You could also hide behind this mass: it was placed near a gallery wall, but far enough away to permit circumambulation. The title is surprising: the defensive bulwark is named *5 Open Bowls*. Open? While the thick wall may have openings at the top, that's higher than any viewer could see. Bowls? Even if the gaps are meant to define separate objects, the forms are more like columns than bowls. For that matter, the work seems less like five things than like one in the process of mitosis. The title makes viewers shift gears in evaluating the piece.

An example of her tool forms was the only sculpture in the show not made of laminated cedar. It is a simple wooden wall piece just under 10 feet tall that resembles a rustic rake. Hanging from the rows of teeth of *Untitled Brush* is a tangle of bleached-yellow strands that

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are neither hair nor hay, as you might expect, but rather dried cow gut. While the form is rigid, the fibrous linear fall is so fine and light that it responds to air currents.

It is typical of von Rydingsvard to make contrary works, and not only in regard to their titles. Usually her sculptures are intimidating (dark, stiff, prickly, oversized), and yet they offer a hint of softness or a point of emotional accessibility. Her use of familiar imagery is one means to this end, as is the visible evidence of labor (those seams and cuts), which is understandable even to neophyte viewers. In public settings, it's almost impossible to resist touching the minutely faceted surfaces of her sculptures, such as the 15-ton wooden *Bowl with Folds*, a Public Art Fund project currently installed at the southeast corner of Central Park. Passersby caress the bumps and explore the crevices of this tall, crimped pincushion shape—another twist of the term “bowl,” since it has no openings visible from ground level.

Other surface markings that are a residue of the construction process also provide subtle points of interest, details that attract the eye and mind. Each form begins with cedar beams that are glued together before carving. The surplus glue oozes from the seams and remains visible on the finished piece. In addition, the blocks are marked with numbers or letters that might be an assembly code, dimensions or perhaps just working notations and calculations. The marks seem to carry meanings that can't be translated. They evoke an unrecoverable past. All the various detailing makes the massive pieces seem almost to disassemble. A sense of surface agitation against an underlying stability is a richly metaphoric combination: the small things change, the big ones remain the same.

Rhoades

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ment with the legacy of Duchamp. In discussing *Perfect World*, Rhoades more than once refers to Duchamp's 1942 “First Papers of Surrealism” installation, which encumbered an otherwise conventional exhibition with a mile of string (out of 16 originally purchased), fashioned into a disordered web between walls and ceiling. This seminal bit of mischief is clearly reflected in the roughly five miles of pipe with which Rhoades filled (obstructed?) the ground floor of the Deichtorhallen. Just as important to both the Hamburg and New York installations, though, is Rhoades's own interpretation of the objet-trouvé tradition, which from Duchamp forward has involved items plucked from well-established use and renamed art. By contrast, Rhoades (like others in his generation, though he is perhaps exemplary) has shown himself to be altogether uninterested in materials with a past. He doesn't redirect everyday items from working lives to estheticized leisure, and he certainly isn't interested in objects that have accrued personal and social history. Particularly in earlier, more freewheeling installations, Rhoades's primary artistic gesture consisted, conspicuously, of consumption (mostly of merchandise at such warehouse stores as Home Depot, Costco and Ikea); the role he usurped was not the Conceptualist one of critic (which ultimately derives from Duchamp), but rather that of collector. It is the circulation of goods through systems dominated by cash, not theory, that captured his imagination.

The success of the Zwirner installation is that it takes this idea much further, historically, thematically and formally, than Rhoades has previously done. The perpetual construction and disassembly of the gleaming mill, apt symbol for the vicissitudes of fortune-hunters everywhere, is a generous metaphor, too, for the general tendency of



5 Open Bowls, 1999, cedar, graphite,
approx. 8 1/2 by 10 1/2 by 3 1/2 feet.

Out of the folds and gaps of von Rydingsvard's sculptures creep thoughts, unspoken stories and intimations of places and things that stay with you. You can't easily forget that massive machine. When it's stopped, the air suddenly seems empty. The highest pestles swing aimlessly for a while, as if reluctant to let go. □

Ursula von Rydingsvard's work was shown at Galerie Lelong in New York [Mar. 10-Apr. 29, 2000]. Mama, your legs will be exhibited at the Butler Gallery in Kilkenny, Ireland, in late summer. Bowl with Folds remains at Doris C. Freedman Plaza in New York City through the spring. A large sculpture is on display in Cologne's Sculpture Park until the end of the year, and two new works have been installed in Massachusetts, at the Williams College science building and at UMass Boston's Arts on the Point.

things to break down—or, more positively, break out—a theme remarkably widespread in new art work this season. Rhoades concedes to a Doctor Evil element in his installations; witness the scaled-up Mephisto-brand shoe box,⁹ containing plexi-mounted drawings, that was part of the Zwirner exhibition. But he also says, credibly, that he is a Romantic and an optimist. “It's not about breaking the bank, it's just about pushing things to the limits. All the pieces are a bit short. They are always a bit unfulfilled to me.”¹⁰ Hard to believe. But it is the dreamer in Rhoades that is most apparent, and appealing, in this recent work. □

1. Jason Rhoades interviewed by Eva Meyer-Hermann, “A Place Where Nobody Could Step Over My Extension Cords: Or: The Next Level. At The End of the Rainbow. *Perfect World*,” in *Perfect World*, Hamburg, Deichtorhallen, 2000, p. 11.

2. *Perfect World* interview, p. 11.

3. *Perfect World* interview, p. 26.

4. *Perfect World* interview, p. 41.

5. Cars were a primary subject of such previous installations as *CHERRY Makita: Honest Engine Work* (1993), which fashioned a massive drill out of a Chevy V-8 engine and reproduced a garage; *Swedish Erotica and Fiero Parts* (1994) and *Impala (International Museum Project About Leaving and Arriving)*, in which the eponymous car was driven through Europe in 1998, stopping at various art venues.

6. It is perhaps for this reason that Daniel Birnbaum called Rhoades “the most American of contemporary American artists.” (“A Thousand Words: Jason Rhoades Talks About His Impala Project,” *Artforum*, September 1998, p. 135.)

7. Russell Ferguson, “Given: 1. The Caprice 2. The Ferrari,” *Parkett* 58, 2000, p. 122.

8. *Perfect World* interview, p. 17.

9. It is also pertinent that Rhoades favors Mephisto shoes; previous installations have featured his earlier brand preferences, Nike and (briefly) New Balance.

10. *Perfect World* interview, p. 49.

Perfect World appeared at the Deichtorhallen, Hamburg [Nov. 10, 1999-Mar. 5, 2000] and “of perfect world” at David Zwirner Gallery, New York [Oct. 13-Nov. 18, 2000].

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