

# The Arts

## The cream of Kilkenny



Aidan Dunne is impressed by the range of visual work at Kilkenny Arts Festival

In a click-on-the-icon era, when technology tries to persuade us that reality's rough edges have been smoothed down, Ursula von Rydingsvard's sculptures in *A Psychological Landscape*, at the Butler Gallery in Kilkenny for the city's arts festival, are almost frighteningly made. They are clearly the products of lengthy physical labour and have no intention of apologising for that. Their gruff, forceful presence, ruffled textures and copious annotations in pencil attest to the exacting, painstaking way they came into being.

Von Rydingsvard was born in Germany during the second World War and spent much of her early childhood in refugee camps there, until her family got to the United States in 1950. Despite her name she is not German. Her Ukrainian father and Polish mother were forced to work on a farm in Germany. Not surprisingly, when she began to make art a great deal of her work addressed her memories of this time.

She began as a painter and switched to sculpture, and there is something painterly about the surfaces of her pieces. Over time she has devised a highly individual, even idiosyncratic way of working. She builds her sculptures from the ground up in uniform beams of aromatic cedar, marking, cutting and carving - with a saw - as the piece grows.

It's a method that allows both calculation and improvisation, a bit like drawing in three dimensions. She responds to an intuitive inner sense of what she is working towards rather than any preparatory studies.

While she emerged, as an artist, from an era of minimalism, unlike minimal sculpture her's, as well as having that characteristic rough-hewn physical presence, is replete with images and associations. The bowl or vessel is a favoured form and could be interpreted as being about making a space, in a stubborn, assertive way, for memory. It also has powerful domestic associations, as do many of von Rydingsvard's other forms, such as ladles and the remarkable lace medallion. The most striking piece is probably an enormous bowl, but there is also another exceptional work, *Floating Staircase*, in which a "skin" of stairs seems to float over a dense, intractable mass of cedar beams.

Her work is stringently disciplined and straightforward but also complex and rich with implications. The work in Kilkenny was made for the Butler Gallery, and it makes a terrific exhibition, one that really should be seen in situ.



On show (clockwise from above): work by Ursula von Rydingsvard,