

Ursula von Rydingsvard: 'Primitive Jarring'

Galerie Lelong

Ursula von Rydingsvard has a way with wood, in particular, raw, milled cedar. While she occasionally works in other materials, such as the resin she used for *katul katul*, a recent public commission, she has long appropriated cedar as her medium of choice. You smell and are seduced by a von Rydingsvard sculpture even before you see it—captivated by the cedar's heady scent. At Lelong, four majestic sculptures filled the spacious galleries. The artist, while certainly able to work small, is never shy about pushing her scale up—or her sculptural weight around—mainly to satisfy her conception of the piece, but also because she so effortlessly can.

All from this year, with the exception of *River Bowl* (2001–2),

monoliths; referential rather than nonobjective; huge but incremental; tough but tender; autobiographical rather than objective—von Rydingsvard remains a non-minimalist rooted in woodworking, in artisanal traditions by way of heritage and feminist theory.

Three were standouts. There was *pod pacha*—which in Polish means something you'd carry under your arm. A massive, multihauched, multifooted receptacle, it is fit for an earth goddess and motorized—von Rydingsvard's second foray into action sculpture. The enormous lid rises and falls in ungainly slow motion, closing with a rhythmic whoosh and thud as if it were a weary heartbeat, linked to the title of the show as the essential instance of “primitive jarring.”

Another was *hej-duk*, a made-up word, after architect John Hejduk. Crossed by a curious narrow band that resembles a runner, it's a strikingly handsome cedar staircase that might be a section of a stadium, theater, or temple excerpted from a clearing. Rising 12 feet and extending 10 feet across, from the side it recalls stacked firewood, a more ingenuous, stripped-down, Eastern European folk version of the Altar of Zeus at Pergamum, *şay*—a mute presence that leads nowhere to face a void from which the gods of the forest have vanished. The fretted, almost 15-foot-high *River Bowl* resembles a flared vase more than a bowl. Towering upward, its rough, puzzled, honey-colored surface invites touch—an enchanted grail also destined, it would seem, for a Titan.

Only *Lace Medallion* appeared out of place, a distressed cedar panel of magisterial proportions ornamented with a horseshoe-shaped Baroque scroll resembling a heraldic device,

slightly tilted from the wall. Von Rydingsvard, born during World War II in a German work camp of Polish/Ukrainian parents, in her ongoing search for time lost and a culture displaced, stubbornly, gallantly fills the breach with worn and weighty monuments—her tribute to memory and a private mythos.

—Lilly Wei



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *pod pacha*, 2003, cedar, graphite, motor, 6½' x 7½' 11½'.

the works here displayed von Rydingsvard's trademark gouged and faceted surfaces that have been rubbed and marked with graphite, reminiscent of a Synthetic Cubist painting made three-dimensional. Wood rather than steel; vulnerable rather than unyielding; handmade rather than machine-produced; open vessels or functional, domestic forms rather than closed, adamant