

Ursula von Rydingsvard, Carpenter To Ancient Giants

by [Benjamin Sutton](#)



The German-American sculptor [Ursula von Rydingsvard's](#) complex, organic constructions are full of unexpected textures, complex materials and primordial forms, all imbued with powerful physicality and palpable presence—maybe it's their pervasive cedar smell. They provide welcome antidotes to the popular abstract minimalism of contemporary sculpture. For three decades now she's been creating immense pieces in her Brooklyn studio, often working in cedar, sometimes with resin. Her superb retrospective at SculptureCenter, [Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture 1991-2009](#) (through March 28), focuses on her particular kind of carpentry, with cut, chiseled, notched, sanded and graphite-rubbed cedar beams turned into startlingly fluid forms that still bare the traces of their construction.

Though often organic in shape—this exhibition features pods, cocoons, giant fingerprints, weeping eyes, a wave, a snake, and more—the surfaces of von Rydingsvard's works are usually covered in measurements, pencil markings, and violent incisions made by electric saws. Their stunning scale adds another set of associations, as though these were the only remaining artifacts of some lost tribe of woodworking giants. The ten pieces brought together here fill the towering industrial space beautifully. "Droga" (2009), in the middle of the room, wraps around itself like a long blanket or a crashing wave frozen in wood. Nearby "Wall Pocket" (2004) extends vertically in a similar shape, with nooks and folds that suggest a wooden mold of a narrow cave. Standing right alongside it looking back, "Droga" and "Weeping Plates" (2005) form eyes and a nose, a no doubt unintended homage to Salvador Dali's "[Mae West Room](#)."

Two five-piece series line the main space's long walls. The upright, almost ten feet-tall bas-relief set "Five Lace Medallions" (2001-07) suggests three-dimensional brain scans or cross-sections of a large boat's hull, full of deep incisions and bulbous ridges. Their lower halves are carved into the wood and the tops jut out dramatically, preserving the continuous stripe patterns of beams throughout. On the opposite wall, "Krasavica II" (1998-2001) is like a row of kangaroo pouches, sans kangaroos. They hang invitingly off the wall, inviting us to lean over and peer into the wooden capsules. Ominously, the ensemble evokes a giant wasp nest.

A radical shift in scale takes place in the main floor's tiny back room, which contains (barely) one piece: the eleven feet in diameter wooden life raft-like bowl "Ocean Floor" (1996). Its edges are adorned with buoys made of intestines, reemphasizing the quasi-primitivist streak running through von Rydingsvard's oeuvre.

Out in the SculptureCenter courtyard the show's only non-cedar piece continues to blur distinctions between natural, artificial, ancient and modern elements. "Elegantka" (2010), a crystalline six feet tall stack of resin (the same material von Rydingsvard used in her 2006 Madison Square Park installation), might be a giant icicle, but from the right vantage point it also lines up perfectly with the similarly opaque-blue [Citigroup Building](#) nearby. It occasions a fortuitous comparison, showing how very complex, artificial materials, if manipulated intelligently, can take on very sensitive, human qualities and dimensions. Von Rydingsvard wrings life from complex materials and abstract forms perhaps better than any artist of her generation—though seeing her work alongside that of [Lynda Benglis](#) would be very interesting—and this exhibition provides a pleasantly intimate survey of her staggering work to date.

SLIDESHOW



Ursula von Rydingsvard Brings Abstract Sculpture To Life

The woodworker's incredible retrospective at SculptureCenter is full of giant, seemingly ancient cedar assemblages.

By Benjamin Sutton