

October 2010



Ursula von Rydingsvard:
Droga, 2009, cedar and graphite,
9½ by 18¼ by 4½ feet; at
Lelong.

URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD LELONG

The consistency in Ursula von Rydingsvard's practice is deceptive. Her signature use of commercially milled cedar beams, chain-sawed with remarkable delicacy into cubistic surfaces that are further modulated with finer cutting tools and with graphite, is long-established. But an increasingly broad formal and associative range is revealed by the five sculptures in her recent exhibition, which variously evoke clothing and domestic objects, geological formations, written language, classical figuration and a single, ferocious beast.

The last takes shape in *Droga* (2009), which, at approximately 10 feet high and 18 feet long, lurked menacingly in the gallery's small side room. The head it lowered toward the entering viewer was incipiently horned, the body tensed on muscular haunches. Diagonal cuts in the wood thrust its mass forward. Without obvious transition, it became, midway, a cresting wave surging in the opposite direction: Hokusai in carved wood. The clifflike *Blackened Word* (2008), impla-

cable wall to *Droga*'s unopposable force, presents dark, brooding surfaces that undulate into narrow crevasses. Installed rather close to the gallery's longest wall, it created a narrow, visually uncomfortable corridor—an organic variation on Serra's steel traps. The meaning of the title would be visible only from above, where one could discern (with difficulty) that the nearly 7-foot-high wall is configured in the rough shape of a word (the artist declines to specify it) written in von Rydingsvard's native Polish.

The cryptic template for *Blackened Word* is anomalous only in its literalness. Von Rydingsvard's sculptures are frequently motivated in part by memories both personal and cultural that are neither apparent nor, really, important for the viewer to know. But a deeply shadowed, fundamentally unknowable core—often alluded to in titles—can be felt as the physical and metaphorical heart of much of her work. *Moja* (2010) is a columnar, quasi-figurative form that tilts toward classical contraposto while sustaining the belligerence of Rodin's *Balzac*, its gnarled surface both a ravaged face and a clenched fist, and in either case a door tightly closed on an

inner void.

Two works hung on the wall, one, *Splayed* (2009), a virtuoso turn at draftsmanship in wood. Describing a nubbly smock, it features apron strings that flutter joyfully upward, binding no one. As overbearing as *Splayed* is light, *Unraveling* (2007) is a top-heavy work that spanned a large wall. Near the ceiling was a cluster of deep cedar basins; those that spilled below decreased gradually in depth and portentousness, eventually melting into delicate tracery. Von Rydingsvard's language may be familiar, but her fluency in it is a continual wonder.

—Nancy Princenthal