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Art

on the
Green

Mad. Sq. Art

BY BROOKE KAMIN RAPAPORT

Madison Square Park, the 6.2-acre swath of green in Manhattan's Flatiron District, faces some challenges after opening its third season of outdoor sculpture exhibitions. Initially teamed with New York's Public Art Fund, the Madison Square Park Conservancy launched an independent contemporary sculpture program in June 2004. To date, its one-artist exhibitions have featured Mark di Suvero, Sol LeWitt, Jene Highstein, and now Ursula von Rydingsvard, whose work is on view through February 28, 2007. While all of these artists work in an abstract visual language, future projects are planned that deviate from a Modernist-derived idiom. Sound artist Bill Fontana, Roxy Paine, whose pieces focus on nature gone awry, and Charles Simonds, who creates imaginary civilizations in clay, are all slated for forthcoming shows. Madison Square Park has become a gallery without walls, where art is installed in landscaped "rooms" across the lawn. The program is trend-setting in its installation practice, relying on museological models for displaying massive sculpture. The test for the park's programmers is to continue to attract major sculptors while bringing first-rate sculpture to a varied viewing audience.

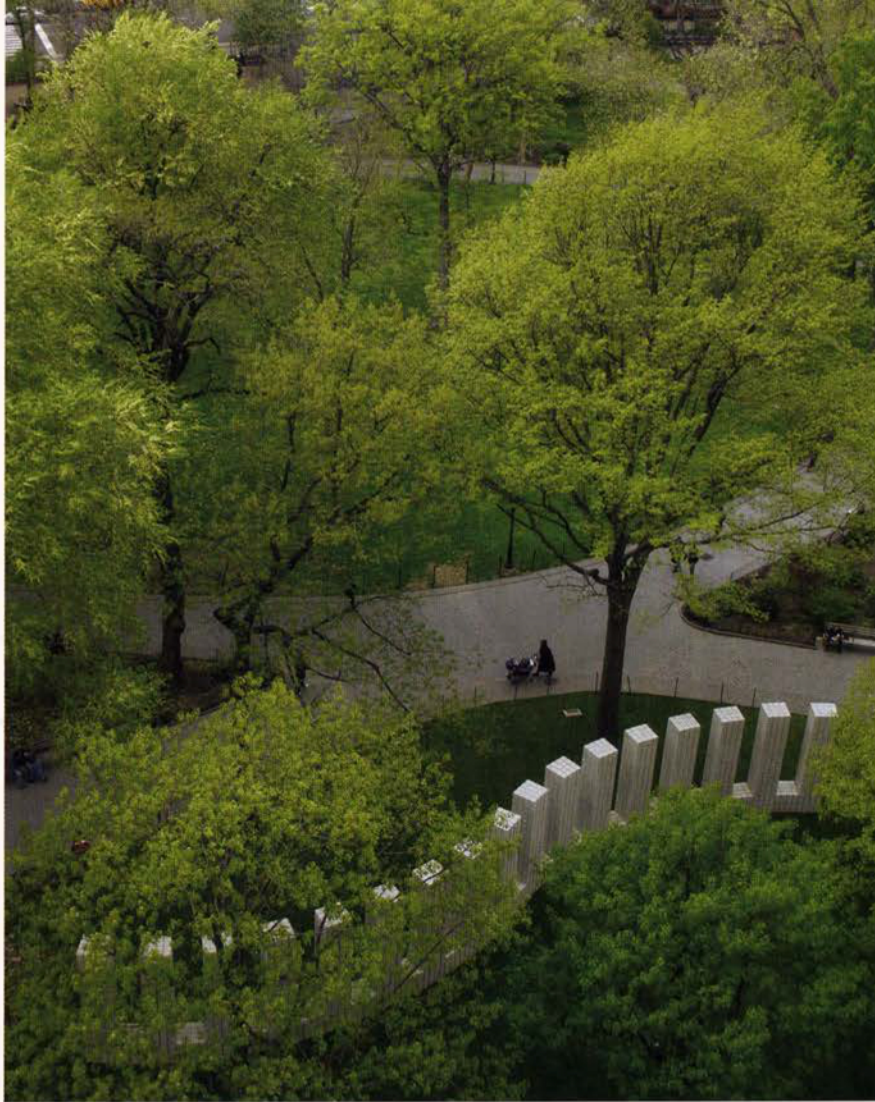
Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Damski Czepek*, 2006.
Polyurethane resin, 143 x 330 x 364 in.

