

Earth and its extrusions reflected and carved

Ursula von Rydingsvard's grand sculptures hint at agrarian metaphors and sometimes resemble geology, but show her human hand and tools



ROSALYN AND MICHAEL BODYCOMB

Ursula von Rydingsvard's "Krasavica II" (1999-2001), sculpted of cedar with graphite, at deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum.

By Sebastian Smee

GLOBE STAFF

LINCOLN — Ursula von Rydingsvard makes hefty sculptures from cedar. They smell good. Walking into her indoor show at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, you catch a zesty whiff, as of a sauna or northern lumberyard.

At times, however, her works look more like geology than wood. They have a layered, blasted look, as if wind, water, and subterranean pressure had gouged out their forms and patterned surfaces. Some call to mind unique formations like the Giant's Causeway on Northern Ireland's Antrim Coast, others the striations and folds of less outlandish cliffs and caves.

And yet even as they look organic, von Rydingsvard's sculptures are also — self-evidently — made by human hands and tools. The artist emphasizes this by leaving her own marks and notations on the works' surfaces. Her process varies with each piece. But it involves hard labor (stacking, gluing, and clamping cedar beams), challenging logistics, and lots of planning.

In 2008, von Rydingsvard won the Rappaport Prize, an award set up and sustained by Jerry and Phyllis Rappaport and dispensed by the deCordova. So even though this mid-career retrospective was organized by Helaine Posner for the Sculpture-Center in Long Island City, N.Y., it is a return, of sorts, for von Rydingsvard.

The artist arranges and re-arranges blocks of wood almost like collage, building up monumental forms from smaller sections, before setting to work with a circular saw to carve out their exterior shapes. She ends the process by covering parts of the surface with graphite, darkening the natural patina of the cedar.

Process is one thing. But do

they work as sculptures? A lot of the time, yes. There are two tremendous pieces in the deCordova's main gallery, and another one on the roof. All three instantly convince you of von Rydingsvard's force as an artist, and of the originality of her achievement.

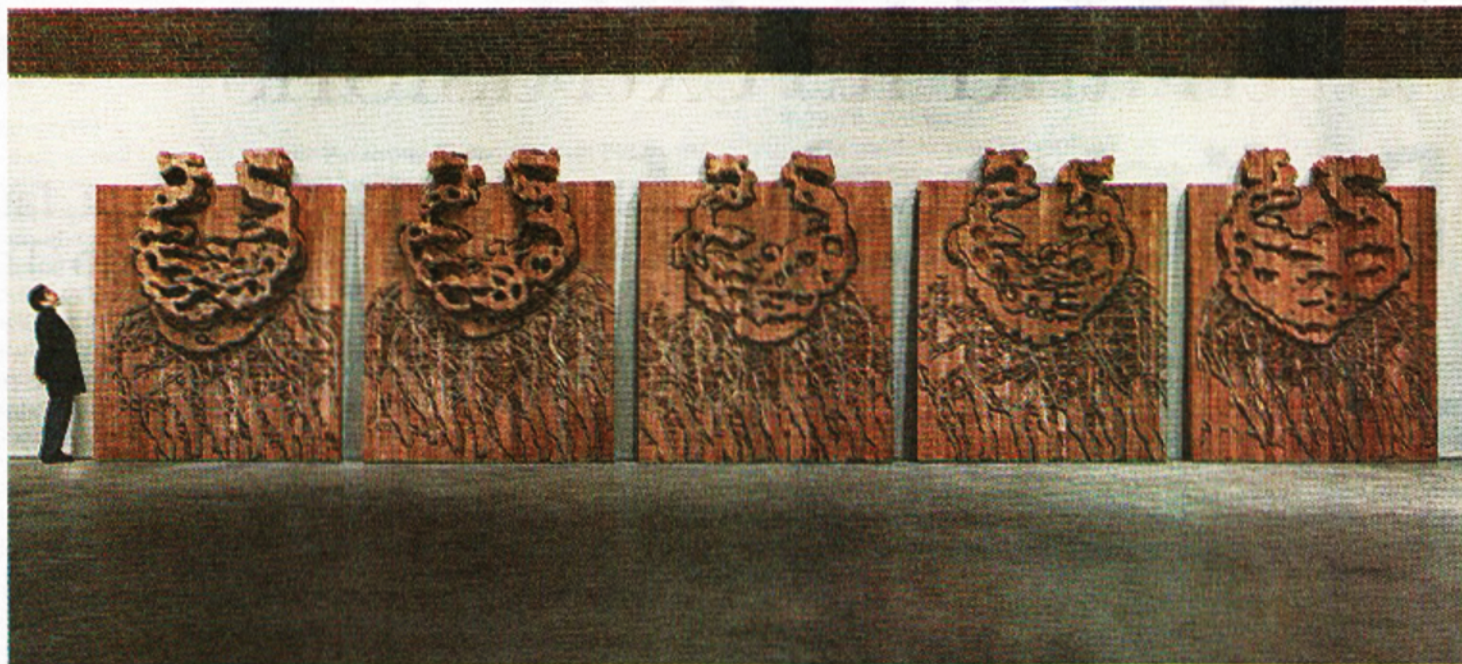
But a little too much in this show fails to get going. I suspect it's because, even as von Rydingsvard has gouged out a powerful new language, she is not always so convincing when it comes to forms. Not unlike Chakaia Booker, who was the subject of a compelling survey show at the deCordova last summer, she can be mesmerizing one minute, and nerveless the next.

