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INCONVERSATION

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URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD WITH IRVING SANDLER & JOHN YAU

by John Yau and Irving Sandler

Just a few days before the artist's opening reception of her recent exhibit *Errätus* at Galerie Lelong (March 18 – May 1, 2010), Ursula von Rydingsvard welcomed Consulting Editor Irving Sandler and Art Editor John Yau to her Brooklyn Studio to view the works and then discuss her life and work.

Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Irving Sandler: I'll start with a very general question. And then, I also have another very general question. Ursula, why wood?

Ursula von Rydingsvard: I'm going to answer it in a way that might not be the answer. However, I will do my best in trying to come as close as I know how to it. It's a familiar arena for me. It's familiar ground. I somehow feel that in my blood is stuff that used to run in the blood of my family, my father, his father. My father had a tremendous amount to do with cutting trees. After the war, I grew up in displaced persons camps that were barracks built by soldiers that were most expedient, the most pragmatic. It wasn't even a lumber construction. It was plank construction that wasn't very warm in the winters because there was no insulation. It was just me, sleeping against a plank, and on the other side of the plank was the outdoors.

Sandler: But, before that, your father had been a farmer in Germany. Slave-labor,

actually.

Rydingsvard: That's right. I never was in Poland as a child, so my experience of that which was Polish was so distant, in some ways, from the Polish culture as it existed, because the culture which I experienced was that of the displaced people, which was, you know, still Polish. Anyway, when I first went to Poland in 1985, I saw the farmers do these great things with stacking wood and how they cut it and what sort of patterns they form with it. It's there for the winter. They are saying this is how able and competent they are. They don't think in terms of visual sensitivity. So that there's a fantasy that you feel as you go by.

John Yau: You're talking about the stacked wood for the fire during the winter.

Rydingsvard: Yes. But their stacks are really enormous.

Sandler: But there also, I guess, would have been barns.

Rydingsvard: Yes. That's right. It somehow feels to me like a place that is not only familiar, but that it has a degree of safety that I can't find in cement structures. I remember first coming to this country and being so surprised that I could see no earth because there were no such things as walkways or even roads in the camps. It was just the earth, mud, and it wasn't necessarily even grassed. It had wild things growing on it, whatever happened to be able to survive. It had little paths that were made by humans that used them often enough. So that, to see the earth that smothered, you know, with something other than earth—it took me a while to get used to it and it felt heartless. It felt very psychologically rough.

Yau: When did you come to America?

Rydingsvard: 1950. But it was December, so it was almost 1951. I was 9 years old. I was in the camps from 1945, I was three when the war ended, to 1950, which is just five years, but we were transported frequently enough so there were nine camps that we went through. I was in the camps from three to nine.

(I visited the little village in Germany, headed by a Burgomaster in which my father worked for this man who owned this land.) I saw the fields that he, at one time, planted. It's so bucolic, with little ponds—it's hard to think of how heavy the

prejudice was of the Germans toward the Poles and Russians that worked there. We also had Russian and Ukrainian immigrants that worked in these same fields.

Sandler: The other question, my last one, and then John can—

Rydingsvard: But Irving, I don't know if I really answered the wood thing enough. I guess in the end, I keep saying to myself that I don't want to feel as though I'm so faithful to this one material. There's no reason for it. I keep looking at the resins and epoxies that are being made. I used intestines, felt blankets, and peat moss for a while. There are many other beautiful materials. I don't know how or why, but I keep going back to cedar. I'm not sure I know the real answer.

Yau: That's interesting, because, the fact is, it's not about being faithful to it. I mean, you just answered it. It's about looking at other stuff, but so far, those haven't answered the questions you're trying to ask in the material that you're using. So, you come back to this material that does what you want it to and doesn't do what you want it to do. It resists you, and you can see it in the work.

Rydingsvard: That's right.

Yau: I think that its resistance is as much what attracts you as the fact that you can do something with it.

Sandler: I think it's more personal. I think it has to do with memory. I think it has to do with barracks and barns and those very early experiences of yours.