Madison Square Park mimics a classic typology of outdoor sculpture spaces. "They're following a sculpture garden model, like the Hirshhorn, the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden at the Walker, or the Baltimore Museum of Art," says Nicholas Capasso, curator of the 35-acre DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in Lincoln, Massachusetts, outside Boston, who has faced issues similar to those at Madison Square Park.¹ Speaking of the configuration of landscaped rooms at the New York grounds, he added, "You need a conceptual and visual barrier so it doesn't end up looking like one big installation. It sends a message to the public that this is an art space: 'What we have here are artworks, not a jungle gym.'"

Madison Square Park has about one-fifth of the DeCordova's acreage. Even so, recent shows demonstrate that the park's winding paths demarcate areas leading to distinct spaces, such as the large expanse of the Oval Lawn. Other areas for the placement of artwork are formed at the park's perimeters. Artists respond to the New York site by placing pre-existing or newly created sculpture into grass-carpeted rooms.

Debbie Landau, president of the Madison Square Park Conservancy (which supervises





and funds the program called Mad. Sq. Art), says that the placement of vanguard sculpture in the park was instinctive, not calculated. "It's always informative to see how the work is sited [in other settings], but nothing can be transferred to our park," she points out. "Pre-Mad. Sq. Art, we didn't have the funds to go on a fact-finding mission to look at sculpture parks." She credits Martin Friedman, who retired in 1990 after three decades as the Walker Art Center's director and who is now based in New York, with the vision to install work in the park. Friedman serves on the park's nine-member advisory committee with other leading New York art world figures, including Guggenheim Museum senior curator of film and media arts John Hanhardt, Whitney Museum director Adam Weinberg, and gallerists Laurence Shopmaker and Betsy Senior. "Martin is a major advisor for us. He saw the rooms working from the get go," according to Landau. Friedman planned the Walker's

Minneapolis Sculpture Garden during his tenure there.

