

The New York Times

August 30, 2013

All Eyes on Her

'Ona,' by Ursula von Rydingsvard, Arrives in Brooklyn

By TED LOOS



Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times

"Ona," by Ursula von Rydingsvard, was delivered to Barclays Center in Brooklyn late Thursday.

Just before midnight on Thursday, a truck pulled up in front of Barclays Center in Brooklyn with a nearly 12,000-pound delivery: a monumental cast-bronze sculpture called "Ona," which means "she" or "her" in Polish.

A crane was standing by, and, as dozens of people looked on, it lifted the 19-foot-high abstract sculpture into place, right under the Center's distinctive "oculus" overhang. By sunrise on Friday, "Ona," by the artist Ursula von Rydingsvard, was greeting surprised passers-by.

Carlos Medina, an electrician on his way to work, deemed it “interesting.”

“It caught my eye, I’ll tell you that much,” he said, pausing to take a picture to send to his girlfriend. “I might be late for work.”

Ms. von Rydingsvard, who was born in Germany to Polish and Ukrainian parents, said that this prominent new public art was meant to be “democratic,” and that it was placed to face people as they emerged from the Atlantic Avenue-Barclays Center transit station.

“You don’t have to pay a fee or enter a museum, and no guard will tell you not to touch it,” she said, adding: “I would actually love people to touch it. The acid from fingers polishes it, like the Buddhas getting their bellies rubbed.”

Brooklyn’s transition from scrappy upstart to polished cultural leader has been a long time coming, and “Ona” — with its aspirationally touchy-feely patina — represents a step in that evolution. Barclays Center commissioned the piece to commemorate its one-year anniversary in September.

“It’s part of the broader ecology of New York right now,” said Nicholas Baume, the director of the Public Art Fund. “People in Manhattan are thinking, ‘I need to go to Brooklyn to experience this great restaurant, this great stadium, and now maybe this great piece of public art.’ ”

The piece has a bumpy, richly textured surface flecked with earth tones, and its shape can evoke the rocky outcroppings of a Western mesa or stylized flames, depending on your point of view.

Like the Brooklyn brand, which has become famous the world over, it is self-consciously and deliberately rough-edged, and yet still something of a luxury product. (Barclays Center executives declined to disclose the project’s cost.)

The sculpture is the capstone of the center’s art program, which already includes three indoor pieces, including a large mural by the painter Mickalene Thomas. It also represents the most prominent example of a recent uptick in outdoor public art projects in the borough. Currently on view are three Oscar Tuazon sculptures in Brooklyn Bridge Park, and an array of pieces at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, including Ed Purver’s digital-print mural “Always Season.”

There’s also an Akihiro Ito sculpture called “Tomorrow” in Fort Greene Park, and an exhibition of four female artists, “Configurations,” at MetroTech Center.

It was not always thus, of course: Brooklyn has been an underdog in the art world for decades, despite its having long been the borough that many artists call home. For local residents, the new art reality may take some getting used to, accustomed as they are to rushing by their surroundings. Stopping along the way to admire sculpture has always seemed like more of a Manhattan thing.

“Sometimes, I wonder, ‘If it’s in Brooklyn, do people even pay attention?’ ” said Sarah Garvey, who lives in Crown Heights, referring to some of the subterranean artworks seen in the high-traffic areas of the Atlantic Avenue-Barclays Center station, which take some seeking out.

Certainly the executives of Forest City Ratner, the developer of Barclays Center, intended “Ona” to make a splash. Ms. von Rydingsvard was picked by a committee of one: David Berliner, Forest City’s chief operating officer.

“I think Brooklyn deserves world-class public art,” Mr. Berliner said. “The Barclays Center is a lot of things, and it’s more than a place to see basketball. We want to signal that in a number of ways.”

Mr. Berliner, an art collector himself who is chairman of the Madison Square Park Conservancy and a trustee of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, has been a fan of Ms. von Rydingsvard’s art for years. “No. 1, we wanted a Brooklyn artist,” said Mr. Berliner, who added that he consulted with the Brooklyn Museum’s director and its contemporary-art curator on the choice. “It’s the epicenter of the creative world right now, so why would we look beyond it?”

He added that it was a plus to have a woman for the job, and that Ms. von Rydingsvard’s background as an immigrant tapped into Brooklyn’s history as a melting pot.

“It’s also the work itself,” Mr. Berliner said. “It is very powerful, it has an elegance, but it is very tough, and that is also very reflective of Brooklyn — it’s got a gritty vibrancy.”

Ms. von Rydingsvard, 71, lives in Manhattan but has been working in Brooklyn for 35 years, mostly recently in a vast studio in Williamsburg. Her work is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, and she has received a Guggenheim Fellowship.

After getting the call from Mr. Berliner more than a year ago, Ms. von Rydingsvard went to work on a complete version of the piece in pliable cedar, generally her wood of choice.

She painstakingly marked up each nook and cranny of the wood with a pencil, so that her assistants knew exactly where to carve. The thousands of cuts are made with circular handsaws — not exactly a delicate artist’s tool. “We go through about 30 saws a year,” she said.

“Ona” made the transition from wood to bronze at Polich Tallix Fine Art Foundry in Rock Tavern, N.Y., using two types of casting, so that some of the finer details would be visible. More than 100 individual sections were welded into one. Then Ms. von Rydingsvard got to work on the surface, wielding a propane torch and applying chemicals that react with the bronze to create different colors.

“I wanted it to feel like something energetic and anxious, but also a welcoming and beckoning quality,” she said of the patina.

The piece’s abstract nature may make it a Rorschach test for people’s feelings about the borough. “To me, it looks flamelike and triumphant,” Mr. Berliner said. “Not defiant, exactly, but ‘Hey, I’m here.’ ”

Others are more skeptical. Marc Feldman, who walks through the plaza every day on the way to work, lamented the loss of unobstructed open space. “But the color and the material go with the arena,” he said. “I’ll get used to it.”

Harriet Senie, a professor of contemporary art at the CUNY Graduate Center who studies public art, said that although she hasn’t seen “Ona” yet, the selection of Ms. von Rydingsvard surprised her. “It’s not a reflection of my opinion of her work, but abstraction in general is not always accessible to a general audience,” she said.

Ms. Senie said that the piece’s placement in a high-traffic area at Barclays Center was promising, but that the biggest barrier to an outdoor sculpture’s success was that, regardless of borough, city dwellers are addicted to their mobile technology. “Recently, I had someone watching a public sculpture in a park, as part of an experiment,” Ms. Senie said. “Fewer than 5 people out of 100 who were passing by looked up from their phones. Public engagement with art in general is being eclipsed by people’s connections with their cellphones.”

Ms. von Rydingsvard said that catching everyone’s eye was not an artist’s responsibility.

“I worry intensely about the visuals and making the details perfect,” she said. “And then I don’t know exactly what will happen after that.”