Rydingsvard: I think you're right.

Yau: I think it does, too. But work can be autobiographical and not autobiographical at the same time. What really makes your work what it is, is the not autobiographical, because if it's purely autobiographical, it ends up being anecdotal and your work isn't closed off in that way. It's open to us entering it, us looking at it, and bringing our own experience to it. It doesn't say, this is what you're supposed to experience. I think that part of your relationship to wood is interesting because you've taken this thing that is, as Irving said, very personal, but you've opened it back up, so that it's not purely personal.

Sandler: My second question: is your essential or repetitive form a circular body? A bowl and a dish are circular. And again, just as you seem to be attracted to

wood, you're attracted to this form. You refused to answer my question when I asked it at the New Museum and you can refuse it again now because I understand that personal questions should remain personal, possibly.

Rydingsvard: No, no, if it was personal and if I knew I would tell you. But, I don't. I don't think I'm trying to hide anything because I'm not sure what it would be that I would be hiding. I'm not even sure how. If I connect it to my history, I think it would be a little bit corny. It's for sure that food was a huge deal. We ate in the camps, much like you see the potato eaters that Van Gogh painted, with a bowl in the center. There were very few utensils. I think we got a number of spoons from the army and it had "US" on it. It had a hole in it so that I could actually have it tied around my neck. You would never dare to lose this spoon. The orientation around what food and lack of it could do to human beings was in the air constantly. And my parents struggled. It's good that they were farmers, its good that they were so knowing about the means by which a family like this could survive. But, it was always in the air.

Yau: And that never leaves.

Sandler: De Kooning said that when he first went on the ferry from New Jersey to Manhattan, the first thing that struck him was that commuters were getting coffee. There was one long row of coffee cups and the man serving had this big vat and he just walked by, pouring one line of coffee. De Kooning said, boy this must be a great country. [*Laughter.*] But, the Church would have been very important.

Rydingsvard: The Church was extremely important. Even though it was another barracks, it was bigger than the one we lived in. It always had a cross on it. And inside, it was clean. A tremendous effort was made to make it feel special, to make it feel as though there was something of great consequence in there. Its the only place that you saw white linen with a little bit of embroidery around it. It's the only place where you saw clean clothes that were the vestments that the priest would wear and altar boys would wear. I remember being very attentive to the part of the mass in which the priest holds the chalice and he has a little board

that he puts on top of it and then a beautifully clean, white folded, ironed, cloth napkin over the chalice. This is where the body and the blood of Christ are. And that's where the communion is that he later serves you. When the priest opens up that little tabernacle, you would see the almost silk-like materials that puffed out and lined it's walls making certain for me as a child that Christ lived in it. This is something you never would come across outside the Church. Everything in the other barracks was, you know, rough.

Yau: When the priest puts the wine and host into the tabernacle is when the miracle of transubstantiation takes place.

Rydingsvard: That's right.

Yau: It has to impress a child. And there's the incense, as well.

Rydingsvard: Yes, the incense that was permeating the air.

Sandler: None of this has to appear in the talk, but I do think it's important, because, whether one can specify it or not, these roots continue to sprout, as it were.

Rydingsvard: I think so.

Yau: Okay, I have a couple of questions. There's one aspect of your work that's been true since I first saw it in the late 1980s—your interest in functional things, bowls, spoons, forks, combs, and shovels, which are about cleanliness, building, and eating. Your forms recall an archaic past. You feel like the scale makes them have a ritual importance to whoever possesses them, though the viewer might not know the nature of the ritual. That's one thing going through your work. The other thing is this very incremental way you use the cedar, where you start with something quite small, a piece, and keep adding to it, piece by piece. I feel that you, as the maker of these things, don't always know how it's going to turn out, that there's a real kind of, "I'm going to find my way to the end." At any point, I feel like you could change your mind, and make another decision. Now I'm going to do this to it. And the change is always slight. But, it's like a shift that affects everything else around it. Does that make sense? It's the incremental, from the small to the large. You feel like it's methodical in one way and imaginative in

another.

Sandler: And organic.

