



Draping and Shaping Wood

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Ursula von Rydingsvard's recent and upcoming exhibitions—commissions for the North Carolina Museum of Art and Storm King Art Center, large new work at New York's Galerie LeLong, and a 35-year retrospective at the SculptureCenter in 2011—demonstrate that her new work writhes, twists, leaps, and otherwise moves in ways that wood has never moved before. Wedges, knobs, teeth, and other details suggest fabric or bodies moving in space.



A Conversation with **Ursula von Rydingsvard**

Blackened Word (front view), 2008. Cedar and graphite, 81 x 248 x 78 in.

Some works, notably a huge piece titled *Unraveling*, now hang on the wall, while others are painted with special pigments. Using cedar four-by-fours as well as two-by-fours, von Rydingsvard still marks, cuts with a circular saw, stacks, unstacks, glues, and restacks her sculpture in a by-now finely calibrated, labor-intensive series of processes. In the newest work, the cuts are deeper, the textures and surfaces increasingly varied—and often interrupted. As von Rydingsvard notes, her work has “aged” by the time it emerges from the studio. As each work’s surface displays its textures, grains, cut, and pigments, its correlations to processes of drawing and painting become increasingly evident.



Above and left: *Droga* (front and back views), 2009. Cedar and graphite, 54 x 115 x 219 in.

Jan Garden Castro: *Droga* is beautifully constructed. It almost looks like a hollowed-out, supine body or the shell of a tree that has lived for many generations. What was the genesis of this work?

Ursula von Rydingsvard: It started with the front oval section of the piece, a section only eight inches to a foot deep, like a ring. It is stuffed with thousands of wedges. The ring was part of another sculpture that I destroyed because I couldn't get it to work for me. I saved the heart, which felt most complex, as though it had many layers of labor history, and I ground the ring with a metal grinder that singed the wood in ways that I liked.

A decision followed, an unconventional one for me, not to stack the cedar horizontally. I wanted, above all, to infuse the sculpture with a high degree of energy. I placed the two-by-fours against this ring, drawing on the edges that needed to be cut, making a kind of orifice, a hole that followed through the interior of the entire piece. In having the two-by-fours function as vertical elements, I could move the lean of the vertical layers a little, and every five layers or so, I put a layer of wedges from the top to the bottom. This gave me another opportunity to work toward another kind of shift. I found further opportunities, as I built toward the back, to lean it more toward the left. All of this movement respected the enormity of the piece. With something that big, that weighty, that heavy, a kind of slow movement pulls all of the weight in response to the tremendous pull of gravity in the process of its moving. I started from the ring with a small fissure, and as I went toward the back of this tubular, large structure and made its primitive, animal-like movement, I opened it dramatically toward the end side, allowing its innards to spill out. This sculpture and this method were an adventure that felt like a leap.

The surface of the skin has the capacity, like scales, of shifting when the body is made to twist itself or flatten or turn itself dramatically. I've kept the flat marks that I made in lighter wood to imply the additional motion. Actually, feathers have that capacity, too. It's the first time that I have left flattened areas, which enabled me to create a pattern

on one side of the sculpture's shifting scales. **JGC:** *Unraveling*, which weighs half a ton or more, resembles a large bowl that has been torn apart. It is designed to hang on a wall facing viewers. This process of opening up the bowl seems as difficult, or more difficult, than anything you've done.

UvR: I made *Unraveling* after I came back from a three-month stay in Rome. This was a little over two years ago. It's also connected to a flood at my house near the confluence of the Peterskill River and Round-out Creek. My entire yard turned into the river. It was truly alarming and anger-provoking that I had no control over what the river needed to do. It carried the grasses, the plants, and whatever was in the yard—the entire driveway made out of small pebbles—down with it. It took whatever it wanted to take. The visuals of the flood and my stay in Rome influenced that piece.

Unraveling hangs flush against the ceiling and flush against a left corner of the wall. It washes—unfurls—down from the ceiling where it joins the wall almost to the floor. It expresses an interest in the flow of energy from something that might have, at one time, felt very substantial to a kind of dissolution or a more heavily profile-oriented structure pattern as it makes its way downward. **JGC:** *Blackened Word* is an indecipherable text that seems to be a deep reading of illiteracy.

UvR: *Blackened Word* started with the writing of an older woman whom I knew well. It's Polish writing—deliberate, con-



Unraveling, 2007. Cedar and graphite, 138 x 222 x 29 in.

crete, with no sense of fluidity or movement to it. This woman could barely read. She could sign her name and write slowly without sentences in a labored way. I used about three words, but the content doesn't matter to me. It enabled me to start a sculpture—a very organic wall. It has one capital letter, and the rest are small. Building the wall enables me to crawl and rise in sensual and voluptuous ways. On the front part, the letters loop and join each other along the bottom in a kind of straight line. On the back, the small "l" and "k" come out from the body of the wall; in some ways, they become more anxious, deeper. Each of the letters enables

Blackened Word (back view), 2008. Cedar and graphite, 81 x 248 x 78 in.

me to have another opportunity for the kinds of wedges that I want to build into walls.

JGC: *The wedges, the curvature, and the new forms that you're creating explode with "ins" and "outs." What aesthetic decisions do you make as you're moving through a piece?*

UvR: As I'm working on a sculpture, my base is a highly intuitive one. I never speak to myself except to say, "No, no, not this" or "Well, this might be a little more doable." It's all visual and psychological response, all a feeling that has to do with a reaction that comes from—I'm not quite sure where. One of my goals is to make the process of my making even less about consciously editing. I'm trying to engage something that I can't control as easily, from a realm that might, in fact, be a more consequential place in terms of the core of what human beings are, or who I might be.





