

Sculpture

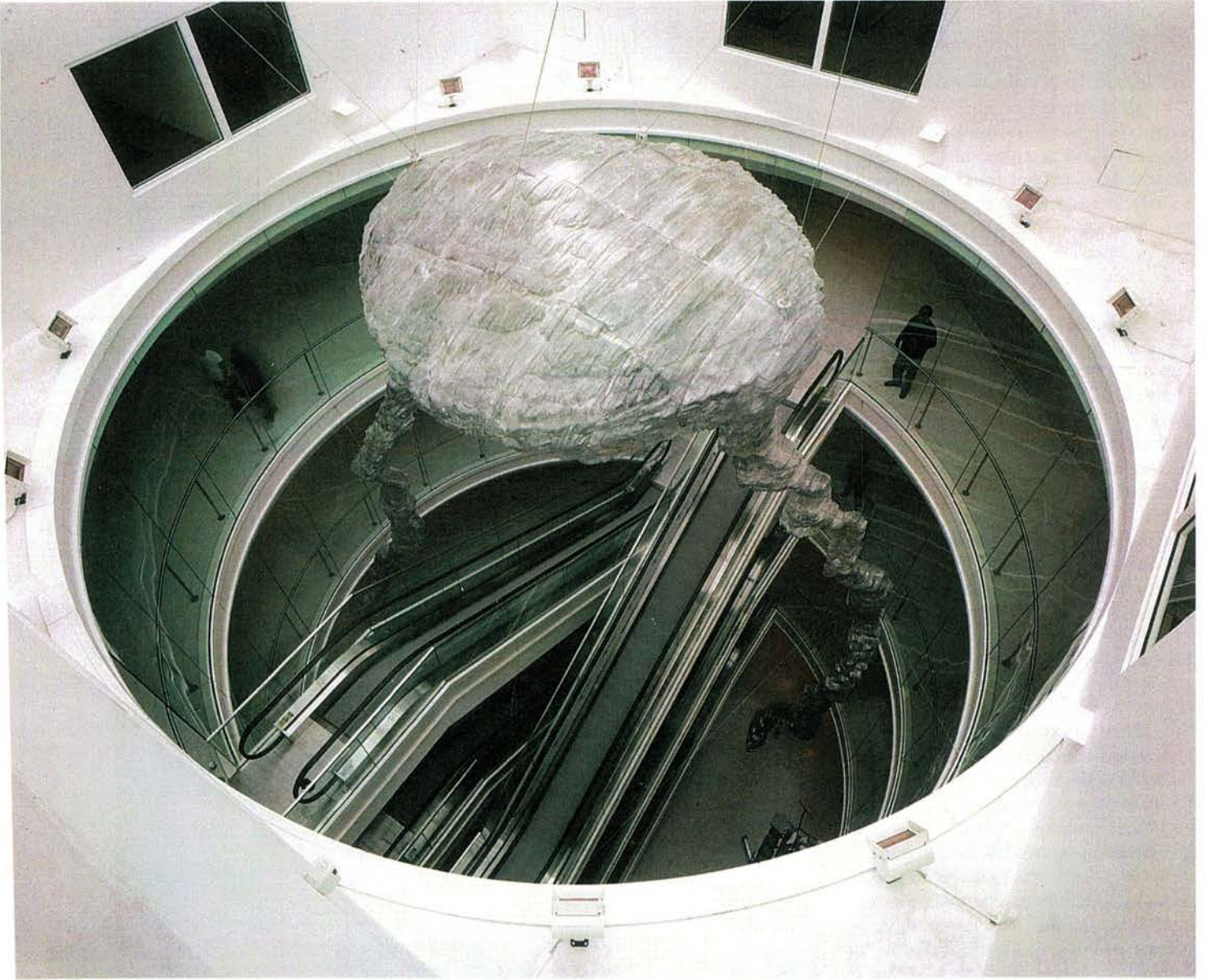
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**Sculpture
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Timeless Psychological Forms