Ursula von Rydingsvard,"Droga" (2009). "Cedar, graphite, 54 × 115 × 219 inches (137.2 × 292.1 × 556.3 cm)." © Ursula von Rydingsvard Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

Yau: It's two things going on: something methodical, "I'm going to do this again and again," but at the same time, it's not mechanical, it's imaginative or what Irving calls "organic."

Rydingsvard: One of my nightmares would be to have my brain clamped to a final look or a final image, it would be torturous. I think it's the wandering through the possibilities and the record of that wandering. I have a feeling that this is one of the reasons why the large pieces have more possibilities for me. And these possibilities get tested. I like the idea of a piece having a rich history of coming upon it every day for a month, for three months, for five months. And a record of that history, a record of the pencil marks, a record of the sweat of the hands, of the grinder, of the saw, and in that layered, recorded history is a part of the visual richness of the piece.

Yau: One of the things that occurred to me with this recent work is that, if in the earlier work there's the time of the building of the piece, the incremental aspect, say, there's an underlying optimism to this process, because you get from here to here. But now, I think there's also another notion of time, because of the way the surfaces are really cut differently and worn, say, near the top—it's the notion of time as erosion. I feel there are at least two kinds of time going on in the piece and it really puts the viewer in an interesting place of tension. On one hand, you see the thing rising up, but you also see things coming back down, touching the

floor. There's a vertical rising, and an awareness of gravity pulling. And then there's the erosion at the top of some of those pieces—it's almost like water has poured over them for thousands of years. I feel like the recent pieces convey an awareness of the largest cycles of time, and accept it, which is different than just being aware of it.

Rydingsvard: When you say optimism, my whole life is one of, I think, shedding fears, or maybe not enclosing myself as tightly as I once did. It's trying to flake off those things which inhibited you, to dig into a will that seems to have had this need, actually all of my life, to come out, trying to figure out what that is. You never figure it out. But trying to come closer and closer. That skin of fear, you know, and you never lose it. But I feel as though, in connection to your optimism, I feel that this show somehow has more optimism. But maybe optimism isn't the right word, I'm not sure what the right word is. Maybe I'm hitting at what I need to hit at a little bit more directly than I have in the past.

Sandler: You talk about shedding fears, but, on the other hand, your work can get very large, even monumental. Would you talk about the role of size and scale in your work?

Rydingsvard: Sometimes I used to make up stories to myself, saying that, wow, I didn't know it was going to be this big. I didn't know it was going to be this expensive. I didn't know it was going to take so much of everyone's energy and effort. But I can't really do that after many years. I still order a huge amount of wood. The 18-wheeler trucks loaded with cedar come in. At some level, it was very obvious to me that this is what I wanted to do, this is what I was going to do, so I overrun a lot of budgets. One of the ways I explain it in my head is, "Oh, gee, it's this teenage girl that didn't mean to have sex."

Sandler: But, does the size of your work, like the proposed 300 foot long piece for Yorkshire, have another kind of significance or meaning? Why do you work so large?

Rydingsvard: I can give you obvious answers like: I feel that if I approach something that feels closer to impossible, it'll draw on something that might be

deeper inside of me than otherwise. It makes your adrenaline run because there are times when you can get into trouble with that work and getting out of that trouble, and that being recorded visually, is a hugely adventurous or exciting thing, or a thing that forces me to solve what I wouldn't otherwise have to solve. The small ones are almost like preparing to play the piano—you do scales—so the smaller pieces are single entities—like experiments. It all starts with a circle on the floor and I know by the size of the circle the approximate size of the piece. When I did that big bowl that's in the other room, I must have known that it was going to be huge, of course I did. But I don't really say that to myself because it's overwhelming at the beginning. If you say to yourself, "Holy shit, you're going to have a piece that is going to be 22 feet by 18 feet, Ursula. Are you sure this is what you want to do?" I've never said that to myself. What happens is once I do that circle, I hesitate at that moment. It's not even that I think about it. I've just hesitated because that's a courage moment, and then I start building on it. Then, it's whatever cut cedar pieces you already put on that circle that suggests the next thing to be built. There are ballsy moments and moments I bow or respond more to what's already there. This game becomes familiar after I'm more under way with the building of the sculpture. It goes on for however long it needs to go on for it to make sense in my head.

