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POST-EMERGING

Ursula von Rydingsvard

BY BROOKE KAMIN RAPAPORT

Ursula von Rydingsvard is “just getting over not being called an emerging artist.”¹ In an art world where stars rise overnight, oftentimes in their 20s and 30s, it has taken von Rydingsvard some time to become a marquee name. For years, she labored in her studio without extensive acclaim, her achievements somehow mimicking the process of creating her cedar sculptures: deliberative, thoughtful, and painstaking. She was 46 years old when *Untitled (Seven Mountains)* (1986–88) was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art; 48 when *Umarleś (You Went and Died)* (1987–88) was purchased by the Brooklyn Museum; 49 when *Five Mountains* (1989) entered the Walker Art Center collection in Minneapolis; and 65 when *Wall Pocket* (2003–04) was given by Agnes Gund to the Museum of Modern Art.

In a sense, this stance of a career unfolding has propelled von Rydingsvard’s creativity and drive across a lifetime. It is a crafted position, carved into her process as deeply as the harsh, repetitive cuts that she makes in her four-by-four cedar beams. von Rydingsvard embraces this status: “I’ve always liked being called an emerging artist,” she said recently. “It gave me the greatest amount of hope and the greatest amount of possibility. I want to think of myself that way.”

Opposite: *Ona*, 2013. Bronze, 19.67 x 9.83 x 8.83 ft. Above: *Paddy-Wack*, 1997. Cedar and graphite, 6 x 30 x 60 ft.



Berwici Pici Pa, 2005. Cedar and graphite, 8 x 5 x 88.42 ft.

the scale gets larger [and] there is a more complex thing that seems to surface. There is more movement, probably more anxiety in the piece, but there are greater anxieties in me because of the larger scale—the consequences can be much greater.”

In the last decade, she exploded on to the scene, starting with her 2005 commission, *Berwici Pici Pa*, for the lobby of Bloomberg’s world headquarters in Midtown Manhattan. The 88-foot-long cedar sculpture hugs the wall, but becomes a procession of form that pushes out into the viewer’s path. In this spare, cavernous space, the sculpture flirts with human scale and is further humanized by the visible activity on its surface. The graphite pencil marks that von Rydingsvard makes on every board of cedar as a guide for circular saw cuts remain in the final work as evidence, signs of the artist’s hand. “The lobby is loaded with people every day when they walk to work,” von Rydingsvard says. “You can have the piece next to you almost the entire time, from when you walk in from the street until you get to the elevators.” Ultimately, the work consists of constructed, conjoined bowls—a familiar form regularly exploited by von Rydingsvard—but for a giant.

Since her Bloomberg debut, von Rydingsvard has shown her work at Madison Square Park (2006), featured in PBS’s series “Art21” (2007), had a touring retrospective organized by the SculptureCenter in Queens (2011), landed a commission for a 19-foot-high piece at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn (2013), and planned a survey exhibition at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, which will consume the museum’s galleries and include six outdoor works (opening April 5, 2014). She has also finished the preparations for an outdoor copper sculpture commissioned by the Andlinger Center for Energy and the Environment at Princeton University (2015). In addition, there is a work in progress for the National Gallery’s East Wing in Washington, DC, and a pending commission for a government building in Miramar, Florida.

von Rydingsvard was born Ursula Karoliszyn in Deensen, Germany, in 1942. Her mother was Polish, and her father, a peasant

Perhaps a Lifetime Achievement Award is not something for which von Rydingsvard—or any artist—chooses to aim. Such an award marks the summing up of a professional life, a retrospective of accolades; it is the art world equivalent of the academic *Festschrift*. von Rydingsvard, who is currently making some of her largest and most powerful work, may not be ready to meditate on the presence of her past, but she still expresses pride in this achievement because, in the case of the International Sculpture Center award, “sculptors are recognized by other sculptors.”

While art world trends have ebbed and flowed across von Rydingsvard’s lifetime of sculpture-making, the eminence of her work has only increased. Her public projects, in particular, have captivated viewers with their surface tactility, monumental scale, and careful balance between abstraction and narrative. The high stakes and complicated process of realizing outdoor sculpture have conspired to advance von Rydingsvard’s work. As she explains, “One of the things that happens when I do public work is that invariably



farmer at the time, was Ukrainian. The artist was raised in a devoutly Catholic family of seven children. Following World War II, the family faced the aftermath of German defeat and was relocated to nine different refugee camps for displaced persons. In those camps, which von Rydingsvard has described as “places where

survival was very difficult,” she found her earliest connection to wood. She simultaneously nurtures and rejects this association because it both informs and limits interpretations of her sculpture. The refugee barracks were retrofitted lumber structures made from standardized American soldier housing and former German concentration camps; inside, the utilitarian cutlery, bowls, chairs, and beds were all made of roughhewn wood.

