

Carving Peace

New sculptures at the Frost give insight into an artist's challenging past.

"Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture"

Through August 5 at the Frost Art Museum, 10975 SW 17th St., Miami; 305-348-2890; thefrost.fiu.edu. Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sunday noon to 5 p.m.

BY CARLOS SUAREZ DE JESUS

As a child growing up in post-World War II Germany, Ursula von Rydingsvard remembers playing on the grounds of a bomb-leveled building where she would pick up scattered bricks and then stack them around her body like a cocoon. It was an escape from the chaos around her.

"I recall this searing inside me," Rydingsvard says. "It was almost a turn-on. It was almost like a playground. I had a really unusual childhood with tremendous unpredictability. It was a lot about trying to survive."

At the time, she was staying in a refugee camp for displaced Poles. It was one of nine in which she grew up before relocating to the United States in 1950 with her six siblings, mother, and father. "I was living in a wooden barracks built by American soldiers," she says. "I would cross the unpaved road over to where the endless field of bricks lay. I would surround myself with stacks of bricks as if building a grotto. It just felt so luxurious."

Those early childhood memories echo from her past in "Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture," an exhibit of her monumental works, created from cedar and powdered graphite, on view at the Frost Art Museum.

It's a show that will knock the wind out of you with the inherent power of the pieces on display, many appearing like mammoth, ritual objects from antiquity or, in the case of *Five Lace Medallions*, the impenetrable gateways to a soaring temple discovered at an archaeological site such as Angkor Wat.

These colossal tablets, roughly hewn from red cedar between 2001 and 2007, are crowned with serpentine carving oddly reminiscent of hand-stitched lace.

Rydingsvard hails from a long line of Polish peasants and has never worn lace herself. But the intricate nature of the panel's upper detailing combined with the brutally raw incisions on the lower sections result in a nimble balancing act. In fact, these panels appear almost flat when compared to her other works on display, so she says they are more drawings than sculptures.

That description provides insight into another of Rydingsvard's childhood memories.

"There was no such thing as paper. It was extremely precious, so I liked planting potatoes and drawing in dirt instead," she says. "We had just one painting of Jesus Christ, and my father became so frustrated once he threw a cup of coffee at it. Since it wasn't covered in glass, the coffee ran down Jesus's face in streaks. Both my parents were heroic survivors."

Art



Ursula von Rydingsvard stands next to one of her colossal sculptures.

The artist doesn't like talking about her childhood in relation to her work. She fears others will oversimplify it. But looking at works such as the giant *Finger Spoon I* (2007), the equally majestic *Weeping Plates* (2005), and even *Krasawica II* (1998-2001), the last a collection of five gargantuan, bowl-shaped pieces situated at the gallery's entrance, it becomes evident the artist embraces the humility of her roots.

Those powerful pieces capture the modest implements one might

find in a country farmer's home, yet they exude majesty and grandeur.

But other works — such as *Ocean Floor* (1996), created as a "sound piece" for New York's nonprofit Exit Art Space — evoke a much more mysterious vibe. Almost primal in nature and large enough to cradle an SUV, its outer lip rises almost to hip level and is surrounded by a ring of what at a glance appear to be gourds. But closer inspection reveals they are cow intestines, hand-sewn by the artist and stuffed with peat moss.

The imposing structure gives the impression it once might have been used as an altar for animal offerings to ancient gods. It also brings to mind archetypal forms, the depth of the ocean, an inverted skull, and even a cauldron as symbols of the seething unconscious mind.

The surface of the piece, like most other works on display, bristles with jagged cuts, craggy knots, rough peaks, and pitted pockets. They suggest it has been eroded by wild forces of nature across the ages and then carefully shaped by the artist's hand.

Navigating these haunting works elicits many questions: For instance, how did the artist fit these works through the Frost's entrance? Rydingsvard says she creates each one as a three-dimensional "puzzle" that's packed into crates and shipped to a museum. Then it's painstakingly reassembled following penciled clues etched upon the wood's surface and seamlessly glued back into shape.

What tools and materials does she employ? "I use Western red cedar that is milled for me in Vancouver, British Columbia."

She says she receives about one shipment of the cedar a year, delivered by truck to her studio in Bushwick, New York. "Thank God I am on a ground floor now," Rydingsvard laughs. "I used to be on a second floor for 24 years, and believe me, hoisting the timber in through a window wasn't fun."

She uses a Milwaukee circular saw to cut the wood and burns out about ten of

"I have to make many straight cuts to make a curve, and for me it's all about achieving those curves."

the tools a year. "The way I make my cuts abuses the saws. I also go through over 100 tungsten tip blades a year. I have had saws customized to make cuts that are more like nibbles," she informs. "I have to make many straight cuts to make a curve, and for me it's all about achieving those curves."

Asked whether the pungent scent of the cedar attracted her to the wood, the artist laughs. "I've OD'd on the stuff. I wear a mask that looks like a tent over my head with a 15-pound battery hoisted on my back. It has a hose that feeds air to me."

Rydingsvard pauses for a moment before sharing a parting recollection from her youth. "I remember putting raw linen out to dry outside the barracks on the patches of grass, since everything seemed covered in dirt. There were no paved roads or cars to speak of. I would try to soften them with water as they dried under the sun. The fabric was very rough and would scratch and make your skin bleed if you tried to wear it like that. It was even hard to sew in that state by hand. But as I sprinkled it with water, over and over again, I would notice how organic it would look when it hugged the surface of the grass. I remember it pleasing me and making me happy in a visual way."

Visit the Frost, experience this provocative work, allow it to burrow into your senses, and leave assured that Rydingsvard is an artist you'll not likely forget.

Email art@miaminewtimes.com