

A Sculptor's Monumental Vision, on Display in Yorkshire

By RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS MAY 8, 2014

WAKEFIELD, England — Ursula von Rydingsvard has opened new frontiers in sculpture, developing original techniques of creating works in wood through a combination of construction and carving. But the size and scope of her pieces have meant that, purely for practical reasons, most of her audience has been close to home in the United States.

Now, more than 50 works by the European-born, New York-based sculptor have crossed the Atlantic for the most extensive show ever of her indoor and outdoor pieces, “Ursula von Rydingsvard,” at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park.

Peter Murray, the founder and executive director of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park and long an admirer of Ms. Rydingsvard’s work, had already secured two of her sculptures as long-term loans and has them placed in prominent positions in the park. One of these, “Damski Czepek” (Lady’s Bonnet), was originally commissioned for the Madison Square Park in New York City, where it was shown between 2006 and 2007, along with three of her other pieces.

But the prospect of transporting so many of her monumental sculptures for this event was a daunting one.

“It has been far from easy in terms of logistics, even just getting the works out of Ursula’s studio,” said Mr. Murray, who curated the exhibition, which is running until Jan. 4, 2015. “We needed 10 huge containers to ship them over here. The exhibition also includes six major outdoor sculptures made especially for this show.”

Born in 1942 in Germany, Ms. von Rydingsvard was the fifth child of seven of a Polish mother and Ukrainian father. Her parents had been deported from

Poland as forced labor; after the end of the war the family spent five years moving between refugee camps before being allowed to emigrate to the United States.

In 1975, while she was studying sculpture at Columbia University in New York, a painter friend, Michael Mulhern, gave her some industrially milled 4-by-4 inch cedar beams that he had found in a sale and with which she was able to experiment. The gift proved a revelation. This wood, which she still obtains in standard commercially cut forms, has remained central to her work ever since. Even when cedar is not the final material of the sculptures, more often than not they are made from cedar molds.

For the first 20 years, she cut all the wood herself. Now she is part of a team of four cutters, two men and two women, using circular saws, chisels and other tools they have developed themselves. The artist marks the cuts in pencil for the team to execute.

“My cutters are very experienced and know exactly what I want,” she said. “We work and eat together and we are like a family.

“Our technique is to squeeze what we want out of the cedar,” she continued. “I can only hope that the cedar feels that all the abuse we inflict on it is worth what it becomes in the end.”

From early on she has applied graphite powder with a soft-bristled brush and sometimes chalk or plaster to the wood to give it subtle patinas. “I didn’t want people to be distracted by the beauty of the cedar,” she said. “I wanted to make it rougher, more gritty.”

Her rural heritage — “I come from a long line of peasant farmers,” she said — manifests itself in a number of surreal, wall-hung sculptures in the Underground Gallery at the sculpture garden, inspired by wooden spoons, bowls, platters, shovels, lace and an oversized rake from which hang strands of pigs’ intestines that, having dried out, have taken on the texture and golden hue of hay.

Further insights into her background and visual universe are offered in the gallery’s Project Space. These “Little Nothings,” as she calls them, from her studio are objects she has collected and created over many years. They include old family photographs, Polish peasant shoes, a milk canister, pieces of knitting and linen, a Japanese shovel, a Korean leather pouch and an African weaving tool.

Yet Ms. von Rydingsvard said that her sculptures were not autobiographical, even if they do contain elements of her experiences and thoughts in a sublimated

form: “Almost all my sculptures are made in an instinctive way. When I am making them, I do not think of specific things. I am guided by my instincts and my dreams.”

The starting points for her sculptures are unpredictable and various. Many of her monumental sculptures have an elemental quality and the appearance of rock outcrops and cliff faces, with complex, weather-worn strata, but she said she did not draw directly from nature.

Standing before “Blackened Wood,” for example, which she made in 2008, she explained:

“This was inspired by a Polish woman who meant a lot to my life. She could just about write and I amplified a few words that she had written. I blew them up in size and used them as the basis for building a wall. If you were to be able to see it from above, you could still see the form of the letters from above.

“Making a piece like this is very labor-intensive. I start at the bottom and work my way upwards. Each piece has its own number and this one consists of about 8,000 parts. As I progress the pieces are screwed together to keep them in position. The final form is then taken apart and ‘reverse stacked’ and glued together and put under tremendous pressure. To do this we have over 3,000 clamps.”

Pieces on this scale take many months of working up to eight hours a day. “When I work on a piece I keep at it. I am driven, propelled forwards by curiosity about how it will turn out,” she said.

“Bronze Bowl with Lace,” which was finished only a few weeks ago, is over 20 feet high (nearly six and a half meters) and described by the artist as “the most ambitious of my life.” It has been dramatically installed on a grassy rise at the entrance of the sculpture park.

“The piece was done from a full-sized cedar mold; you cannot get the level of detail otherwise,” she said. “It had to be cast in three sections. The lower ones were sand cast but the more delicate lace part had to be done using the lost wax process.”

“The patina was created by using six different chemical agents, which give it almost every color of the rainbow,” she added.

During the day, the sculpture’s multiple surfaces shine with iridescent light. At night it is lit from within and below, and it glows in the dark.

Now in her seventh decade, Ms. von Rydingsvard shows no sign of diminished levels of energy and inventiveness. Her husband, the Nobel laureate neuroscientist Paul Greengard, bought her a forklift truck for her 60th birthday, which “has made a huge difference to me,” she said. “But he does say that in his next life he is going to marry a watercolorist.”

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