

## The Sorceress of Cedar

by Alexandra Anderson-Spivy

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Ursula von Rydingsvard's dense, eccentric, craggy sculptures fascinate me, yet I can't remember any art that has made me so strangely uneasy. Her mammoth constructions quiver with power and evocative, disturbing contradictions. These cedar creatures, their scarred and striated surfaces frequently darkened with rubbed-in graphite, are monumental yet intimate, crude yet delicate. Von Rydingsvard is an artist who works on a dauntingly heroic scale while the underlying content of her pieces is intensely personal, even haunted by her memories, for she is a veteran survivor of real struggle.

Ursula

It's been widely noted that she was born on a German farm to a Polish mother

and Ukrainian father forced to work as agricultural slave laborers under the Nazis during World War II. After the war she, her six siblings and her parents were shunted through nine displaced person camps in Germany between 1945 and 1950. She



Ursula von Rydingsvard  
*Unraveling*, 2007  
Galerie Lelong

spent her early childhood living in crudely built wooden barracks, one board to the weather, surrounded by hard-packed earth. Supplies were meager and the most menial possessions became precious, essential survival tools. Not until she was nine did the family manage to immigrate to New Britain, Connecticut. Her American adolescence led her to college and eventually to the MFA program at Columbia in the mid-1970s. Subsequently she worked and taught her way upwards in the art world, first teaching simultaneously at five metropolitan institutions and then as a professor at Yale until she could afford to work fulltime in her studio. Like many other women artists, Von Rydingsvard's career trajectory has been steady, persistent and hard-won rather than meteoric.



Ursula von Rydingsvard  
*Blackened Word*, 2008  
Galerie Lelong

Her Polish heritage and her harsh yet paradoxically exciting childhood continue to infuse her constructions with an unusual sense of gravitas. Now at mid-career,



Ursula von Rydingsvard  
*Moja*, 2010  
Galerie Lelong

she has forged a signature style that draws equally from an interpretation of minimalism, expressionism and personal experience. She is creating ambitious, assured work that is increasingly epic in scale and visceral in feeling. In the current Chelsea show (her sixth solo with Lelong since 1994) there are just five pieces. The oddest one is *Unraveling*. Ungainly but graceful, this large wall "drawing" consists of gnarly, almost curly shallow wooden bowl-like forms that are at first concentrated in one corner and then spill downwards to roughly dissolve into twisting, shapes

like a disintegrating net or fast-flowing water.

Other concretions conjure up the organic, animal or geological as well as associations with the human body. The looming, snaky *Blackened Word*, 24 feet long and almost seven feet high, is like nothing so much as an overhanging cliff. Its eroded fissures and deep grottos seem to demand that viewers try to creep into them. Get close in and you are engulfed by the seductive scent of fresh cedar. (The only other artist I know who to so subtly uses aroma is Wolfgang Laib with his sculptures of beeswax).

Von Rydingsvard says that she based its initial, underlying meandering footprint on an old Polish woman's spidery, hesitant handwriting.

The majestic nine-foot all *Moja*, the only piece in the show built to be installed outside, is a solid tower of cedar incised with

irregularly patterned bumps and sinuous grooves. Alone in a side gallery, *Droga*,

("Bride's Veil"), built up out of thousands of

diagonally sliced and glued 2" x 4" elements, undulates and expands across the floor like a huge, brown enchanted mammal arriving from a forest in a fairy tale. It is a tour de force of construction. Its obsessively articulated surfaces, chipped, gouged, sanded and tinted, ripple almost like silk. An irregular fissure snakes

along one side of the massive sculpture, which is also internally hollowed out into a kind of inaccessible cave. *Splayed*, which is a wall-hung study for a much larger piece planned for a quarry in Yorkshire, England, is a lacy necklace of wrapped wooden pieces and stacked, carved cedar medallions that is delicate yet already big enough for a giant.



Ursula von Rydingsvard  
*Droga*, 2009  
Galerie Lelong



Ursula von Rydingsvard  
*Droga* (detail), 2009  
Galerie Lelong

I detect that what disconcerts me about this work is its unfamiliar, passionate concentration of irony-free, intuitive feeling and a harnessed violence rare in today's slick, over-mediated art world. It's intense! In an era of digital scans and take-out fabrication, she is obsessed with big projects and hard, almost penitential labor. Though she sometimes adds bronze, resins or other materials to the equation, wood is her primary material. The ground floor of her large Bushwick studio, where the 4" x 4" and 2" x 4" milled cedar beams that serve as her modular units lie stacked in mountainous piles, looks like a lumberyard. There she constructs each piece incrementally but methodically, one beam at a time, cutting, stacking, clamping, securing and gluing the elements in place. Using chisels, mallets, circular saws and sanders, and wearing a respirator to protect her from toxic wood dust, Von Rydingsvard distresses and caresses the edges of each of the wood layers, later applying the graphite pigments for color variations. All this requires months, even years of careful and dirty work, as well as forklifts, other heavy machinery and a team of trained studio assistants whose skills need to include engineering. (Who, by the way, she credits, unlike many other artists who tend to keep their studio teams behind the scenes). The larger the piece, the more unpredictable its outcome; the longer the time spent on a piece, the more complex is its history. Resolutely abstract yet loaded with associative meaning, Von Rydingsvard's sculptures are simultaneously primitive and elegant, poetic and menacing. I'm betting that once you see them you won't be able to get them out of your mind.



Ursula von Rydingsvard  
*Splayed*, 2009  
Galerie Lelong

At the beginning of April Von Rydingsvard also installed an enormous new outdoor work at Storm King Art Center. The 18-foot tall container-like shape with

two lumpy bronze extensions that act as supporting feet was commissioned for the bucolic sculpture park's 50th anniversary exhibition that includes pieces by Alice Aycock, Chakaia Booker, Andy Goldsworthy, Mark di Suvero, John Bisbee, Maria Elena González, Darrell Petit, Alyson Shotz and Stephen Talasnik. In 2011 the Sculpture Center plans a retrospective of her work that will travel to the deCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in Lincoln, Massachusetts.

Ursula von Rydingsvard, "ERRATUS," at Galerie Lelong, Mar. 18-May 1, 2010, 528 West 26 Street, New York, N.Y. 10001

"5 + 5: New Perspectives," Storm King Art Center, Old Pleasant Hill Road, Mountainville, N.Y., 10953, 845-534-3115, May through November 15, 2010,

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