Left: *LUBA*, 2010. Cedar, graphite, and bronze, 212 x 139 x 88 in. Above: *Collar with Dots*, 2008. Cedar and pigment, 115 x 137 x 7.5 in.

As a footnote, I like to have my wood feel as though it has a history. I don't want it to feel futuristic or as though it was made in the 1950s, 1920, 2010. I want it to feel as though one can't pin down its age. Not always, but often, the more the work gets handled—marked on, chewed away with a little chiseling that we do to take the glue out (because a lot of it drips over the edges, which it should in order to make a complete seal)—the more it gets touched, the more it gets turned over, and, in some ways, the more it gets abused and used, the more history it carries with it, the greater the degree of visual substantiality.

JGC: *What about the variegated surface hues?*

UvR: Primarily, I put graphite on my cedar because it affects the look so much; I need to be the one in control of that. I put deeper amounts of graphite in places that need it, and lighter where it needs that. Recently, I seem to be omitting edges and wedges of portions that extend out, or not, making a kind of pattern between what the color of the cedar itself does and what the color of the graphite surface does. This is the kind of pattern that, in my head, comes closer to something that feels like a fabric.

I was also fortunate, during my stay in Rome, to find some pigment powder—their blacks seem to have earth colors. The one I've been using the most begins with an earthy green. I've used that pigment, mixed with water, in a number of my pieces. If I add enough water, you can begin to see hints of the soft green color but nothing obvious.

JGC: *How did you develop your new work for Storm King?*

UvR: I want very much to feel more vulnerable in my sculptures. I did a small sculpture called *The Two-armed Bowl* and then tried to scale it up to many times its height and width for the Storm King commission. I then had the two appendages cast in bronze. Psychologically, I wanted it to have slender footings that would just barely touch the ground, and they come out of the side of a cedar bowl that carries a large, cancerous, and bulbous appendage. It's a growth, an outcropping, a rooting-out of an offspring that's gnarled.

JGC: *It seems to have jagged teeth at the bottom and at the top, and both the shape of the bowl and the shapes of the appendages are a little anthropomorphic.*

UvR: The outcroppings on the side of the bowl are almost like what a plow would make in the earth. Initially, when the earth is coagulated, the structures on its surfaces are quite geometric. This isn't at all what I thought about or what crossed my mind as I was making it—I'm just trying to verbalize some sort of parallel. The wedges or the structures that edge out of the surfaces of my pieces are sometimes very caustic, but I try to imbue them with a kind of directional energy. With the piece at Storm King, the



Left: *Moja*, 2010. Cedar and graphite, 102 x 49 x 44 in. Right: *Ogromna*, 2009. Cedar and graphite, 240 x 148 x 140 in.

large bowl leans ever so gently toward the smaller outcroppings. There's a slightly contouring geometric pattern that's more muscular-looking at the bottom and becomes more jagged as it makes its way toward the top. There are constant interferences with any path that they start forming. I like to screw up my patterns, which gives me an opportunity to make them feel a bit more like fabric. Obviously, this is impossible because they're so physically substantial. Still, I can make something work on its surface in ways that bring it closer to what a fabric might feel like. By fabric, I mean that it will feel as though it were not hard or with the possibility of moving in more quixotic ways. I also use the flesh color of the cedar and the black of the graphite to do that. The title, *LUBA*, refers to a feminine presence, such as a pet.

JGC: *The cuts and fittings of the cedar surfaces are very much like drawing and painting. There are also many internal correspondences and rhythms that seem to turn toward drawing as well as sculpture, that give surface temperature, tension, and line. What is the Storm King site?*

UvR: The site looks down on a quarter-mile colonnade of trees and is one that I've always liked. I visited a number of times. Standing beneath the two arms and the side body of the bowl, one can see the colonnade of trees—this is my way of framing the view in a way that feels more intimate.

JGC: *Your work for the North Carolina Museum of Art is a tall, hurricane-like shape. How did you create this image for this site?*

UvR: The sculpture is called *Ogromna*. In Polish, *ogromna* refers to something large and female—it could be a storm or a spoon, for example. The piece is about 21 feet high and approximately 13 feet wide, made of dramatic wedges that are truly pointed. There is something about looking at these wedges from below that is almost disorienting, for the entire bowl juts out in so dramatic a way that one almost gets vertigo looking at it from the bottom up.

I wanted these wedges to catch the rising sun from the east as it touches their edges. I also wanted *Ogromna* to have a teeny waistline. In starting this bowl, I first made a circle of chalk on the floor of my studio. This is, essentially, the only guideline or beginning. The waistline, for me, is the part that meets the ground and is then appended to a cement foundation. After building it for 13.5 feet—because my studio is only 15 feet high, and my body can't fit into a smaller space—I had to take down the top six feet of the piece and then continue building on that. To have to build on only a part instead of the entire piece is one of the most unnerving ways of building since I need to see the entire structure in progress to be able to assess with some degree of confidence what else it needs.

I wanted the siting to be such that the sculpture has a strong presence in front of the museum. It can be seen from cars along the road located above the museum, yet when one comes upon it, after seeing it from a distance, some closer views make it appear as a surprise encounter. I've opened up some new possibilities and feel excited.

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