A Conversation with **Ursula von Rydingsvard**

by Jan Garden Castro

Ursula von Rydingsvard works intuitively, shaping monumental sculpture into tactile experiences that remind us of familiar games and emotions. Some forms, such as those in her 2002 exhibition "On an Epic Scale" at the Neuberger Museum, suggest daily life on a grand scale and also recall Polish values she learned as a child. With her parents and six siblings, von Rydingsvard spent five years of her life, 1945–50, in German refugee camps for displaced Poles. The family moved to Plainville, Connecticut, when she was eight.

von Rydingsvard's latest adventure, named *katul katul*, is a five-story sculpture for the new Queens County Family Courthouse designed by Henry N. Cobb and Ian Bader of Pei, Cobb, Freed and Partners. Floating from the atrium skylight, a sculpted dome and agitated ribbons interact with natural light. The artist has not revealed what this enigmatic work symbolizes: it could be the helmet of a mythical Polish hero or heroine. The name *katul katul* refers to a Polish children's game that is, in turn, inspired by Polish cooking: women mold dough or potatoes and toss the balls into boiling water. The children

pretend to pat and mold each others' heads, tossing them to the right, to the left, and, symbolically, "into the oven." This sculpture is designed to greet the public, usually family members with serious disputes and conflicts, with a gentle metaphor of hope, affirmation, and light. The artist's layering of meanings in this and other large installations is matched by her hands-on construction methods, which often begin with cedar four-by-fours cut with a circular saw. The monumental cedar works in von Rydingsvard's solo exhibition at Storm King Art Center received the International Association of Art Critics Award as one of the two best small museum exhibitions in 1992. *For Paul* (1992), a huge cedar bowl connecting earth and sky, has its own site at Storm King for viewing from above, as well as from ground level.

***katul katul*, 1999–2002. Plastic and aluminum, 52 x 40 ft. diameter. Work installed at the Queens County Family Courthouse.**



This page: Two details of *katul katul*, 1999–2002. Plastic and aluminum, 52 x 40 ft. diameter. **Opposite:** *Lace Medallion*, 2002. Cedar, 102.5 x 93.5 x 9 in.

von Rydingsvard holds an M.F.A. from Columbia University, New York. During her years of teaching at Yale University (from 1982 to 1986), she helped to open doors for the next generation of artists, including several notable women. Her solo exhibitions

in 2003 include New York's Galerie Lelong (May) and the Butler Gallery in Kilkenny Ireland (August). Her solo exhibitions in 2002 included Galerie Lelong, Paris; the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York; and the Byron Cohen Gallery in Kansas City. In 2000, her five solo exhibitions included Cranbrook Art Museum, Hill Gallery in Birmingham, Michigan, and Galerie Lelong in Zurich and in New York. The New York Lelong show received the 2000 International Association of Art Critics Award as one of the two best shows in a commercial gallery. In



1998–99, a traveling indoor retrospective originated at the Madison Art Center, Wisconsin. In 1997–2000, an outdoor retrospective originated at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, England, traveled to the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, and closed at the Indianapolis Art Museum. von Rydingsvard's many awards include two National Endowment for the Arts grants, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Art Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Her large commissions include *Paddy Wack* (1997), Sebastapol, California, and *Iggy's Pride* (1991), Geyserville, California. *Three Bowls* (1990), commissioned by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, was later purchased by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. *Skip to My Lou* (1997), a circle of dancing cedar forms for the Microsoft Corporation, combines three notions: the awkward handwriting of an elder who can barely read and write, a Native American image of the ocean's surface motion, and people dancing energetically in a circle, then separated. *Skip to My Lou* links illiterate immigrants, the site's original tribal inhabitants, and the workers who built the piece in an organic, passionate, undulating cedar composition.



Jan Garden Castro: *How did you create the Queens County Family Courthouse sculpture?*