Yau: Just to say something about Irving's idea of size, to go back to the incremental, as big as your pieces are, and some of them are quite large, they also feel immediately human because we can identify with the smallest things that we, even children, can hold in our hands. You establish a relationship to the viewer that never tries to overwhelm them.

Rydingsvard: It's extremely important to me that there is a humanity in the work. I think it was a little harder to reach at times when I was a little more covered in terms of my ability to spill it out.

Sandler: I'd like to pick up on John's point about the incremental, because while these pieces can be large, like 300 feet long, they are all built of surface elements of two or three inches at most, until quite recently when your work

changed. You have this problem of the tension between what's happening on the surface and the volumes you've been creating.

Rydingsvard: They're building blocks. Each one is a small opportunity to do something with the whole. Some of them serve a more supportive role and then there are some you really give a much more consequential role that pushes at or defies what you've been working on. The building just seems so normal. I guess the other thing that I mean to say is that I come from a long line of peasant farmers. My father was Ukrainian; my mother was Polish, but a long line, as far back as I know. Many of them didn't know how to read or write—my parents hardly knew how to read and write. There's this need, on my part, to use my body, but just to use your body alone is such a bore. It's as boring as exercising on a treadmill. It's so punitive for me to sit. It almost puts me into a coma; I almost want to fall asleep. So that kind of interaction with something, with the material, feels like I found some kind of game for myself that enabled my head and body to survive. As polluted as my environment is, it is good for my body and certainly good for my head.

Yau: It's interesting because you used the word "game" a few times. It brings in the word "play." As labor intensive as these works are, there's also a playfulness to them that comes across to the viewer—a humor. Not "ha ha" humor, but a gentle humor to it. The piece has risen up quite high but then there is a feeling of erosion, almost as if you're saying "this is what the weather could do to this piece." It's not going to, but there are rivulets as if the rain had run down through these grooves that you put into the wood. To go back to the thing with nature, you are making work that acknowledges its interaction with nature. If you think of Brancusi, the tower rose straight up, but he's not acknowledging nature in another way. I think you really are acknowledging weather in your work. I don't think that's very typical of outdoor sculpture.

Sandler: John, are we allowed to disagree?

Yau: Of course.

Sandler: Because I see no playfulness. I'm always struck by its absolute gravity

or *gravitas* and the utter seriousness. I guess every now and then, like in the new work, where it opens up and there are dangling elements.

Yau: I think the playfulness is new. I'm not saying it's been there all along.

Sandler: We might digress.

Rydingsvard: Before we digress, can I just say something in connection with your building idea? Some of my most fun moments in the camps were playing in brick buildings that had been bombed. Just taking those bricks apart and building with those bricks, it would sometimes be done with a friend, but there was a huge amount of fantasy of what could be afforded. Nothing was defined—a brick is just a brick—you can then continue to define. The givens of having a part of a wall that was destroyed and the way in which the things were destroyed by the bombs—the ruins—were so beautiful in some way. They had so many possibilities. I guess I also have this yearning to be close to some things. I don't know why, but to be close to these spoons and amplify their size and therefore make them that much more available to me, like a small pleasure is even better when it's a big pleasure. Not always, but often. The same with the bowls, it's like seeking this whole thing people talk about in terms of the purpose of your life. Who knows? I don't know what the purpose of my life is, but I let something guide me that doesn't know either, but is less on the conscious level—that is the thing that comes closer to defining what I want to look at, or what I want to surround myself with, or what I want to create. It's not as though I'm not in love with my work. After I do it, I just lose interest. I must say though, I put that wall up of those plates, for the two of you, because we took them down to photograph against a decent white wall. When I put them back up, it was easier for me to breathe because they weren't dispersed all over the place. It felt more right, but I don't even know why.

