

Art/Architecture; Fighting With the Monsters That Fill Her Studio

By AVIS BERMAN FEB. 24, 2002

BEING big doesn't mean being invulnerable," said the sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard. For nearly 25 years, Ms. von Rydingsvard has made massive abstract sculptures of scored and chiseled wood that are as intimate as they are substantial. Each work is enriched by the interplay between a monolithic scale and the caressing detail of the densely furrowed surfaces.

Based in New York and exhibiting steadily since 1977, Ms. von Rydingsvard started being noticed in the late 1980's; today, at 59, she is in the front rank of contemporary American sculptors. The Metropolitan, Whitney, Brooklyn and Nelson-Atkins museums, the Walker Art Center, the Storm King Art Center and Microsoft have acquired pieces, and the ambition and adventurousness of her art continue to escalate.

An exhibition of five recent works, on view through May 5 at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, N.Y., is aptly titled "Ursula von Rydingsvard: On an Epic Scale." Later this year, "Katul-Katul," her first public-art commission, will be installed in the Queens Family Courthouse in Jamaica, Queens. The sculpture is so enormous that she has never seen it whole: her studio, a 4,000-square-foot loft in Brooklyn, is too small to hold it.

Because Ms. von Rydingsvard is known for immense undertakings, she was ideal for the Neuberger's forbidding Theater Gallery. "The space is challenging, and holding it is difficult," said Dede Young, the museum's curator of modern and

contemporary art. "The ceiling is 20 feet high, and it's a 5,000-square-foot box. It makes work look very small."

Last June Ms. Young invited Ms. von Rydingsvard to exhibit at the Neuberger because she thought the artist could handle the physical space. Ms. Young originally envisioned a show of sculptures executed over the last two or three years. But after visiting the gallery, Ms. von Rydingsvard decided to create works to suit its dimensions.

"I was amazed that she would be available," Ms. Young said. "It wasn't normal to do things so quickly."

Ms. von Rydingsvard agrees. "The experience has been very different," she said. "Most museum shows are three years in advance, and sometimes there's a dread that comes along with the excitement. There was simply no time for the fear. You just do the work."

Two pieces -- "Bowl for Boston" (2001) and "Krasawica II" (1998-2001; krasawica is Ukrainian for "beautiful young woman") -- were finished, and another three -- "Can't Eat Black," "Mama, Build Me a Fence" and "Lace Collars" -- were constructed for the occasion.

Last summer Ms. von Rydingsvard was in the throes of having a wood model of "Katul-Katul" (the title comes from a tossing motion in a Polish children's game) fabricated in transparent plastic for the Queens County Courthouse. The final work - - a semicircular dome from which two long ribbons will twist and trail like gargantuan jellyfish between two escalators -- will be suspended in the cylindrical atrium of the building.

"Katul-Katul" is the first time since 1976 that Ms. von Rydingsvard has used a material other than milled cedar beams. Yet she has so absorbed wood as a primary medium that she had to think out the whole project in cedar, plotting a model of identical size -- nearly four stories high -- from the ground up, length by length, cut by cut, stack by stack. Only when the entire model of "Katul-Katul" was completed could she break it into smaller segments for vacuum-forming into light and airy plastic.

The commission was supposed to be unveiled and the courthouse opened last fall, but Sept. 11 made postponement necessary. Meanwhile, Ms. von Rydingsvard had to prepare for the Neuberger show and wanted to experiment with the wooden model for the dome section of "Katul-Katul." She flipped the dome segment upside

down so it became a vast bowl. Then she cut it up. "I dreamed of pulling it apart for a long time," she said. "It took courage to slice it up on the chance of coming up with something else, but life has a way of feeding you from directions you don't expect."

Destroying the model for "Katul-Katul" was an audacious act for Ms. von Rydingsvard because of the symbolism the bowl form holds for her. "The structure of the bowl is a means by which I can understand almost anything," she said, principally because it hints at so many sensations. Sustenance, domesticity, fertility and emptiness immediately come to mind, but this "vessel of emotions" can also be an exposed maw or a cavern bristling with jagged contours.

For the Neuberger exhibition, Ms. von Rydingsvard ended up creating "Can't Eat Black," a visceral essay on the theme of dislocation. Chunks of the bowl were wrenched apart, reassembled at angles and pierced by steel rods. It is now a broken basin, a sagging, sprawling structure, rife with fissures, shims and mended seams that must be propped up by small columns. In contrast to the gliding, rippling rhythms of "Lace Collars" and "Krasawica II," the unstable surfaces of "Can't Eat Black" heave. The sculpture, which suggests a rupture in the earth, looks like rising and falling tectonic plates that will never be smoothly reunited. Indeed, after the piece is taken down, an exact reconstruction will be impossible. "The process records the doubt, the groping, the uncertainty," Ms. Rydingsvard said.

Ms. von Rydingsvard was born in Germany, one of seven children of Ukrainian and Polish parents named Karoliszyn, who had lived in rural Poland until they were removed to a large farm and forced to work for the Nazis. After World War II, the family was shuttled among refugee camps until 1950, when they emigrated to the United States and settled in Plainville, Conn.

After studying painting as an undergraduate in New Hampshire and Florida, Ms. von Rydingsvard entered the master of fine arts program at Columbia University, where she took up sculpture. With Ronald Bladen and George Sugarman as her teachers, it was natural that she tried working with steel, but its rigidity frustrated her. In 1976, the painter Michael Mulhern gave her some lengths of wood, and the cedar beam has been her signature medium ever since.

She embraced the supple qualities of wood and its potential for textured surfaces, which she gashes to make them look scarred and eroded. If much of the imagery of her sculpture is drawn from her childhood environment, so, too, is wood a part of her heritage. "I come from a long line of Polish peasant farmers," she said,

"and they were surrounded with wood -- wooden homes, wooden fences, wooden tools to farm the land. There is a familiarity, a feeling of comfort and grace. And because of the familiarity, I can really push it around."

MS. VON RYDINGSVARD'S sculptures, while brooding and somber, are oddly domestic and consoling. Although they are nonrepresentational and avoid literalism, they refer to household utensils, ancient landscapes and vernacular architecture. And when she speaks about incising and battering wood, Ms. von Rydingsvard's language is homely. She compares a jutting protuberance to an "apron" and calls a chopped, pitted interior "lacework." She revels in domestic analogies because, she said, it is her fabricated version of home. "I derive such comfort from the wearing down of surfaces," she said. "I love the look of stairs that have gotten walked on or tables that really get used."

Ms. von Rydingsvard would like to build and break another bowl. "Now I know it's O.K. to slice up a bowl," she said. "Before the Queens piece, it wouldn't occur to me to do that because it took a year to make. It will feel like a topographical map of a very primitive settlement."

And will it also be huge? "It has to be big," she replied. "If you tear a little thing apart, you can't even make what you're doing with that sculpture clear. There's no gravitational pull with an itty-bitty piece -- you glue it back together, and who cares? But the gravitational pull of these monsters -- to fight that is what interests me." The TimesMachine article viewer is included with your New York Times subscription. This article is also available separately as a high-resolution PDF.

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