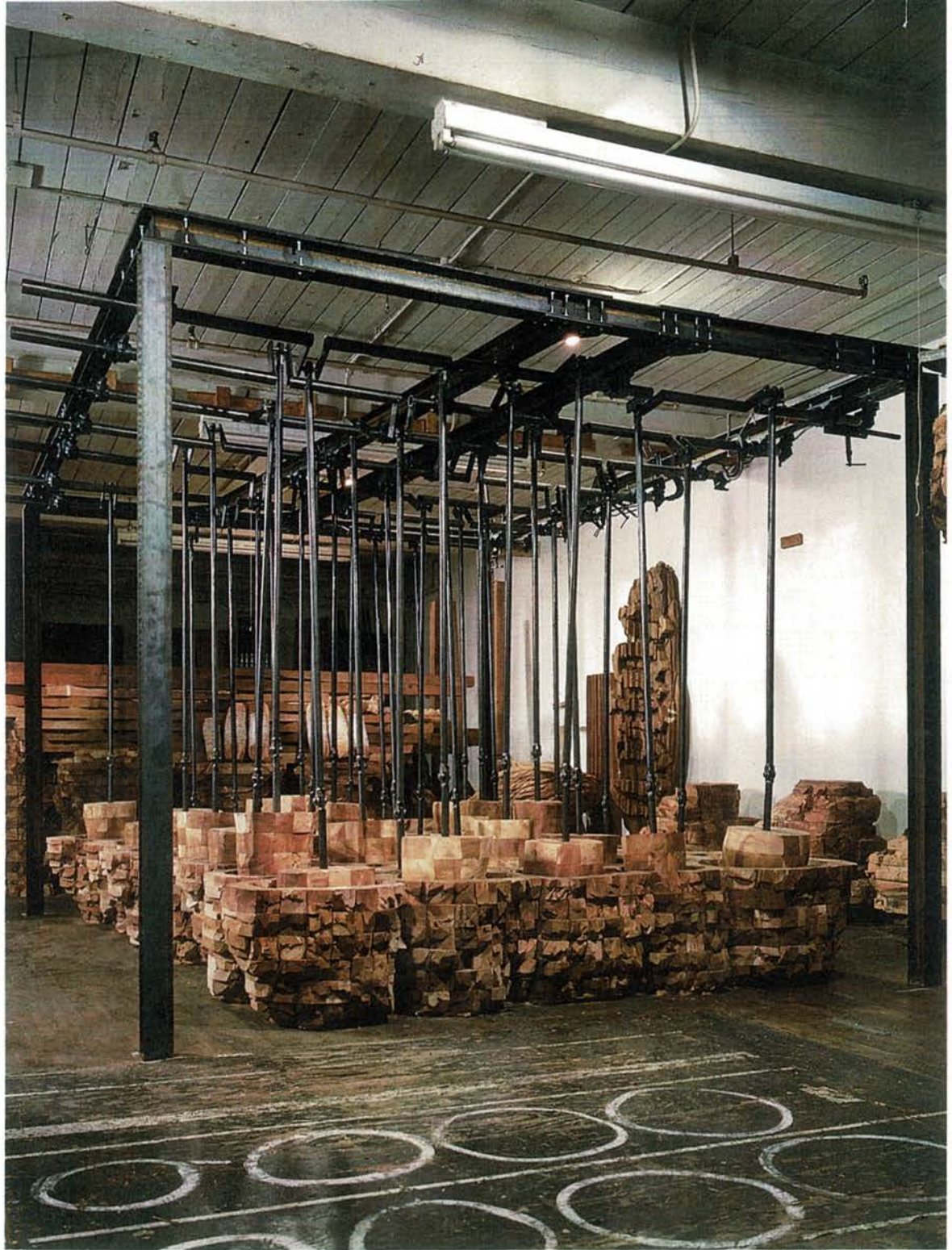
Ursula von Rydingsvard: The entire structure, dome, and sleeves were built based on my intuitive sense of what the atrium needed. I wanted the work to play with the light of the 40-by-40-foot skylight and to dance on either side of the double escalators slicing through the center of the atrium. I wanted a spiritual presence and an elegant reconfirmation through light at this family courthouse where grisly things happen. I built the entire five-story piece in cedar—that was my full-scale model—a 22-foot dome with two attached appendages straddling the escalator for 50 feet.

JGC: *You told Avis Berman that your work is almost baroque but lighter. You said, "I'd like you to feel that this is how birds would do baroque."¹ Do you want to talk about the heaviness and the lightness*

of this piece? And the complications of working in such an innovative medium?

