

CRITICISM ► EXHIBITIONS

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Ursula von Rydingsvard: Primitive Jarring

by David Cohen

Galerie Lelong

528 West 26th Street, New York

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May 9 to June 21, 2003



Ursula von Rydingsvard, Pod Pacha 2003 Cedar, graphite, motor, 80 x 89 x 140 inches / h

Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York



Ursula von Rydingsvard, River Bowl 2001 Cedar, 174 x 120 x 120

inches

Part-creature, part-tomb, Pod Pacha is at once endearing and menacing, like a Precolumbian dog, or like Alfred Jarry's pitiable buffoon Ubu Roi. A mechanized lid heaves and wobbles, its thudding and pounding reverberating around the gallery. Is the strange creature shrugging its mammoth shoulders, or is some giant trapped within desperately trying to escape? Pod Pacha has a dozen udder-cum-stalagmite legs, and is made up, like other pieces in Ursula von Rydingsvard's impressive show, in a distinctive irregular checkerboard of robustly sliced slabs of cedar. Chunkiness is the defining feature of this body of work: a set of stairs and a mammoth "jar" form both put us in mind of Brancusi's Endless Column.

The reviewer in the New York Times praises von Rydingsvard's work for "standing on its own, shunning the influence of Minimalism... putting emphasis on the handmade and the associative." All praise is welcome no doubt, but a very different reading of the artist's relationship to recent sculpture could equally suggest itself: hers is a highly distinctive and individualist language for sure, but one that nonetheless battles the grid and repetition, hallmarks of minimal art. This sculpture achieves associativeness precisely by its depersonality of carving touch. Resulting surfaces have a brutal logic of their own, making the works seem truly a product of nature, not art. Such romanticism does indeed stand out against the conceptual trend. But rather than isolating her, it places von Rydingsvard in the company of such artists as William Tucker and David Nash, whose sliced and charred cube structure, Husk, stood out in his last show in the same gallery space earlier this season as a welcome, toughening-up departure.

Tucker comes to mind in viewing Rydingsvar's gargantuan jar-form, River Bowl, for the way in which a richly ambiguous surface rewards endless imaginative projection. Although the vase-like form of the overall structure quickly reveals itself, there are countless lesser form-possibilities within the checkered grid. It's a work that inspires one to draw it in search of locked-in meanings.