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BEYOND THE FEMININE

Lesley Dill and Ursula von Rydingsvard aren't bound to traditional notions

By KATE HACKMAN
Special to The Star

If this fall's exhibitions in Kansas City are any indication, the women have it. Consider:

■ Belger Arts Center focuses on Renee Stout.

■ The Kemper has Wendy Ewald.

■ Grand Arts has Patricia Cronin.

■ Byron C. Cohen Gallery has paired up Lesley Dill and Ursula von Rydingsvard.

■ The group shows at the H&R Block Artspace and Dirt Gallery, which are dedicated to contemporary women artists.

REVIEW

Perhaps the Guerrilla Girls' calls for the art world to stop ignoring women artists have been heard.

From young and emerging locals to internationally renowned elders, the women showcased locally are presenting work in all genres and media and seem to be unencumbered by anything resembling boundaries or traditional notions of the feminine.

Surface tension

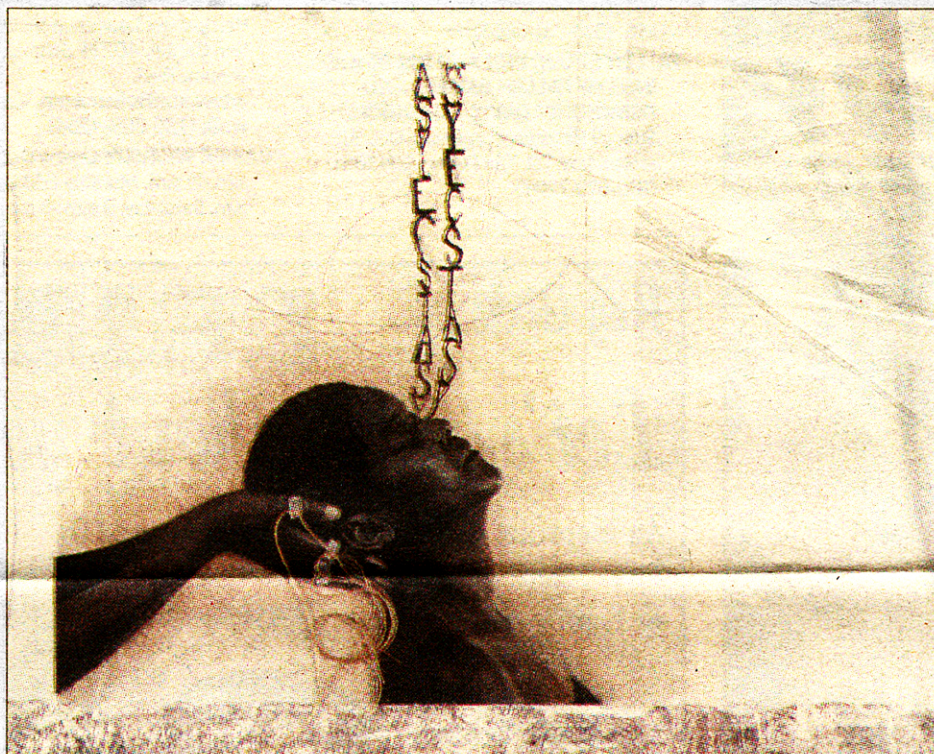
Ursula von Rydingsvard has never shied away from what might have once been considered male territory.

Her forceful sculptures are shaped through an extremely physical process — videos of the artist at work find her hunched on the floor of her studio, wearing knee pads as she energetically and intuitively marks stacks of cedar beams with graphite. These are then cut and shaped and glued together, with each piece one strata of a larger formation.