Ursula von Rydingsvard, "Unraveling," (2007). "Cedar, graphite, "138 × 222 × 29 inches (350.5 × 563.9 × 73.7 cm)." © Ursula von Rydingsvard Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

Yau: I've noticed this about your studios since I've known you: they're very neat and ordered. There is a sense of order that has always run through every studio of yours I've ever been in.

It's interesting because the work doesn't feel like it's over-determined. I feel like you find your sculpture—you don't make it, you find it. You may have an idea of what you want it to look like in the end, but I feel that in order to get there you have to find your way there and that's always been true.

Rydingsvard: The interesting thing is that I don't formulate verbally, ever, what it is that I am trying to find. It would be awful for me to have to do that while I'm building the work. The things that drive me are the hardest things for me to explain.

Yau: In this new work, like the undulating floor piece that has that opening through it, sort of like a wave and also like earth and rocks, and then the other vertical one that you just put those two pieces in, which goes back to the idea of the tabernacle—there's a sense of sacred space that we can see into, but that we can't enter into. There's a tension about that because we feel there is this secure space, which almost could embrace us; it's quite large, but we cannot quite get into them.

Rydingsvard: People sometimes want to, but it hurts.

Sandler: That's one of the changes: now you're undercutting forms and creating volumes that you can actually see into. In your earlier work one could often

sense that the interior was hollow and a secret place. Now you've actually opened up these secret places. You were talking about one piece that you still can't see inside of that you'd like to put in a place where the viewer walks above it, on the perimeter. Another change in your work is a much more organic quality, particularly in that horizontal piece that John said had the empty interior volume. A third is that rather than use these small increments, two or three inches, to build these large volumes—now these small increments have taken off and become imaginative and varied forms in their own right. With respect to your work, you have at least three radical changes that have happened in the past two or three years. Comment?

Rydingsvard: I think you're on target with all those observations. Except that I can see myself making bowls again that are hollow with hidden spaces. I'm not sure that I've really formed a system with opening that up, but I do think that they're more willing to share something, though I'm not sure what it is. I can work with more secret spaces, I'll bet. It's not like it will never happen again.

Sandler: I understand that; that this doesn't determine what your future work will be.

Rydingsvard: But you're right. There was a time when I would have never opened up quite like that. [*Pause*.] I didn't answer that right. I can see it in your eyes.

Sandler: No, we'll get back to it. But, just to finish, the idea of a secret space seems to move in and out of all of your work. I can understand living in a displaced camp where finding a secret space may have had a great significance. [*Laughs*.] I keep getting back to the personal. You keep avoiding it.

Rydingsvard: Sure, it's good. It's important. Even with the Storm King piece where the two arms reach down—that's the secret space.

Yau: You can see through it, but you can't get through it.

Sandler: That would be a fourth change in that you're now slowly introducing bronze.

Rydingsvard: Yes. I've had two bronze pieces in the past. We'll see what happens with the bronze in the future. The Yorkshire Sculpture Park piece in the stone quarry is going to be bronze and I'd like it to be the kind of bronze you dig under the ground for a long time, allowing it to get its own patina and corrosions.

Sandler: One last question because I want to pick up on the point that you made in reference to nature. Do you think of this work having a connection to nature, but also possibly having a figurative connection? Some of it does though: the shovels, the spoons. But the work is essentially abstract. Does the idea of abstraction, figuration, and nature interest you at all?

Rydingsvard: I think of making a figure periodically when I look at Kiki Smith's work. I saw that last show at the Brooklyn Museum. I envy her ability to go toward a certain emotion like the death of her mother and actually being able to portray her sister hovering over her mother in a moving way. I know that time she went through, but it would be my dread to be forced to do a figurative figure—my absolute dread. But, neither am I so abstract. You're right. I call these appendages on my bowl arms. One of my bowls was titled "Bowl with Bent Knee." I actually felt the anatomy. Anatomy, bodily structure, is a big part of my thinking. Nature is a little bit more difficult. I think nature is made up of things like I witnessed a flood in our upstate home that I love. It's right by the river. We have seven acres on the riverfront and the river extended itself across the entire seven acres and started swallowing our house and garage. I looked at it with disbelief. Then, of course, all the processes and visuals I saw in terms of the bending and the taking of everything in its path represented a power that I was in awe of. I had this great desire to run into it, to try to stop it. It's overwhelming, overwhelming. I like the idea of having frames around nature. Nature becomes most easily taken in by me if I can look at it through the frame of a window or a door.