Above: *Droga*, 2009. Cedar and graphite, 4.5 x 9.58 x 18.25 ft. Below: *Ocean Voices*, 2011–12. Cedar and graphite, 52 x 185 x 67 in.



MICHAEL BODYCOMB



Luba, 2010. Cedar, graphite, and bronze, 212 x 139 x 88 in.

Ashton: “She has dwelled on the childhood years in which she lived with her family in the barracks of a postwar displaced-persons camp.”⁴ Helaine Posner: “von Rydingsvard regards her love of wood as part of her history. She comes from a long line of Polish peasant farmers for whom wood provided basic shelter and tools to work the land.”⁵

If these allocated items provided some comfort, the semblance of a domestic setting, for the young von Rydingsvard, they also serve, decades later, as a physically rudimentary but metaphorically profound connection to her childhood and an atavistic material for her sculpture. Yet von Rydingsvard doesn’t link these basic and earliest possessions to her work: “Never, ever do I recall being in my studio and directly connecting a memory to the piece I’m working on,” she told Martin Friedman in a 1998 interview.⁶ While art historians righteously guard and trumpet von Rydingsvard’s past as the key to unlocking her present, the artist is resolute when explaining her choice of wood, specifically cedar, as the only material that can do what she needs it to do. It is supple and sexy, pliable, and subject to domination in her studio. Mahogany, pine, and walnut never made the cut.

The Karolizyn family immigrated to Connecticut in 1950. von Rydingsvard received a BA and an MA from the University of Miami in Coral Gables in 1965, and an MFA from Columbia University in 1975. Her Columbia professors included George Sugarman and Ronald Bladen. von Rydingsvard was deeply moved by a 1975 conversation with visiting artist Philip Guston in which he “made reference to his tremendous vulnerability” as an artist. von Rydingsvard has taught at the School of Visual Arts and Yale University’s graduate program in sculpture. Her students have included Charles Juhasz-Alvarado, Rachel Feinstein, Ann Hamilton, Maya Lin, Sarah Sze, and Meg Webster.

von Rydingsvard’s years at Columbia coincided with a transition from the crucible of 1960s Minimalism to the conceptual, political, and feminist work that characterized the 1970s and ’80s. While she processed lessons from these reigning movements,

Critics who write about von Rydingsvard always point to these childhood conditions as the catalyst of her sculptural awakening. David Levi Strauss: “This constricted existence came to an end in 1950, when the family emigrated to the U.S., but the images and textures of that period were eventually transformed into a durable and flexible sculptural vocabulary.”² Avis Berman: “von Rydingsvard persistently explores childhood experiences, emphasizing the quiet drama of family connections. She also chronicles the emotional attachment to one’s environment and the dignity of hand labor and hand tools.”³ Dore



Umarís (You Went and Died), 1987–88. Cedar and stain, 6.5 x 10.67 x 1 ft.

they didn't figure into the form, material, or content of her sculpture. As for Minimalism, von Rydingsvard endorsed the theory, "but there just wasn't the feeling that I needed to extract from the work. Their work felt as though they were standing on pedestals and talking from on high." Instead, she made gestural work, which reeked of the handcrafted in the immediate post-Minimalist period. And because her work could be repetitive, labor-intensive abstraction, it didn't assume the overt defiance of political art. Nor did she cite other women artists who had worked in wood as key influences, sculptors such as Louise Bourgeois, Blanche Dombek, and Louise Nevelson.

von Rydingsvard's first major work was a cedar sculpture for "Art on the Beach" in Battery Park City. *Saint Martin's Dream*

(1980), which spread 260 feet wide and rose to a height of five feet, recalled wings and windmills as it claimed an expanse across a Lower Manhattan landfill. And while the forms are uncharacteristic of the work for which she is best known, this early project pointed to central factors in von Rydingsvard's subsequent development: her quest for suitable and monumental scale in public works, her willingness to cajole the material to her whims, and her steadfast, unbreakable attachment to cedar.

"I don't want cedar to be my go-to material," von Rydingsvard recently admitted. "I pretend it's not the only material I have to work with and tend to intersperse it with other options." Yet cedar has compelled her for decades, and truckloads are regularly delivered to her Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio. Ironically, cedar has also enabled von Rydingsvard to innovate in other materials, including polyurethane resin, copper, and bronze. For her outsize outdoor works, von Rydingsvard always makes a full-scale model in the studio in cedar; the piece is then transformed into another material. "In all cases," she says, "it seems that I am compelled to use the cedar to make the actual structure that is to be cast in bronze. I don't make a small model. I make a full-scale model. It is unheard of to give the foundry a 20-foot-high model to cast. I feel that I've come to have such a familiarity with the cedar, that I feel I can manipulate it...I can keep squeezing it do things cedar never thought it could do."