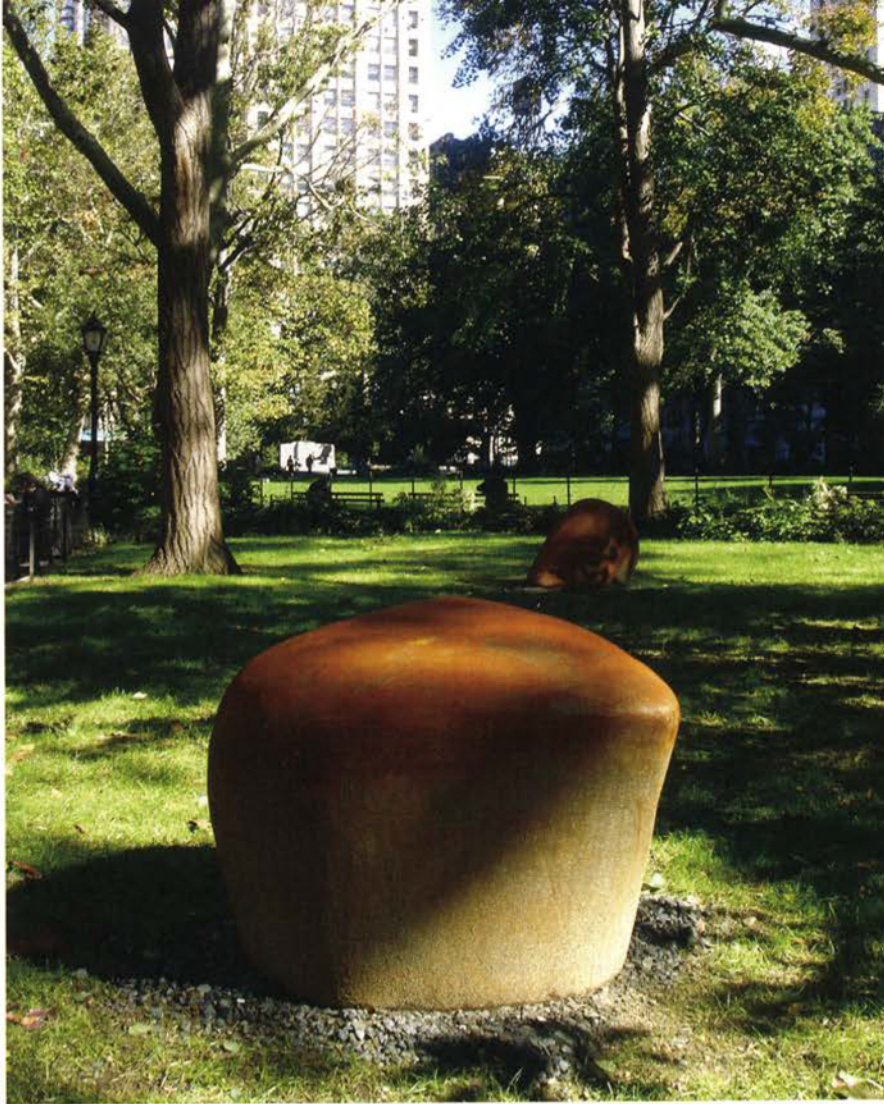
In response to a question about site-specificity and art created for a temporary exhibition at Madison Square Park, Friedman referred to the artist roster and replied: "No one has said: 'I'll work there if I can carve out one square acre and pave it.'" Friedman describes the attraction to the park's "romantic" setting with its meandering corridors, sections of greenery, and historicity: "The divisions are there and the artists pick where they want to put their work. What you have is a contemporary re-creation of a 19th-century park, but with contemporary amenities."

Mad. Sq. Art's inaugural project was di Suvero's installation of three steel beam sculptures that shared an affinity with nearby urban architecture while playing off the park's towering locusts, elms, lindens, and maples. Each work was sited in a well-defined area of the park. Conceptual artist LeWitt's two geometric "structures"

in concrete (one, an 85-foot-long curved wall; the other, a circular enclosure) headed the park's aisles and arenas. Visitors to the works who sat or sprawled on the grayish concrete appeared in dutiful contrast to the rigidity of the block forms. Simultaneously with LeWitt's exhibition, Highstein deployed 11 objects at the south end of the park. These sculptures—in granite, cedar, quartzite, and cast iron—were stationed in muted areas rather than engaging directly with the strident physicality of the soaring skyscrapers or the magnificent stands of trees.

Historically, New York City's parks served as gathering spots for the public, where 19th-century sculptors, including Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Daniel Chester French, John Quincy Adams Ward, and Randolph Ranger, summoned patriotism through actual or metaphoric means. Their statuary memorialized war heroes and other notables, and Madison Square Park holds key examples of bronze and stone figures whose identities are lost to general public memory yet survive in the textbooks. William H. Seward (the Secretary of State who purchased Alaska under President Abraham Lincoln), Admiral David Farragut (first Admiral of the Navy), President Chester Alan Arthur, and New York State Senator Roscoe Conkling all have a prominent place reachable by walking on park lanes.

Those lanes are revealed and celebrated in Alvin Langdon Coburn's *The Octopus* (1912), in which tentacle-like pathways form an abstract composition of Madison Square Park in a snowstorm.² The photograph provides a nearly century-old record of the park's first heyday: a commons distinguished by surrounding skyscrapers such as the Metropolitan Life Insurance Building (1909), where Coburn stood to take *The Octopus*, and the Flatiron Building (1902). When Madison Square Park fell from its beginnings as a vibrant public arena in the 1840s to the seedy dust bowl it was just 10 years ago, those established figurative sculptures based on classical models no longer captured the public imagination. Beginning in 2001 with the re-opening of a renovated park and the development of on-site cultural programming, artists working in an abstract language now inspire the



Opposite: Sol LeWitt, *Curved Wall with Towers*, 2005. Concrete, 168 x 32 x 1,020 inches. Above: Jene Highstein: *Tri Cornered Poplar Casting*, 1989–2001. Cast iron, 30 x 40 x 38 in. Below: Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *Admiral David Glasgow Farragut*, 1881. Bronze and granite.



public in the Flatiron district. Coburn's photo throws into high relief the ideal spaces afforded to several 21st-century sculptors who, to date, have conceived of their installations with respect to the historic layout of park space.

