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Topography
of the Soul

A Conversation with

Ursula von Rydingsvard



BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Ursula von Rydingsvard is known for monumental works, usually in cedar, that evoke her Polish heritage, her hard childhood in Polish refugee camps in Germany, and childhood games and family. Her abstract compositions also evoke the body as a metaphor for our innermost yearnings and struggles.

In addition to using the circular saw as a way of carving cedar into larger-than-life shapes that seem both timeless and intimate, von Rydingsvard has been following the path of her own and other bodies—drawing on psychological and physiological notions of the body's skin, scars, and outer layers, as well as its inner workings. This layer of meaning offers new ways to view von Rydingsvard's recent exhibitions at Madison Square Park and Galerie Lelong. Her new works explore female shapes that simultaneously speak to an evolving aesthetic of cedar and urethane, the ways in which women experience their lives, and how art may both comment on and provide solace from horrible events in one's history and era.



Previous spread: *Five Lace Medallions*, 2003–06. Cedar, graphite, and chalk, 5 units, 116.5 x 501 x 9 in. This page, above: Installation view of “*Sylwetka*,” 2006. Left: *Exploding Bowl*, 2005–06. Cedar, 32 x 56 x 55 in.



Jan Garden Castro: *Could you discuss your exhibition “Sylwetka,” which took the notion of a woman’s profile as its theme?*

Ursula von Rydingsvard: I titled the show “*Sylwetka*,” and this metaphor makes a general reference to a woman’s profile or silhouette, but it’s not specifically that at all. I am always anxious to keep many more options open than a title may suggest.

JGC: *The large piece Wall Pocket has an incredibly voluptuous silhouette. What were its origins?*

UvR: Again, I don’t know that too much meaning should be placed in the title, but I did want there to be an opening up or a differentiation of what the bowl is usually considered to be. The organic folds inside are almost like the waves of a woman’s Botticelli-like long hair. The structure sometimes fits together in a manner that feels very wayward, almost awkward, almost groping in the way the elements want to stand with one another. There’s also a kind of grotto-like darkness on the inside, and the back is flat enough that the piece can be put up against the wall. That flatness provides a tough skin, a backbone for the wall pocket. It was important to me that it be considerably higher and taller than a per-

son, but it is proportionally one of the more slender and thin-walled pieces I have made. It is vulnerably stacked, with vulnerable edges all over the place, and a number of times I altered the bottom section that folds in on itself.

JGC: *Each piece in the show seems to be about the contemporary condition. Do you want to talk about Exploding Bowl?*

UvR: I’ve been working on that bowl and altering it for a number of years. I sliced it up in a way that made sense to me and made sections that I sliced into areas of air. Into these open pockets, I squeezed thousands and thousands of shims. I then ground into the surfaces of the shims so they would have a charred, deep brown, burnt sienna look from the metal grinder hitting up against the cedar.

JGC: *Spreading Blue has a different look but is a strong metaphor.*

UvR: *Spreading Blue* has some relation to *Landrollers*, installed at Storm King in 1992, 14-foot logs made from cedar four-by-fours. I carved into the surface of these logs, making a drawing. For this piece, I had an image in my head of a lacy tablecloth dipped in acid so that when you took it out, it had jarring, unexpected, vulnerable holes eaten away by the acid. *Spreading Blue* might be a follow-through of *Landrollers*, except that the tablecloth feels more whole, not as disrupted. There is a kind of sadness, a slipping away or slipping down, leaving an empty space underneath the tablecloth. There is nothing holding it up; it’s floating in a way. It has a feeling of terrific introversion. I once heard about a lady who loved dots to the extent that she painted everything inside and outside of her home with dots and wore dotted dresses and skirts. I envision these dots being white, much like the dots that I saw on the surfaces of wooden or log houses in small villages in Poland. I only saw one or two of these, but the dots were made with a whitewash of powdered lime. It’s almost an over-indulgence with the dots on the surface. Also, it’s not literally a tablecloth. It



Left: *Large Ring*, 2005–06. Cedar, 71 x 65 x 5 in. Above: *Spreading Blue*, 2006. Cedar and graphite, 26 x 103 x 28 in.

could be some sort of regulated landscape that took a turn and fell—a rank and file formation of dots that turns erratic, with some dots falling off, a kind of slow wandering away.

JGC: *You've also created a Large Ring that looks as though it represents an elder spirit.*

UvR: *Large Ring* is a microcosm—for example, if a wrist were cut and one were to take a slice of it. I started with this idea as a springboard fantasy, I like the layering of mushroom shapes made of cedar. I had never layered wood like this before. Placing the cedar mushrooms and their stems between the layers would cause an area to open up, so that I could insert very thin shims, making it resemble flesh or what I imagine a ligament or a tendon might look like. I know that these things don't look like this, but this is my fantasy. It has been translated to a larger scale, creating a kind of universe that circles in on itself.