UvR: My goal was to make the lightest piece I've ever made, one that would feel light physically and psychologically. I must add that the process of making it didn't feel light at all. There was tremendous anxiety involved in dealing with the builders, the various organizations and authorities. This is many-fold more difficult technically than anything I've ever tried. Because this piece is huge, suspended, and in a courthouse, there are rules that have to be adhered to in the most rigorous way, many people watching, checking, and coming to verify. This has involved layers and layers of bureaucracy. I put in too much time writing memos and justifications.

Obviously, the vision I have for it is there for me. Having learned so much, having opened up other options for myself in the future, and the curiosity



of my needing to see what the piece would look like in the atrium was what drove me.

JGC: *Every step of the way is discovery.*

UvR: Exactly. Even at the end, there were two things I had to resolve. I sandblasted the entire surface and tinted the inside, testing for the right paints.

JGC: *What role did computers play in this project?*

UvR: A role that wasn't very significant because I had already created the full-scale model of the entire sculpture in cedar. Computers were used to calculate based on the reality that already existed, but they did not contribute toward making any significant

decisions in terms of what the sculpture looked like.

We did a computer rendering of what the sleeves would do when they cascaded down the sides of the escalator. The movements wouldn't be possible to draw—they're taken from another sensibility. They're not drawing board movements.

JGC: *How did you develop the form?*

UvR: After I created a full-scale sculpture in cedar that weighed over two tons, we cut the model into almost 200 sections. Knowing that the sculpture was to be made of plastic, we built a huge vacuum-forming machine. The machine heats up a four-by-eight-



foot sheet of plastic, softening it until the belly lowers; the entire piece of plastic is then dropped down over the cedar mold, encasing it. The air is immediately sucked out with tremendous force, so that the plastic sheet exactly repeats the surface structure of the cedar. We ended up with about 200 vacuum-formed plastic molds—each distinct and structurally precise.

The plastic we used, Spectar copolyethylene, is impermeable to fire and gives off no gas. I sandblasted the entire dome on the outside and painted the inside a no-color color like water or ice. The piece is as light as a cloud physically and psychologically.

From the full-scale cedar model, we had to re-engineer the aluminum armature onto which the plastic could be suspended. The armature had to endure its own load and that of the plastic suspended from the skylight. The armature had no right angles nor any two angles the same. We had to design every

seam and every weld—in fact, we became certified aluminum welders.

JGC: *You used cedar as a prototype for the courthouse project, and cedar is a staple in your vocabulary of materials. What is its attraction?*

UvR: I have been working with cedar since 1975. Cedar is a terrible carving wood because it splinters easily and has tenacious tendons, but it is extremely durable outdoors and soft and easy to cut with a circular saw. I use Western red cedar, which turns silver over time. These qualities serve me well. I want to think, however, that I have many options in terms of using other materials.

JGC: *I was wondering what Krasawica (the title of five deep bowls in the Neuberger exhibition) means.*

UvR: The word is Ukrainian and usually refers to

Opposite: *Mama Your Legs*, 2000. Cedar, graphite, steel, and electric motor, 9.5 x 11.75 x 15 ft. View of work in the artist's studio. This page: *Bowl with Folds*, Cedar and graphite, 1998–99. 12 x 16 x 16 ft.



Above: *Skip to My Lou*, 1997. Cedar and graphite, 3.6 x 67 ft. diameter. View of work installed on the Microsoft campus. Opposite: *River Bowl*, 2001. Cedar, 174 x 120 x 120 in.

a young, beautiful woman. The word has delicious connotations. For me, the title is connected to the structure that I'm building in a tangential, subconscious way.

JGC: *What did you create for your recent show at Galerie Lelong in Paris?*

UvR: The gallery is an elegant, large (over 100 square meters) old townhouse kind of space. I made something akin to a floorboard about four feet high, with a bowl eight feet high and a lot of little pieces, such as an accordion bowl that leans in a quirky way. My favorite piece is a cedar medallion with an image suspended from it, all inlaid into a cedar wall.

JGC: *Could you discuss the genesis of your motorized sculpture *Mama Your Legs* (2001)?*

UvR: It's not as though I set out to make a sculpture that moves but more that I was out to parallel the sense of a highly repetitive, primitive movement as in grinding corn or churning butter. The process was so exciting that the end goal wasn't as primary as it is with many of my other sculptures. I was after the resulting sound of a solid hunk of wood hitting the inside front, bottom, and back of a wooden bowl in

a circular movement. I sometimes called this inner cedar chunk a thigh.

