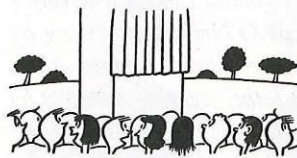


THE TALK OF THE TOWN

September 16, 2013

DISTINGUISHED VISITOR NIGHT MOVE



A couple of weeks ago, the newest crop of pop starlets and boy bands strutted down the red carpet, into the Barclays Center, for the MTV Video Music Awards. The other evening, to significantly less fanfare, a flatbed truck cruised the wrong way along Atlantic Avenue, bringing another guest to the Brooklyn arena. Guards inside the lobby pressed up against the glass for a better look. She was late, but she would outlast all the other acts in town.

“These bronze sculptures are easily good for two thousand years,” Andrew Pharmer, the general manager of the Polich Tallix fine-art foundry, in Rock Tavern, New York, said. He was talking about “Ona,” a nineteen-and-a-half-foot-tall, nearly twelve-thousand-pound art work by the sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard, which had been commissioned as a permanent installation for the Daily News Plaza, outside the Barclays Center’s Geico main entrance, and which he was helping to install.

A few hours earlier, Pharmer, a soft-spoken man with a scruffy beard, had stood in the hangarlike foundry, in the spot just vacated by “Ona.” To his right were bulbous figures, by the artist Tom Otterness, destined for a playground in

Qatar. “Ona” was outside in the dark, wrapped in a silver tarp and fastened to the truck with bright-yellow straps.

Jimmy Jolly, the head fabricator on the project, ambled in. He had begun work on “Ona” in February, casting the sculpture from a form made of cedar planks—von Rydingsvard’s primary medium since the nineteen-seventies—which she stacks in interlocking patterns, and then chews



Ursula von Rydingsvard

away at with a circular saw. The two bronze halves had been fused together only the day before; Jolly had been at the foundry until 2 A.M. finishing the piece, and would stay with it through the night, until it was bolted into the ground, in Brooklyn, at 7 A.M. “Everybody leaves with all their fingers and toes, we’re happy,” he said.

Pharmer and Chris (Rocket) Roqué, the foundry photographer, got into a Toyota Avalon, which would be trailing “Ona” to the city. Pharmer said that he had last seen von Rydingsvard, who is seventy-one, the night before—she’d been at Polich Tallix until around eight, wielding a blowtorch.

“And was she stressing, dude?” Roqué asked.

“Yup, and I’ve *never* seen her stressed out,” Pharmer replied, as “Ona” squeaked through an EZ-Pass lane ahead.

It was a little after 11 P.M. when “Ona” pulled up to the arena. Although von Rydingsvard has works in the collections of MOMA, the Met, and the Whitney, this was her first permanent installation in Brooklyn, where she has had studios for

the past thirty-five years. She showed up wearing all black. “She looks pretty cozy in there, right?” von Rydingsvard said of “Ona,” as she clambered up onto the flatbed. “Like she has a babushka on, all cuddled in.” She pulled back the tarp and stroked her creation. “People will touch it, I hope. And then the parts that they touch will become shiny, like the Buddha’s belly.”

“Ona,” von Rydingsvard explained, means “she” or “her” in Polish, the artist’s first language. (She was born in Nazi Germany, to Ukrainian and Polish parents, and spent her childhood in refugee camps, before moving to Connecticut, in 1950.) “It seemed to have some level of affection and intimacy, but not really *gooey* intimate.”

“What is that?” a young woman on the sidewalk asked. “I live down there, and I’ve gotten to the point where I get out of the subway and go”—she threw her hands up—“Well, what today?” A crane was maneuvered into place by a master rigger wearing a shirt that read, “Money won’t buy happiness, but it’ll get your ass on a boat and that’s a start.” Slowly, amid much arm-waving and yelling, the sculpture was tilted upright, hoisted over the sidewalk, and transferred to a forklift that would orient it toward the subway entrance. It resembled an upside-down tree trunk—ten feet wide at the top, three and a half feet wide at the bottom—its sides marked with ridges and folds. Pharmer hypothesized that people might nickname it “the tornado”—“Like, ‘Meet me at the tornado,’” he said.

Keith Richey, an M.T.A. employee with a gold tooth, suggested that it looked more like a gyro: “Lamb meat!”

David Berliner, the chief operating officer of Forest City Ratner, who heads the Barclays Center’s arts initiative, stood with von Rydingsvard. “There was this commercial that was on, when I was growing up, for VO5 hair spray,” he said. “There was this British celebrity named Rula Lenska, and they would show her backstage. The lines were something like, ‘My hair has to stand up, even if I can’t!’ And someone would knock on the door and say, ‘Five minutes, Ms. Lenska,’ and then she would go out onstage.”

“And her hair did stay up—it did not lie flat,” von Rydingsvard said.

Berliner nodded and said, “Five minutes, Ms. Ona. It’s your time.”

—Emma Allen