Landau believes that her site isn't a venue to plunk down public art. On the contrary, its mission is that of an urban sculpture museum. "We have a program, a point of view," she commented. One goal is to democratize the art-viewing experience. "This is a place to reach people who don't...see things in a gallery or museum. You can't have people interact with your work in a normal art context," Landau stressed, referring to visitors' direct access to the sculpture. "There is nothing exclusive about a park. It's a democratic environment. The artwork is accessible to people from all walks of life; those who intentionally seek it out and those who happen upon it. All for the price of free."

An estimated 1.2 million visitors between June 2004 and June 2006 have traversed Madison Square Park on their way to the office, to lunch at the popular Shake Shack, to let Rover off the leash at the dog run, or to romp through the recently renovated playground. Mad. Sq. Art has helped to galvanize attendance over the past two years.

Today, those visitors are streaming through Ursula von Rydingsvard's exhibition of four carefully placed works. "The whole park is formally framed, almost like little rooms," the artist says, referring to its classic plan of landscape architecture. In four of those rooms, von Rydingsvard has installed work. She was born in 1942 in Deensen, Germany, to Polish parents and often uses Polish in her titles, summoning the rural surroundings of her childhood. For example, *Damski Czepek* (2006) is translated as "Lady's Bonnet" and takes the form of a woman's hat.

The work is a metaphor for the protection that bonnets afforded to women remembered by the artist, with protection now given the scale of a shelter. Providing a cave-like refuge in the midst of Manhattan, *Damski Czepek* has become something of a gathering spot. Wedding ceremonies have taken place in the sanctuary of its alcove, children leap from the hood



to the lingering “ties” that meander along the grass, and people stroke the work in an attempt to discover its material. Noting the number of people who have crossed *Damski Czepek*’s path, von Rydingsvard commented: “The grass is beaten to death on the inside and outside. Rarely do I make a piece that’s supposed to be used. People touch it...I love how open to anyone with no discrimination this piece is. You don’t have to pass a line saying this is what art is. There’s no pretense about what it is.”

With the park’s invitation and financial backing, von Rydingsvard was able to create *Damski Czepek* of polyurethane resin, a new material for her. This plastic is distinct from the milled cedar she typically uses to make vessels of segmented wood. She first created a full-scale cedar model of the work in her Brooklyn studio. It was disassembled and shipped to the Walla Walla (Washington) Foundry where staffers worked with her to re-create the form in graying plastic and to achieve the specified depth, surface, and texture. “It’s not easy to make plastic look soulful,” von Rydingsvard says. But the work’s skin already appears craggy with age, like an old soul. The sculpture’s



hazy translucency pulls in sunlight and absorbs the moodiness of passing clouds.

At the Walla Walla Foundry, Dylan Farnum was part of the team overseeing the piece’s production. “There have been very few urethane projects that size,” he said. von Rydingsvard’s plastic “pour” was the largest for Walla Walla. “We did other urethane castings,” he said referring to Lynda Benglis’s *The Graces* (2003–05), “Benglis’s casting was large,” he said, “but not monolithic large.” Farnum adopts a sorcerer’s language when describing the process of transmutation that went into creating the 12-foot-high and 34-foot-wide *Damski Czepek*. He conjures up molds, colorants, and a giant, flaming kiln. Installed in the park, the sculpture continues to weave its magic. “I’m back in New York often. At night, it looked impressive with the park lights glowing,” he said.