JGC: *Just as this piece was a new direction, do you consider your studio to be a laboratory of ideas?*

UvR: As time goes on, my experiments become more deviant and more exciting. For example, I began working with cow intestines and cedar about five or six years ago. This led to my favorite gut piece, *Maglownica*, a corrugated paddle covered with a gut sheath. The gut traces some of the washboard indentations and protrusions of the structure underneath. The use of the gut, I believe, led to my using the plastic for the courthouse project.

JGC: *How does your staff work with you?*

UvR: I spend a tremendous amount of time with my assistants; they are like family to me. We have lived together at different sites for many months at a time. Bart Karski is the head of my studio, with two full-time and some part-time people, depending on the project. On May 12, we celebrated Bart's 10th anniversary. He came to me at the age of 17. The celebration involved close to 60 assistants from the past. Our main goal was to get together, cook the best dishes we've ever cooked, and to share them with one another.

JGC: On your recent trip to Japan, were there some discoveries—or anything you saw that seemed old and familiar?

UvR: There were unknowns in the Japanese culture and visual arts that bowled me over—images that felt as though they were contained in some predetermined way, but within that containment, there were unpredictable spurts of energy. I recall sitting inside an old Japanese structure built very much like a teahouse and looking out the windows and seeing the outdoors framed in a calculated way. It was an amazing way to direct visuals. It doesn't feel as though we think that way here in America. You see this kind of self-control in Japanese art, architecture, clothing—all aspects of their lives. No sooner do I say this, than I also see sandwiched into their imagery and writing, a torn, out-of-control moment.

Regarding seeing things that felt familiar, I visited a small village in a region called Shirakawa-go, way up in the mountains, and I happened to go there at a moment when it was snowing very lightly, very gently. The Gassho-style homes there in which the people continue to live reach far into the Japanese past.² They are thickly thatched A-frame structures. The wooden beams are tied together with sisal rope. There are no nails, dowels, beams, or screws. It was truly amazing to wander through these attics and to see their things—hammers with long curved noses, backpacks made out of sisal and wood, and incredible grain scoops made out of bark. There is a parallel and also a real difference between what I saw in those mountains and what I would see in the mountains of Europe, especially in Poland.

I was also bowled over by the 1,000 life-size Buddhist deities at Sanjusangen-do. They were lined up on stepped levels. Diagonally and horizontally, to the left and to the right, the lines of deities seemed to go on to infinity. The overlappings of the eroded gold on wood and the very slender lines that came out of their heads gave me a feeling of being immersed in a forest of ancient holy stuff that has no concreteness; it excited my peripheral vision.

JGC: It occurs to me that there was something both ancient and familiar about your retrospective at the Nelson-Atkins Museum.

UvR: I don't focus on creating work that belongs in any time zone. I loathe being an artist connected with a style done in 2002, the 1950s, or even 600 B.C.E. I think there's a way I'm trying to talk about my own time that is directed more by my own psychology than by chronological years.

JGC: Now that the courthouse sculpture is in place, what is your reaction to it?

UvR: There's a huge range of what feel like movements of a cloud formation that vary underneath the dome as the light from the skylight goes through the layers of plastic with its varied colors and varied amounts of pearl bead blasting. The air pockets that slice across all of the many joints throughout the



sleeves of the sculpture are important, as are the flanges that slip slightly away from their dedicated position. In other words, there is a way that I am learning to energize with air and shifting structures. The biggest surprise perhaps was seeing the five-story sculpture in a cylinder of glass. Though the glare is obnoxious, there's something critical that happens with the concentration of energy from that sculpture as it is trapped within the glass cylinder.

Notes

¹ Avis Berman, "Ursula Von Rydingsvard: Remembered Spaces," *Ursula von Rydingsvard Sculptures* (Zürich and New York: Galerie Lelong, 2000), p. 12.

² These dwellings were built in 1700–1750, in the middle of the Edo period (1616–1869), but the origins of the style go back to the earliest Japanese houses.

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