

# The Harvard Crimson

## Sculpting Humanity from Wood

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Ursula von Rydingsvard carefully outlines a pattern in chalk on a cedar beam before it is violently carved with a circular saw. The serrated blade incises the wood as sawdust flies about her Brooklyn studio.

But as this seemingly horrific act progresses, an intricate pattern emerges upon the beams, a meaningful organization of indentations and ruptures that she will later cover with materials ranging from soft gray graphite to clinical latex. The wood then appears soft, gently curved and meditative. When combined with hundreds of other individual blocks, it forms huge works that invite introspection on the human and other natural forms.

Detailing her methods of construction and her chronological progression, von Rydingsvard addressed around 200 students, faculty and guests at the Carpenter Center last Thursday evening. Presenting her work from the 1970s onward, von Rydingsvard narrated slides of her work that depicted the process of building and eventually the completed product. She revealed the work to the delight of the audience reacting to the beauty of various pieces catching sunlight in sculpture gardens or on private land.

“I never make a model for anything; the model never informs me,” she said as she showed photographs taken in her Brooklyn loft. In one slide, she held her chalk in hand as she outlined the form to be cut by craftsmen she calls “the princes of my studio.”

With organic materials, von Rydingsvard evokes human forms and organs, shapes that through their elemental nature engage the viewer by engendering thoughts on the fundamentals of human existence. Her works bring to mind body parts like lips, eyes and stomachs abstractly represented by protrusions, rounded interiors, linear extensions and rhythmic undulations. Using cedar as her primary medium, she designs and executes these forms masterfully, shaping each block of wood into a patterned whole.

The shapes included in her work give way to thoughts on human relationships—conception, filial ties and friendships. While suggested by the pure form of her sculptures, von Rydingsvard also explicitly references these subjects through titles. The name of the monolithic, honeycombed work “For Paul” references the artist’s husband. “Mama, Your Legs” harkens to something more elemental, as the artist herself has commented.

Von Rydingsvard’s work is largely intuitive. The viewer immediately grasps the shape and form of her figures and the materials are manifest throughout. No attempt is made to disguise any part of the work; all is open for view. In one instance a staircase was even appended to a work so that viewers could peek down into its hollow center.

However, in spite of its accessibility, the work encourages further exploration and contemplation. The abstract nature of the work, while speaking to objective thoughts, also invites personal interpretation and valuation. Since the work does not explicitly portray any particular object, the pieces can become intimately connected to the viewer on a more fundamental level.

Von Rydingsvard spoke of her progression from her simple, nature-based period in the 1970s to her current work with gargantuan pieces. During her earlier period, she planted installations in various locales including Battery Park City in Manhattan and the country near Niagara Falls in upstate New York. With her maturation in the medium, however, she created increasingly larger structures, pieces that now no longer fit in her studio. The artist easily recalled the exact measurements of nearly every piece shown, revealing her close connection with the process of creating the works.

The sculptor's artistic progression was also marked by the introduction of new materials into her work. Von Rydingsvard told the audience about a visit to an American Indian museum on the west coast. Here she was inspired by functional pieces made with walrus intestines. Based on this organic idea, she then incorporated animal parts—cow stomachs and hog intestines—into her work. Despite the gruesome sound of these materials, the resulting work is surprisingly elegant. The final surfaces appear smooth and supple, much like leather but not as artificial. As in her other work, von Rydingsvard evokes the organic, yet in this instance she uses literal organs rather than the usual cedar.

As regards the surfaces of her sculptures, the intricate detail that goes into each piece of her work, she seemed hesitant to point to any one inspiration. “The sources of the things that are most important to us are impossible to talk about,” she said.

Von Rydingsvard's stature in the fine arts world has been solidified by the inclusion of her work in various collections throughout the United States in addition to the opening of a current, highly acclaimed show in upstate New York. Her work is now in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney in New York as well as the Detroit Institute of Art. Recently, she was commissioned to create a work for the Microsoft Corporation as well—a large piece that now stands in one of the company's courtyards and is lit by artificial moonlight at night.

An exhibition of her work is currently on display at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York. The show, which runs until May 5, includes work made specifically for the challenging space of the gallery that tends to make works look small. The call to create engaging work came easily to von Rydingsvard, however, whose work has never lacked scale and grandeur.