

Prime Cuts

On the edge of abstraction, hinting at representation, Ursula von Rydingsvard has carved out a formidable niche for herself in the fertile landscape of sculpture today

LAST YEAR WAS A VERY GOOD ONE FOR Ursula von Rydingsvard. Her collection of large-scale sculptures was on view through the summer and fall in New York City's Madison Square Park—including a giant translucent “bonnet” cast from polyurethane resin—earned high praise from critics and offered the artist her greatest public exposure to date. And her fifth show at the city's Galerie Lelong was equally well received and showcased such powerful works as the 13-foot-tall *Wall Pocket* (2003–4).

So, on a sunny autumn day in the cavernous space of her Brooklyn studio, the 64-year-old sculptor was in an ebullient mood as she attempted to explain her working methods. Buzz saws wielded by her assistants droned in

the background, trucks rumbled by outside, and a gray cat snoozed peacefully, curled up in a small sculpture. Typically, von Rydingsvard works in cedar, using hundreds of chunks of wood, which she marks with graphite and glues together (a large sculpture may require as many as 3,000 clamps before it is completed). While the final forms may evoke bowls, shovels, spoons, igloos, caves, altars, or even the human body, they never quite veer too close to the literal. And if they begin to, as with a pair of large, shoelike forms resting in a corner of the studio, she rejects them completely.

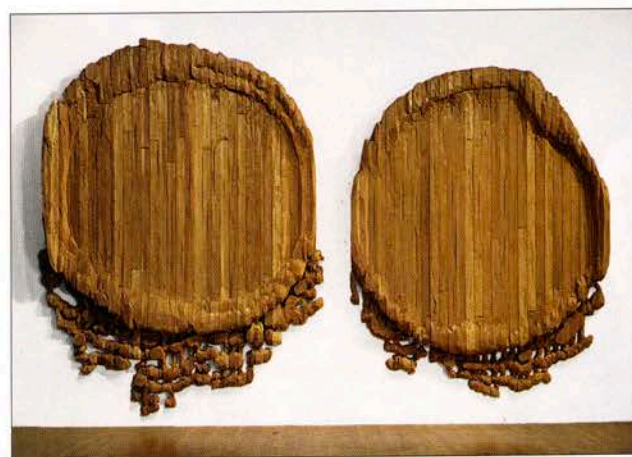
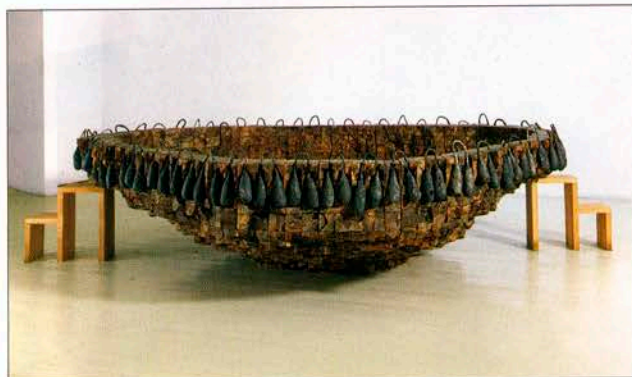
“You won't believe it, but this is the seventh year I've been working on this,” she says, gesturing to another sculpture. “This I've been working on for two years, this one for three.” She can't say how many works are in progress at one time but notes, “When I start on a big one, I have to stay with it because I usually have a crew mobilized specifically for that purpose. I have a tremendous amount of wood that I've ordered. Psychologically, once you get started on a big project, it's like diving into a pool and staying there until it's finished.” She doesn't even listen to music when she works because, she says, music “is so riveting I find I can't do anything else.” But when she's not working, von Rydingsvard reads voraciously, always going back to Rilke, Dostoyevsky, Duras, and Faulkner.

Tall, slender, and wiry, with a shock of reddish brown hair, von Rydingsvard laughs often and infectiously, even when the subject turns morbid. Four gigantic wall pieces with rough, lacy shapes embedded in their surfaces line one side of the studio. “I've left these in my will to my husband to make a chapel out of when I die,” she says, smiling broadly. “Poor guy. What a curse! It was my idea; I don't think he even knows about it.” (Her husband, Paul Greengard, a Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist, gave her the forklift that sits in an alcove for her 60th birthday.)

Von Rydingsvard's ascent to the front ranks of American sculptors was far from smooth. She did not have a chance to turn her attention seriously to art until she was in her 30s, and it wasn't until she was 46 that she had her first solo show, at Exit Art in New York, in 1988.

Her early years were marked by deprivation and upheaval. She was born Ursula Karoliszyn in 1942 in Deensen, Germany, in a slave-labor camp, where her Polish mother and

Ukrainian father had been transported from Poland and forced to work for the Nazis. Between 1945 and 1950, von Rydingsvard moved from one refugee camp to another eight times, until the family, which eventually totaled seven children, could be sent to America. “We were being pressured to go to Aus-



OPPOSITE Ursula von Rydingsvard in her cavernous studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. **TOP RIGHT** *Ocean Floor*, 1996, composed of cedar, graphite, and cow intestines. **CENTER** *Small Comb*, 2004. **BOTTOM** *Weeping Plates*, 2005.

tralia because it seemed like the natural thing,” she recalls. “There was so much land. But somehow my parents felt very strong about the United States; it's an instinct they followed.” Her memories of the camps, though, seem to be less than

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bleak. "I remember playing in bombed-out brick buildings in a way that seemed like I had everything I needed for play," she says. "It seemed the most fantastic environment you could ever imagine." Her love of wood as a medium may also stem from these years. "I grew up in wooden barracks," she says, "and there was this plank that divided you from the rest of the world. Sometimes they would put army blankets on the planks to keep the environment a little bit warmer. But this was what you cozied up to at night." Her mature works in cedar convey a sense of protective enclosure, of rendering the harsh outside world habitable and safe.