Von Rydingsvard brought other spells to Madison Square Park in the form of three works in milled cedar, sculptures that will transform from brown to silvery gray over their months spent outdoors. *Czara z Babelkami* (which translates loosely as

“Magic Bowl with Popcorn Stitches,” 2006) stands at 16 feet 10 inches high and is the tallest work in the park. Its form—a bowl or vessel—is standard in von Rydingsvard’s iconography. Her sculptural vocabulary is informed by her background, her ardor for cedar, and her ability to endow sculptural form with meaning both personal and collective.

As a child refugee in camps for displaced Poles following World War II, the artist inhabited a world of wood: the barracks she shared with her family, the army-issue cot where she slept, the rustic utensils and bowls atop the wooden table—these form her earliest memories and explain her fierce attachment to wood. Its color, its malleability, its smell still consume her. Through this unique iconography, von Rydingsvard plumbs deeply felt associations to create her work but reaches beyond them to build sculpture with which viewers can claim an atavistic relationship.

Czara z Babelkami’s scale and profile also pay homage to the Flatiron Building, Daniel Burnham’s architectural icon. A suggested comparison between the building and her work doesn’t satisfy von Rydingsvard, who

Opposite, left: Alvin Langdon Coburn: *The Octopus*, 1912. Platinum print. Opposite, right: Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Ted's Desert Reigns*, 2006. Cedar, 57 x 72 x 16 in. This page: Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Czara z Babelkami*, 2006. Cedar, 202 x 125 x 12 in.

focused on how light would catch the sculpture's wood protrusions. Its siting on the east side of the park was purposeful: to seize a flattering pose as natural light lingers from dawn to dark, between summer and winter. The artist refers to this sculpture as a "she" and describes it anthropomorphically—her thin waist, her profile, her craving sunlight. She commands her own stretch of lawn, the room's curving boundaries adapting to the form.

In addition to reaping associations from her first recollections of wood, von Rydingsvard also draws on a softer material. *Babelkami* are the little popcorn-style balls on the hand-knit wool sweaters of her childhood. *Czara z Babelkami* is a paean to domesticity made palpable in an abstract vocabulary that recalls handmade sweaters and bowls. The vessel—itself an ancient symbol of women—continues in *Bowl with Fins* (2004), situated in the park's north section. It is, in comparison to its taller sister, a diminutive object, almost human height, resting in a quiet corner. *Bowl with Fins* nestles in a leafy alcove, where a tree curves over it like a green umbrella. Unlike marble urns that add gloss and traditional ornament to a formal garden, von Rydingsvard's *Bowl* is rough-hewn, without decoration or handles to grasp. Instead it adapts amicably to its urban surroundings, the process of cedar construction revealed rather than concealed.

Ted's Desert Reigns (2006), also made of cedar, is named for an assistant who divides his time between the artist's Brooklyn studio and the Arizona desert. This tripartite sculpture stretches out horizontally into its room, just peering through greenery at those seated around lunchtime tables. The sculpture's surface is striated with horizontal stacks of wood piled one atop another. The upper registers sprout *babelkami*, the protrusions forming a border crowning the piece. "The *babelkami* are squeezed together in unpredictably energetic ways," according to the artist. "I



enjoyed losing myself, no longer able to keep track of their appearances and disappearances." Although their placement may be random, von Rydingsvard's process of sawing and cutting the cedar is exacting and precise. von Rydingsvard worked determinedly to situate her sculptures in the park. The placement of each object was carefully planned with attention to site, to the effects of natural light, and to visitor traffic. This thoughtful positioning is at odds with some work created today for the public realm. "I think there's something disturbing happening to public art that feels really corporate," von Rydingsvard says. "Like a kind of advertisement, either for the building or what the corporation

wants to stand for. I feel it's possible to do a work that's large and highly personal. It doesn't have to have an egocentricity or aggression just because it's large."

Madison Square Park provides distinguished sculptors with a Manhattan venue to display outside art in a setting where visitor attendance would turn most museum directors green with envy. Mad. Sq. Art uses that green daily, as an emerald carpet to show major examples of contemporary sculpture. The challenge for the park is to maintain that rigor of display.

Brooke Kamin Rapaport is guest curator for "The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson," opening at the Jewish Museum in May 2007.

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from conversations with the author.

² I am grateful to James Leggio who suggested a discussion of this photograph.