In both cases, the thrill of a new sculptural language (in Booker's case it was cut up car tires) can occasionally run ahead of the artist's capacity to unite that language with persuasive forms. The result is either willfully arbitrary shapes that don't match the materials, or a tendency to fall back on clichéd motifs.

Von Rydingsvard's signature motif is the bowl, but she also uses other vessels, kitchen utensils, farm tools, and references to women's clothing. These all have deep personal and metaphoric associations for the artist, who is descended from Polish farmers.

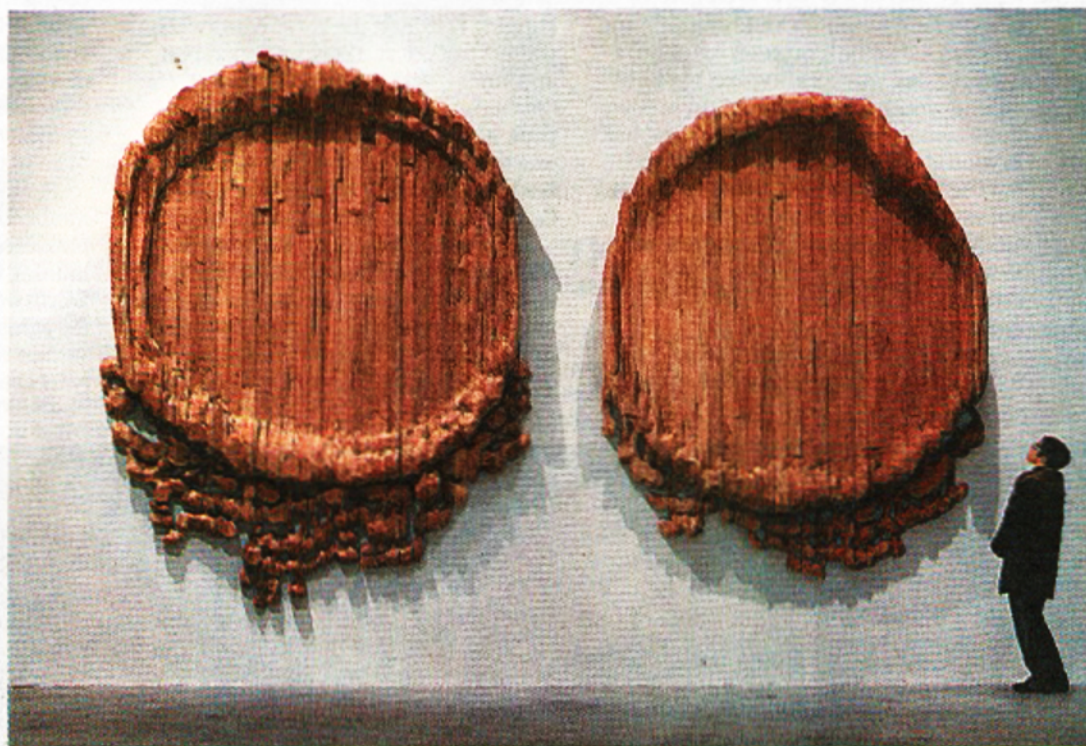
But a metaphor or association will only work in a sculpture if it finds a right place within the whole, and if that whole is compelling not only as a carrier of poetic association but also as a form in itself. In works like "Weeping Plates" — two wall pieces resembling giant plates with wooden blobs descending like tears — and "Five Lace Medallions" — cedar wall pieces representing lacy collars embedded within scored and gouged panels — von Rydingsvard doesn't quite pull it off. Wood doesn't feel like the right medium for either lace or plates, and the repetition of dull forms fails to make them more interesting.