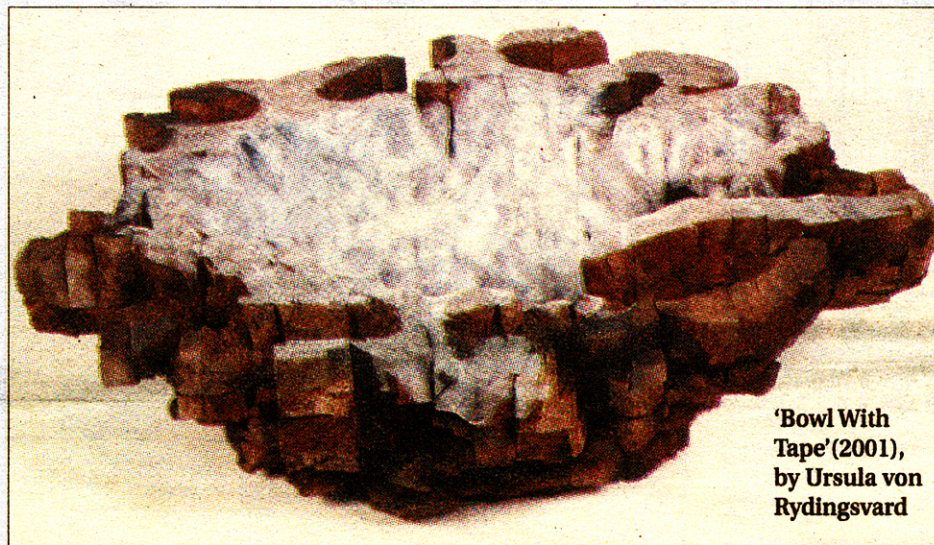
Often they assume architectural proportions, as with her commanding series of vessels and boulderlike groupings installed inside and on the lawn of the Nelson-Atkins several years ago. Her "Three Bowls" (1990) is a permanent acquisition displayed on the south lawn.

Von Rydingsvard's new works at Cohen are smaller in scale and rougher in texture. While the surfaces of a few are softened and smoothed by layers of graphite, lending them a weathered look, most are left raw. As such they possess an intimate and immediate directness. It is as if von Rydingsvard wants to render her actions entirely visible and to create as visceral and urgent a sense of presence as possible.

The shapes of the sculptures draw from the artist's personal lexicon, influenced in part by childhood memories of the German work and refugee camps where she lived before her Polish family immigrated to this



'Ecstasy' (2001), by Lesley Dill



'Bowl With Tape' (2001), by Ursula von Rydingsvard

country in 1950. Yet these associations remain somewhat elusive. "Lace Oval," for example, a meandering wall-hung ring of loops and hollows, evinces a decorative collar, a topographical view of a vast landscape or a string of forts nestled around a common, open plaza. "Twarda Reka III" likewise suggests the outstretched fingers of a hand, a fork, a rake or farm implement, or a geological formation. Ultimately the forms resonate as expressive gestures indicative of essential ways of being.

Though there is a tenderness to all of von Rydingsvard's work, "Bowl With Tape" is perhaps the gentlest of the six sculptures on view.

A freestanding bowl shape, its interior is lined with layers of transparent adhesive tape that create a smooth, pearlescent surface. Like a carefully wrought nest lovingly padded with soft cotton, the piece evokes a hidden sanctuary whose very existence hinges on the protection provided by a rough exterior.

THE SHOW

"Lesley Dill and Ursula von Rydingsvard" continues at the Byron C. Cohen Gallery, 2020 Baltimore, through Nov. 2. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday-Saturday and by appointment. Call (816) 421-5665 for information.

Language of images

Lesley Dill's handmade paper-and-thread constructions and photo/text collages are more delicate and ephemeral — reflecting her specific interest in the interior realm, from dreams and visions to emotional states — though common interests in memory, process, personal identity, nature and aspects of spirituality seem to link the two artists.

Dill has long been incorporating the words of Emily Dickinson, as well as others', treating language as revelation and release. Here words like "thrill" and "voice" are printed on leaves cut from paper and cloth, and they spill, fluttering, from a small figure or extended arm mounted high on the wall.

Treating language as inspiration and a form of expression with a life of its own, Dill creates images that embody the temporal sensations suggested by words rather than approaching them as fixed signifiers.

Dill's treatment of materials and repetition of imagery sometimes seem more formulaic than inventive; threads dangle from every piece, hands and leaves appear again and again. Often striking small details, like the speckled eggshell quality of a sculpted paper hand, are lost in the midst.

Still, her ability to weave together powerful words and images to compound effect can yield striking results. A smallish photo collage incorporating silver leaf features the image of two hands, gently supporting the arching head and neck of an older woman, who seems to lean backward with total trust.

These strong hands bear bits of folded paper and a flurry of loose threads at their joints, as if indicative of the passage of healing energy from one body to another. Letters spelling "ecstasy" unfold in vertical lines above the figures, as if rising from the sepia, aural glow surrounding them. This, and a few of Dill's other photo-based works, escapes self-conscious artfulness. Tapping into deeper and darker emotions, they feel fresh and alive.