Ona (2013), a soaring 12,000-pound, cast-bronze work permanently installed in front of the Barclays Center in downtown Brooklyn, is a case in point. von Rydingsvard's fully



Left: *Elegantka*, 2007–08. Cedar and pigment, 98 x 37 x 36 in. Right: *Elegantka*, 2011. Polyurethane resin, 98 x 37 x 36 in.

realized cedar model went from her studio to the Polich Tallix Fine Art Foundry in Rock Tavern, New York, to the final installation on the stadium's plaza. *Ona* ("she" in Polish), though abstract, has the voluptuousness of the female form. It seems to pivot on its axis, harnessing an embedded motion. So faithful is the bronze to the cedar model that curves and cuts in the surface conjure von Rydingsvard's intense process with each and every shard of cedar. Duality and contradiction are built into every layer of this sculpture: the bronze has the roughhewn, gritty character of wood, yet it is a work of graceful and elegant physicality; it may be titled

with a feminine pronoun, but it has the commanding, in-your-face presence of a muscled, street-smart guy.

The as-yet-untitled sculpture for Princeton's Andlinger Center will accompany a new building complex designed by Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects. Though von Rydingsvard still has to complete the 19-foot-high work, sections are already being translated from cedar into pounded copper, a material whose color will change over time as it withstands the elements. Copper seems a suitable choice for a science complex whose goals are to investigate sustainable energy production in the face of global climate change. As mutable as

LEFT: MICHAEL BODYCOMB / RIGHT: ANDY RYAN



Zakopane, 1987. Cedar and paint, 11.5 x 22 x 3 ft.

the environment, the patina of the copper will transform across the decades. von Rydingsvard's new work is able-bodied and brawny, its surface folds cresting and melding into one another. It will sit directly on the ground, refusing a platform or pedestal as it unites with the site.

Before the Princeton work is complete, a major retrospective—von Rydingsvard's largest show to date—will open at Yorkshire Sculpture Park in Northern England (April 5, 2014–January 4, 2015). The 40-work exhibition, which includes drawings and sculpture, features a new, 20-foot-high outdoor bronze as its centerpiece. “I am working on Yorkshire Sculpture Park,” von Rydingsvard said recently. “That is all I’m doing.” *Bowl with Lace* will be lit from the inside at night with an amber light; holes evoking lace in the work's upper surface will enable transparency.

When asked about the increasing verticality of her sculpture, von Rydingsvard bristles and explains that her work has always and continues to embrace both vertical and horizontal planes. Citing three sprawling horizontal pieces—*Paddy-Wack* (1997), *Droga* (2009), and *Ocean Voices* (2011–12)—she is adamant that horizontality “evokes a kind of empathy toward that

way of moving or existing.” But her outdoor pieces such as *Ona*, the upcoming Princeton work, and *Bowl with Lace* demonstrate a soaring direction. “I’m not sure I’m getting more vertical,” she insists. “You understand why I had to be so vertical at the Barclays Center. The building is huge...I have to be 20 feet. I also had to have a kind of energy; the piece had to contain something that would make it notable, that would differentiate it from the building, from the plaza, that would have an element of humanity.”

Across a lifetime, von Rydingsvard has carved and cut, smoothed and suffered her materials into a humanizing form of sculpture. The work reveals her process and perhaps her past. The irony may be that some of her current recognition has come with new processes and materials. As a result, von Rydingsvard's breakthroughs have pushed well past her guarded status as an emerging artist.

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Notes

¹ All quotations attributed to the artist are, unless otherwise noted, from a conversation with the author on November 13, 2013.

² David Levi Strauss, “Sculpture as Refuge,” *Art in America*, February 1993, p. 89.

³ Avis Berman, *Ursula von Rydingsvard: Remembered Spaces* (Paris and New York: Galerie Lelong, 2000), p. 3.

⁴ Dore Ashton, Marek Bartelik, and Matti Megged, *The Sculpture of Ursula von Rydingsvard* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1996), p. 9.

⁵ Helaine Posner and Patricia Phillips, *Ursula von Rydingsvard: Working* (Munich, Berlin, London, New York: Prestel, 2011), p. 17.

⁶ Martin Friedman, “von Rydingsvard: Mining the Unconscious,” in *Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture* (Madison, Wisconsin: Madison Art Center, 1998), p. 14.