That said, the nearby "Droga" is so singular and persuasive that it virtually carries the show. The piece slumbers on the floor like a giant mammal or an ancient mountain range. The diagonal striations are structural, not just on the surface, and they accentuate the sense of slippage caused by sheer, slumping weight. And yet the piece is hollow. The cavity runs from one end of the piece to



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL BODYCOMB

"Five Lace Medallions" (2006), von Rydingsvard's sculpture of cedar, graphite, and chalk, and "Weeping Plates" (2005) of cedar.



the other. You can see right through it.

The exterior, meanwhile, is chunky and faceted, cross-hatched with circular saw marks; it's like an early Cubist painting by Picasso or Braque stretched over a daddy walrus.

Something about it makes you almost desperate to climb on it. (When I was there teachers had to physically restrain several young members of a visiting school group.)

Wood was obviously a crucial material in the Polish agrarian life von Rydingsvard tries to conjure. But her conjuring is not

about nostalgia. Indeed, she fights continually against the homey, sentimental associations wood has for many people. Applying graphite to give the rich, welcoming color of the wood a grimy, gritty feel is part of that battle — and for the most part it works.

In two works here, von Rydingsvard also uses a material with less pleasant associations — intestines. Reversing expectations, she convincingly uncovers their beauty.

The second tour de force in the main gallery is called "Krasavica II" (the word is Ukrainian

for a beautiful young woman). It's a linked chain of five huge vessels. Here, the repetition does in fact add force to the forms, since they are compelling to begin with, and the subtle variety as you move from one vessel to the next generates its own interest.

What could be the purpose of these shapes? Holders of sustaining liquids and foods? Vessels of memory? Containers of suffering? Their Brobdingnagian character confounds all answers.

The exhibition continues upstairs with a series of smaller sculptures as well as a selection

ART REVIEW

URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD: Sculpture

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781-259-8355.
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of works on handmade paper. But the real highlight, for me, was the single work installed on the rooftop terrace.

"Elegantka," as it is called, was commissioned by an anonymous deCordova patron especially for inclusion in this retrospective.

Unlike all the other works in the show, it's made from polyurethane resin. The material, which has a lovely turquoise tinge, is translucent, and chimes superbly with the setting, dominated by sky. Best of all, its columnar shape, thickening at the top (a favorite form for von Rydingsvard), spirals gently. It's almost impossible not to follow the spiral's movements and walk around the piece. And as you do, the work seems to become one with the extraordinary panoramic setting. The experience is very beautiful.

Von Rydingsvard's sculptures can feel a little hit and miss. But the hits, when they come, are hard, and they make you step back in a state approaching awe.

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