



CHIPPING AWAY AT THE IMPOSSIBLE

Ursula von Rydingsvard and the importance
of minute dissimilarities

BY ORIT GAT | PORTRAIT BY KRISTINE LARSEN



"I've had shows in Brooklyn, and the Brooklyn Museum collected a major piece," she says, "but I am also happy to be in a place where the people walking by aren't necessarily the people who go to art museums—it's a very democratic place to be."

After an almost 50-year-long career, von Rydingsvard does not rest on her laurels. What separates her from many of her peers is commitment. While many contemporary artists experiment in sculpture as well as many other mediums (Louise Bourgeois comes to mind as a clear example of another woman artist to work in bronze, and Niki de Saint Phalle's *Nana* sculptures could seem thematically close to *Ona*), von Rydingsvard remains dedicated to exploring the possibilities of wood, the material that became her lifelong medium. This explains the fact that a lot of her works may look similar, but their siting—the consideration of the audience of a given piece, as well as the way it is in dialogue with the architecture around it—provides extra content. Or extra difficulties. "I always insist on making things impossible," she says, and points to a sculpture, explaining that she was looking for something that would be more fragile than her other, heavier pieces. She succeeded so well that now it's too fragile to be an outdoor work. "But what interior would fit it?" she asks of the six-foot-tall, three-foot-wide sculpture. This constant rethinking of materiality and scale makes for some unexpected exhibition methods, because her works are not meant to be exclusively indoor or outdoor sculptures. Her upcoming survey exhibition in the U.K., the most extensive of her career, would allow such orphan works to have a place, as it will occur both indoors and outdoors, in the 500-acre groves of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, where it opens on April 5, 2014. The pieces in the exhibition will be sent mainly from her sculpture-filled compound in Brooklyn, as well as from a show at the SCAD Museum of Art, in Savannah, Georgia, but von Rydingsvard can't just let that be that: She is making a host of new works for the Yorkshire exhibition. "I want to do it well. I'm so excited, I hope I have enough time," she says, once again conceding just how planned and labor-intensive her art really is. MP

OPPOSITE AND LEFT: Ursula von Rydingsvard inspecting the progress of her Barclays Center sculpture at the Polich Tallix foundry, in Rock Tavern, New York.

BELOW: Ursula von Rydingsvard inspecting the progress of her Barclays Center sculpture at the Polich Tallix foundry, in Rock Tavern, New York.

PREVIOUS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: Von Rydingsvard at her studio with the upper portion of a wood model for a Princeton University commission. The actual sculpture will be cast in copper.

Untitled (Inventory 5449), 2009. Thread and handmade linen paper, 35½ x 38½ in.

"Can you climb?" asks Ursula von Rydingsvard as she looks disapprovingly at the short, button-up dress I wore to our interview in an attempt to look professional. Before I say yes, the 71-year-old artist is already scrambling up a ladder onto the makeshift plywood scaffolding that surrounds a piece she is currently working on. Von Rydingsvard is one of those artists whose work you think you know. True, her pieces are very recognizable because they are made almost exclusively of a single material—cedarwood—and are always an amalgam of a lot of smaller pieces of wood, from little five-inch chunks to longer logs, all cut at the studio according to patterns the artist limns directly on the wood in pencil. A description of any one of her sculptures will sound like an account of many of her other works, but it's the nuances that matter. That's why von Rydingsvard is so hands-on. Everything in these works is planned, even though the artist claims to have a conflicted relationship with that fact—she wants them to appear casual, natural, not like they're the result of hours of meticulous, detailed labor. No guesswork: "I'm a fanatic in terms of controlling the visuals in my work, and I really don't know any other way of doing it."

Looking into the 10-foot-tall piece under the scaffolding is surprisingly revelatory: Unlike the exterior of many of her pieces, the interior is less ragged, and pencil traces are visible everywhere on the wood, marking the places where cuts should be made and identifying where every two pieces of wood should meet. What I learned at von Rydingsvard's studio is to note the subtleties and intricacies of every one of these large constructs, which are the result of a combination of consideration and attention. Von Rydingsvard and her four assistants all have a number of pencils in their pockets, used to trace every layer of wood which is designed with the previous one in mind and is numbered in order to guide the process of gluing together the wooden bands that make up the piece.