Von Rydingsvard was eight when the family settled in Plainville, Connecticut. She "eased into the language in six months," she says, but her home life was a distant remove from the 1950s postwar American dream. Both parents worked, her father holding down two shifts at a tool-making factory and laboring as a gardener on weekends. She remembers wearing pants to school made of the same army blankets that lined her earlier lodgings. "The other kids would laugh," she recalls, "but I didn't get it. I tend to block out things that are negative."

Von Rydingsvard attended the University of New Hampshire, where she met her first husband, Milton von Rydingsvard, a premed student. The young couple settled in Coral Gables, Florida, so that he could attend medical school, and von Rydingsvard earned the credentials to teach art in a local high school. For years she put any ambitions of making serious art on hold as she supported her husband's

The womblike Wall Pocket, 2003-4, is at once nurturing and intimidating.

career and cared for their daughter, Ursula Anne, who was born in Berkeley, California, while he was doing his residency.

When the marriage dissolved, von Rydingsvard and her daughter wound up back in Connecticut, living in an apartment building owned by her father. "The seed for making art didn't really take until I made the decision to gain an autonomous existence," she explains. It was the early 1970s. She taught art for a couple of years, saving up enough money to enroll in Columbia University's M.F.A. program. She was 33 at the time. "I got a Columbia University apartment; I went on food stamps and lived on \$2,000 a year, with a daughter," she recalls, laughing even at this hardship. "I'm good at being poor."

But Columbia opened a new world to her. She took art-history courses with Meyer Schapiro and studied sculpture with Ronald Bladen, George Sugarman, and Jean Linder. Von Rydingsvard cites Linder as "probably the biggest influence: she was a beautiful woman sculptor, she did sexy work, and it reconfirmed that a woman could do this. It blew my mind that they didn't put her in the middle of the campus and stone her." Von Rydingsvard started welding in steel and looking hard at Minimalist art. But it wasn't until a fellow student, a monk-turned-artist named Michael Mulhern, gave her some cedar beams to work with that she discovered her true medium. From the Minimalists, she acquired a love of repetition and simple materials. "But their philosophies seemed so cleansed of any kind of sensuality, so controlled, that they drove me nuts," she says.

In the years following Columbia, von Rydingsvard held a job delivering meals to senior citizens in the Times Square area, was awarded a grant from a government-run program for artists, and worked five teaching jobs a year to support herself, her daughter, and her sculpture. She also bought a loft for

metaphor: 'I WANT TO PACK IT—NOT EXACTLY LIKE HEADCHEESE IS PACKED, BUT CLOSE'

\$6,000 in SoHo (which she furnished with a couch, a table, and a bed—"the rest of it was lumber and pieces I had made," she says).

Then came an offer in 1982 to teach full-time at the Yale University School of Art, where she met Greengard (they were married in 1985). She was appointed assistant professor and then associate professor and taught at Yale for six years before moving back to New York, where Greengard had accepted a professorship at Rockefeller University. Her 1988 show at Exit Art transformed her career, and a 1992 retrospective at Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, New York, brought her an even wider audience, as well as several invitations to install permanent outdoor sculptures.

In the years since, von Rydingsvard has created numerous private commissions for such collectors as Ann Hatch and Steven and Nancy Oliver, a couple who engage artists to build site-specific works for their Sonoma Valley ranch. Von Rydingsvard has also made a low, ground-hugging work for Microsoft's headquarters in Redmond, Washington; *Three Bowls* for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; and a five-story-high sculpture for the Queens County Family Courthouse in New York. Her repertoire of materials has expanded to include plastic, aluminum, polyurethane resin, and even cow intestines for a 1996 work called *Ocean*

Floor. Most recently she has experimented with motorized works like *pod pacha*, which was described by *ARTnews* critic Lilly Wei in 2003

as a "massive . . . receptacle

[whose] motorized lid rises and falls in ungainly slow motion, closing with a rhythmic whoosh and thud as if it were a weary heartbeat." Her works sell for between \$25,000 and \$600,000.

While von Rydingsvard's sources range from ancient Greek to Oceanic, African, and Asian art, her titles evince a strong connection to her Polish-Ukrainian roots. Her latest show at Galerie Lelong (which represents her) was called "Sylwetka," meaning "silhouette of a woman" in Polish, and the big bonnetlike work in Madison Square Park is titled *Damski Czepek*, after the Polish words for "lady's cap." Describing a work-in-progress, she resorts to a humble culinary metaphor: "I want to pack it—not exactly like headcheese is packed, but close."

In the upstairs quarters of her Brooklyn studio are an office for her assistants, a full kitchen (she sometimes makes lunch for her crew), and a large space she uses for thinking and drawing. Here von Rydingsvard displays some souvenirs and artifacts from her extensive travels—mostly objects like bowls, shovels, and textiles. A couple of whimsical projects reveal her lighter side: a party costume she made from unraveled scouring pads and fake fingernails, and a wire-mesh "bra." Some drawings on a long wood table are an attempt to work out a site-specific project in North Adams, Vermont. "Not that I draw for the sculpture, but somehow I have this on my mind," she says. "It's mostly trying to figure out where I want to go."

In the studio, she keeps a notebook with a long list of adjectives in Polish. "It's very hard for me to figure out titles, because I don't want the titles to explain the pieces away," von Rydingsvard says. But then again, the works themselves might change right out from under the titles. "Often things come back from a show and I take them apart—you can see other possibilities," she explains. "I do that a lot." ■



TOP *Czara z Babelkami*, 2006, installed at Madison Square Park in New York.

BOTTOM *Dubeltowa*, 2006.