Yau: Framed. Let's go back to the beginning, to the spoons, forks, and combs. Then there are the forms the viewer explores by walking around it and seeing the parts. The piece downstairs that you haven't named is the first time where you couldn't see the form.

Rydingsvard: The first one to the left as soon as you walk in? I call it "Droga."

Yau: That is the wildest form within your work. It's like, "how do you see it?" You have to try and see it, and the minute you see it, you realize that you can't really take it all in, as it has so many things happening to and with it, happening on the surface, happening as it changes as it moves through space. You can't name it, you know, there are other things we could say like "Oh, that's a this," or have some association. In this piece, it's almost like you're going to step beyond the world of names. Speaking of shedding, you're even shedding names. Because that piece seems to me to raise disassociation.

Sandler: That piece also frames a void. It's interesting from having a piece that large to the intestine pieces, which frame a different kind of void. So, that's another motif that runs through your work.

Yau: Well, it frames the void, but we can't frame it. Unlike a bowl or something, we can have an association or name for us to stand on, as a viewer. There is less familiar ground for us to stand on. I like being in the place that doesn't have the name.

Sandler: When I was here last there were no drawings and now I see there are two walls of them. Not only on paper but they're drawings on heavy paper, it kind of looks like fabric. Is it a departure to do this much drawing as we see here now?

Rydingsvard: No, I've done a lot of drawing all my life. Some of those cabinets are full of my drawings that I've kept, but I've never shown them. I mean I showed once at the Portland Art Museum, just three years ago. The only thing I want to show is my sculpture.

Sandler: But you don't do sketches or drawings for the sculpture?

Rydingsvard: No.

Sandler: So it becomes an activity in its own right.

Rydingsvard: That's right. The drawings I've had to do for sculptures and models I've had to make were strictly for fundraising purposes. It is a summarized version of what's going to happen with the work. It never helps me.

Sandler: And you've not done prints?

Rydingsvard: Pace Prints actually kicked me out because I was too indecisive. I didn't come with a project or plan. I think I spent three days working with their people without coming up with a product. But with Dieu Donné, you have vats of pulp that you can build with and then it gets put underneath this press that squeezes all the water out. Rivers get formed on the paper as a result of the water being forced out so powerfully. A lot of the drawing is done just by the press for you, but you have to know how to make the press work for you. I think the gallery might have one of those examples in the back from the Dieu Donné. I made almost 40, and Dieu Donné will have a show of them, I don't know when. Maybe in four months?

Sandler: Another thing that comes up is this. Because your works are so large, what is the relation to site and to architecture? Would you talk about these two aspects? I mean the Yorkshire piece is meant for that particular site. Have you done architectural commissions?

Rydingsvard: I did an architectural commission for the Jamaica Queens family courthouse that was built by Pei Cobb Freed and Partners. This was in 2003 in an atrium with a 40 × 40 foot skylight. I hung a bowl-like structure, but I keep thinking of it as a kind of cap. It was a bowl that was about 24 feet in diameter made from co-polyethylene. I made the entire four-story structure, including the bowl, with sleeves that hung off the bowl, one on either side from cedar first. I then sliced it into about 220 pieces, but strategically, to fit underneath a vacuum-forming machine. We built probably the biggest vacuum-forming machine in the country. We had to ship it in from Chicago and get it in working order—very complicated. We would heat up the sheets of co-polyethylene and quickly let it descend onto the cedar structure simultaneously sucking the air out. The 24-foot cap and the four-story-long sleeves were hung directly underneath the 40 × 40 foot skylight with the intention of bringing light down very gently in a way that embraced the escalator located between the sleeves.