Once von Rydingsvard draws the lines, the rough log is given to Ted Springer, an artist she met at a residency in Florida, for shaping. "I feel like there is a conversation that goes on through the wood, back and forth," Springer says. He's been working with von Rydingsvard for more than a decade. "I get to nibble at it a little bit, and then it goes back into a piece and she works off of that, so it feels like a dialogue. That, for me, is what keeps me coming back here. If it were simply a drawn-out blueprint, I would lose interest." Von Rydingsvard cut the wood for her pieces

herself for over 25 years, and agrees that a conversation is necessary, especially for work that is as tactile as hers. She adds, "I've trusted Ted to do this, and he's probably the most lyrical cutter I've ever had. He can get detail that no one else can. I think he could get into the *Guinness World Records* book for what can be done with a circular saw."

Springer lives in Tucson, Arizona, and comes to Brooklyn for a few months a year to work with von Rydingsvard. Von Rydingsvard's Bushwick studio is a very social environment: The second floor of the two-story building includes an office and a kitchen where the staff gather to eat lunch together every day; on the roof, von Rydingsvard grows herbs and vegetables—like Roberta's, the restaurant down the block, famous for growing ingredients on its rooftop—that are used for the team's meals. The ground floor serves as a workshop: The main space is full of pieces in different stages of completion, some with scaffolding around them, others in the process of being dyed with black graphite, one being disassembled for gluing. Springer works in a plastic-enclosed room in the front, and the gluing station is in the back. Von Rydingsvard's works are glued in the studio into large pieces that will be reassembled in the exhibition space. "Every piece has its own installation instructions," she explains, "and is sent from one space to another with a book of instructions."

Von Rydingsvard has been based in Brooklyn for 35 years and this month sees her first public commission in the borough, an outdoor bronze in front of the Barclays Center arena. She's titled it *Ona*, which is Polish for "she" or "her." (Von Rydingsvard's mother was Polish, and a large number of her works are titled in her mother tongue.) For a woman who works on large-scale wooden sculptures (not exactly the daintiest process—it is so difficult that she has developed an allergy to cedar and has to wear a protective suit whenever she comes in direct contact with the wood), von Rydingsvard is acutely aware of femininity and gender roles. She is currently at work on lace patterns (in metal) as well as pieces made of colorful silk scarves (even though she wears only black) that she disassembled for some experiments in works on paper that she recently completed at the New York workshop Dieu Donn e, and sees a similar thread through her work on the Barclays Center project. "All my life, I've wanted to address vulnerability in the material, and that ceramic shell with all of its crushed surfaces that are pounded off, does that, I think," she says of the lost-wax process by which bronze casts are made. In this technique, the molten metal is poured into a shell that is then broken in pieces.

Ona is "almost as though you are pointing to someone at a distance. If I were speaking about somebody across the room or in another country, I would say *ona*," von Rydingsvard explains about the title. When she says *pointing*, she gestures with her hand. In fact, when she speaks about art, she regularly uses her own body to explain visual ideas: She traces invisible textures with her hands, compares sizes to her own height, outlines forms with her fingers. This physical way of thinking extends to her public work, too. The Barclays Center commission "is a piece that viewers can touch all they want," she says. "And there's that way in which the bronze patina gets worn off wherever it is touched that actually makes it look even more beautiful. Because there's a kind of polishing that people do with the oils of their hand and of their flesh." Von Rydingsvard has shown numerous works in New York—including a public work that was shown for six months at Madison Square Park and a major traveling exhibition that originated at Sculpture Center, in Queens—but having an outdoor, permanent piece in her borough is special.

BOTH IMAGES: CHRIS ROQUE. PREVIOUS PAGE: GALERIE LE LONG, NEW YORK

FROM TOP: CHRIS ROQUE; ROSALYN AND MICHAEL BODYCOMB; URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD, AND GALERIE LE LONG