JGC: *The body as a metaphor for what it contains?*

UvR: Yes. I've used my body or other bodies in everything I've ever built. For instance, in *berwici pici pa*, I envisioned a sprouting image that had to do with pulling at the lip while keeping the jaw stationary, so that the bone is almost like an immobile wall as opposed to the very flexible lip that one can stretch, sometimes outrageously. I have also made bowls like *Bowl with Bent Knee*. I am extremely involved with the interiors of my bowls, meaning that the interior is as important as the external layers. The body too, could not exist as it does without what is behind its surface—that obviously makes a tremendous impact on what one sees on the outside.

JGC: *Was *berwici pici pa*, with its multiple compartments, also inspired by notions of family?*

UvR: I meant it to be a very voluptuous procession. It was a reaction to the minimal, right-angled space of the Bloomberg Building. I wanted something primitive, something sensuous that wandered from the wall, up the lobby, and then back down the lobby. This procession follows every person who comes in through the lobby, all the way to the checkpoint where there's a guard. It's 88.5 feet long, and it makes its way from the edge of the main entrance to

the edge of the door that leads to the offices. The piece also has "vertebrae," a thick line that's quite distinct in back of the vessels. They seem linked to one another almost from the beginning to the end of the sculpture, and they also seem to flatten themselves against the wall, enabling the part that hangs toward the front to be much looser and to wander in a way that's much more elastic and with its own kind of energy—not energy that sucks against the wall but energy that pulls away from and wanders from the wall.

JGC: *Some of your forms are flattened portraits. What inspired your pair of Weeping Plates?*

UvR: I had a flood upstate last April. I remember going to the little piece of property that I have near a river, and the river was overflowing outrageously so that there was no yard. The yard became the river. If I stepped into it, the flow was ferocious enough to carry me away. Of course, bushes and plants of any height got bent, forced to go in the direction of the water, which was powerful enough to move anything in its path. Adrenalin ran through my body—this view was so hard to believe that I was rendered helpless to do anything to save my land. It took a while for me to make a transition from a reaction of tremendous anger toward that water to incredible awe. I backed off and bowed to the reality of its forces. Soon thereafter these plates happened. Not that I'm mimicking in any way what the water did, but I think that in some way that event influenced the work—not that it was the only thing functioning. I have a feeling that the whole realm of the domestic that I constantly dip into has a lot to do with many other things that are very difficult for me to verbalize. In fact, I could say that almost everything in this show is connected to that which is domestic and that which is very primitive.

JGC: *Have any of your pieces been responses to 9/11?*

UvR: The one piece definitely connected to 9/11 was *Mama, build me a fence*, because it was the first piece I made after that day. *Can't Eat Black* might have been connected, because I built it not so long after. The other piece that possibly connects is a five-panel piece that I've been working on since 2002 (*Five Lace Medallions*).



Left: *berwici pici pa*, 2004. Cedar and graphite, 1,040 x 96 x 65 in. Above: *Czara z babelkami*, 2006. Cedar, 202 x 125 x 74 in.

I know they're reliefs, but, to me, they're mainly drawings that I first did with chalk, then pencil, and finally cut with a circular saw in such a way that I either disrupted or amplified what was there to jar those drawings and give them greater depth.

JGC: *How do you feel about Five Lace Medallions?*

UvR: It's hard for me to talk about the emotions I have for any of my pieces. I'm not even sure I had 9/11 in mind while I was building these things, but something had been unearthed inside of me or disrupted inside of me, so that it served as a mobilizing force for that kind of imagery.

JGC: *What were the risks you took in creating Damski Czepek?*

UvR: *Damski Czepek* was the first time I had ever used urethane. I spent a good bit of time finding the most durable urethane and the kind with the quality of translucency that I needed. I found the material, then experimented with it to see what the light would do. I made corners and edges like those in the final structure, sending them off to the Walla Walla Foundry to cast and send back to me. I would keep refining to see what widths and what kind of curves I could make in the final structure that would enable me to speak the way I needed to speak. I wanted the urethane to have a humaneness that we don't often associate with plastic.

Damski Czepek was located on the largest lawn at Madison Square Park, and the light hit it in ways that created tremendously varied drama. First I made the entire structure out of cedar, always keeping in mind what I wanted the light to do as it passed through the urethane. I did it by registering the rugged surface of my cut cedar. It wasn't shiny, glossy plastic; it was on the whole quite matte, again reverberating a very erratic way of speaking through

this urethane. Through the arms she stretched on the lawn, the bonnet was able to welcome many people, including children, to use her. She was able to speak through the light that came from the east and also through the setting sun that lingered in the west. In part because the buildings are so low and in part because the trees surrounding the bonnet were far enough away, there was a generous opening for light to enter—a rare thing in Manhattan.

