

ARTFORUM

Ursula von Rydingsvard

GALERIE LELONG

Ursula von Rydingsvard's *Blackened Word*, 2008, an enormous, rippling accumulation of cedar and graphite, brings to mind the ruins of Angkor Wat as they appear in the final scene of Wong Kar-wai's 2000 film, *In the Mood for Love*, which finds the heartbroken hero whispering something into a crack in a decaying wall, seeming almost to want to hide in it. *Blackened Word* unfolds as one walks around it, a hulking shape irregularly darkened with graphite and cleft with creases, dips, and fjords, some roomy enough to accommodate an arm or a small torso, some just big enough for a probing finger, or less. The artist based the structure on an elderly woman's shaky handwriting, an enlarged sample of which she laid on the floor and built up from two dimensions into three, providing another sort of whispering, a kind of encoding: a landscape that contains language but does not itself speak.

Von Rydingsvard is very deft with the work's paradoxes—monumental but ravaged, monolithic but modular, eloquent but mute—and as a result *Blackened Word* creates a real impression of opposed energies, of being pushed and pulled at once. This is a perceptible sense of movement, which is surprising in a piece as elemental and large as this one and forms a vivid contrast with any stolid Minimalist qualities one might be tempted to detect. (It is telling how much contemporary sculpture by women still seems to have a bone to pick with Minimalism—dissecting it, softening it, showing what has slipped through its rigid lines. Von Rydingsvard takes apart the idea of the big form without making a joke about it, in contrast with Orly Genger's witty *Reg Versus Fans*, 2009, in which a massive pile of painted rope requires, like some obese diplomat in a hot country, four fans to keep it from overheating.) Of the Minimalists, von Rydingsvard said in 2007 that she loved their use of materials and repetition but “their



Ursula von Rydingsvard,
Blackened Word,
2008, cedar, graphite,
6' 9" x 20' 8" x 6' 6".

philosophies seemed so cleansed of any kind of sensuality, so controlled, that they drove me nuts.”

The sensuality in these sculptures is earthbound but not gentle, comprising another paradox in the deep sense of a natural material being made to do the artist's bidding in works that still have a natural feel; a distinctive cedar scent seems part of the lively struggle, evidence both of the wood being mastered and of the triumph of its physical qualities. *Unraveling*, 2007, is a large work that hangs on a wall, dripping and looping down in a most unwoodlike fashion from one corner toward another, pausing in forms that resemble baskets or barnacles. It looms over the viewer like something from a jungle. *Droga*, 2009, is a hollow tubelike structure, made, like *Blackened Word*, from pieces of cedar meticulously assembled, here with a more pronounced feeling of something taken apart and then reassembled in a slightly skewed manner: At first glance the work appears to be a large piece of felled first growth. Seen from different angles, however, its likenesses become more fleeting, with perspective and scale changing in an instant: a crouching animal, a grotto, an uninviting maw, a landscape of rocks stepping down into water like the Giant's Causeway on the coast of Northern Ireland. Von Rydingsvard's canny deployment of holes in *Droga's* top makes for a very few patches of light that provide shape and perspective within the hollow structure but do nothing to delineate its details. Like *Blackened Word*, *Droga* is a container, a repository—but also a mystery, exploiting all the metaphoric possibilities of its material without being too literal.

—Emily Hall