One of my favorite places to stand is on the inside of the bonnet, having the rest of the world framed by the arch. The arch is the thickest portion, the most dense. That's the portion that turns alizarin crimson during certain moments of the day when the sun is intense. It is one of the few pieces that I have made to engage people physically. My bonnet is also filled with many scales, meaning that the urethane attaches itself in an undeniable way to the body of the bonnet, but then there are scales that detach themselves and look white underneath, and they have a kind of playful yet vulnerable existence on the surface. I even added some scale-like elements to the surface because I liked them so much. The color of the bonnet is a "no color" color, with blue, black, and green in it. You can't use white because it stops the light from going through.

JGC: *You've said that Czara z babelkami, the giant bowl with popcorn stitches and bulging sides, is a metaphor for a favorite sweater you wore as a child when you were shuffled through eight refugee camps.*

UvR: *Czara z babelkami* is probably the largest bowl I've ever made. *Czara* is an ancient bowl associated with magic. *Babelki* are the popcorn stitches that get knit onto sweaters, but in Polish, they also refer to the little lambs wool fluff balls attached to the



Above: *Mama, build me a fence*, 2001–02. Cedar, graphite, and chalk, 168 x 367 x 17 in. Right: *Damski Czepek*, 2006. Polyurethane resin, 143 x 406 x 364 in.

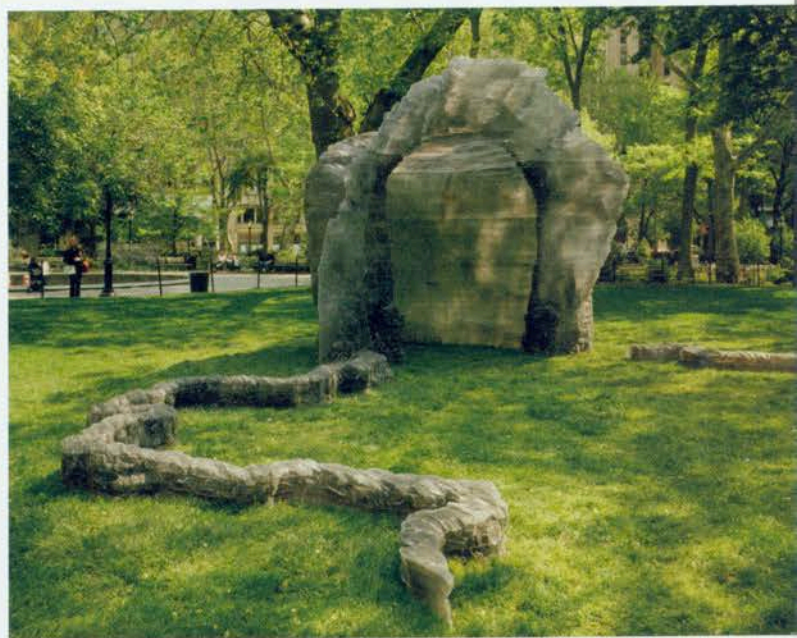
neck or waist of a sweater. *Czara z babelkami* stands very slender at one side of her profile and gets outrageously wide-looking at her head-on side. She's 11 feet wide at the top and 17 feet high. I started with a grid, the grid of the unbleached wool sweater made with popcorn stitches that I wore as a child. That grid got stretched and worn. It was one of my only pieces of lovely clothing. In time, the *babelki* lost much of their grid and wandered, making larger spaces between themselves around the shoulders and the belly. I had fun making *babelki* into large cedar structures. I made portions of the cedar grid in a slow and deliberate way (as seemed respectful to this scale) to make room for something like a belly.

JGC: Do you have any comment on the process of working on the Madison Square Park show for two or three years?

UvR: There's a privilege for me in working for the public at large. People did not have to buy tickets; they did not have to enter a museum or the inside of any space. They could see or not see, enjoy or not enjoy, as they walked by on their way to work, as they ate their lunches, or as they spoke to one another on the benches of the park. I come from a long line of Polish peasant farmers. My parents could barely read and write. The concept of a museum was not one that they were privy to, so that to be able to reach out to small children, to be able to reach out to people who would not ordinarily go to museums is important to me. It's a well-maintained, happy park, small and intimate in scale. In fact, the divisions of the park feel like they're formal rooms.

JGC: How would you assess the transitions in your work?

UvR: That's not an easy question for me to answer. I want the work to get better, and one of the most important things in my life is evolving my work so that it feels more interesting to me, so that



I'm dipping more deeply into things that matter to me, so that I understand my psyche more intimately, so that I can be more objective or more subjective depending on what I need to call on. The work is becoming more vulnerable: it's not as anchored; it is able to suspend itself a little bit more without feeling the need to make a conclusive statement. The work might offer possibilities, metaphors that are at the same time more specific and offer a wider range of options. I'm not on such certain ground, but I know that I want to grope in places that feel more vital, that I want to be able to take greater risks from my own psychological arena.

Jan Garden Castro is a writer living in New York.