

Arts
Pure emotion distilled into sculptural form
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Ursula von Rydingsvard

American sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard's extraordinary work is currently on display at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Yvette Huddleston met the artist there.

Abstract sculpture can be one of the most difficult art forms to relate to but the exhibition of work by American artist Ursula von Rydingsvard, currently at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, speaks to the viewer on a viscerally emotional level.

Born in 1942 in what was then Nazi Germany, to a Ukrainian father and Polish mother, von Rydingsvard spent her early childhood moving with her family from one displaced persons camp to another before they were finally able to emigrate to the United States in 1950. Not surprisingly, this experience affected her profoundly and much of her work investigates the way in which human existence is both fragile and somehow durable, while frequently incorporating the theme of displacement.

The show at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, part of this summer's Tour de France-linked cultural festival, is the first large-scale survey of von Rydingsvard's work in Europe – and is her most extensive to date. It features more than 40 works made over the past twenty years.

“Ursula is a truly international figure and she has a huge following outside this country,” says Peter Murray, Executive Director of the YSP. “It is a terrific project for us. Ursula has been

coming to the Sculpture Park for many years and she has gradually got to know the space. She loves what we do here and loves what we stand for. We knew that her existing work would fit very well here and she has also made new works especially for the space.”

Von Rydingsvard’s distinctive work is most associated with cedar wood, the material she has worked with for the past 35 years. She uses it as a blank canvas to create her pieces which include huge monolithic structures and wall-mounted works. They are all meticulously assembled from 4” x 4” cedar beams and she particularly likes the form where the exterior or front might seem quite plain and simple but the back (or interior) is very complex and dramatic – just like people. Her principle in working is that what is not seen is just as significant as what is, so it is important to view her works from all angles.

She doesn’t work from drawings or sketches and many of her pieces start out as bowl-like shapes or containers. “I get an image in my head that I then go for,” she explains. “And often that is very different from what the wood can do. The piece really develops during the making process.” And despite the fact that many of the pieces appear to be very tactile and seem to invite you to touch them she is clear about how she wants a viewer to approach her work. “It doesn’t feel good. I just want people to look at it,” she says. “It is just the visuals and the way that the viewer responds to that emotionally.” She won’t be drawn on the ‘message’ or ‘metaphor’ of any given piece, saying that she wants people to see in it what they want to see. There are sometimes vague clues in the titles but not much is given away. Several times during our conversation she refers to a piece as ‘she’ and when translating the Polish titles she explains that it would refer to a female ‘Dear One’ or female ‘First One’ but says that the ‘gender’ of a piece, if there is one, will often only come to her during the process of creating it.

Throughout the exhibition there are references to von Rydingsvard’s ancestral family, who were peasant farmers, with representations of simple rustic items of this heritage such as tools, implements, bowls, shovels and spoons. There is one very delicate wall-mounted piece, *Norduna*, that looks like an apron. “I had this great yearning to create something light,” she says. “Something that could take off if it wasn’t held down by gravity. Everything that I use is to speak about a whole score of other things.” She opens up most about one free-standing large-scale sculpture entitled *Blackened Word*. “This was a woman who was very important in my life who could hardly read or write – when she wrote it was very hard for her,” she explains. “I took some of her words and wrote them on the floor. Then I used that as an excuse to grow the words upwards from the floor. You can actually read them when you go up on a ladder and look down on it. The resulting look of those awkward letters and words means that the piece is more dramatic at the back than at the front.”

Another striking sculpture is *Right Arm Bowl*, which looks like it could be a creature of some sort. “I had a great desire to make a surface that looked like fabric in order to make different connections and give it different metaphors,” says von Rydingsvard. “I put graphite into the crevices and then I wanted to create this feeling of vulnerability so I made these two appendages that reach down to the floor – they are almost like limbs or something like that, but it doesn’t have to be human.”

Although cedar remains central to her practice, von Rydingsvard has used other materials to create her work and there are examples of this in the exhibition. *Five Blankets* is an extraordinarily delicate piece of work – translucent layers placed one on top of the other – made out of cow’s intestines which von Rydingsvard sews together while they are still wet.

“I first had the idea when I saw a parka in a museum made from walrus bladder which the mid-coast Indians used to use as waterproof jackets,” she explains. “I saw the light coming through it and it took my breath away because you could see what the skin was doing – the translucency.”

All the outdoor works have been created especially for this exhibition and the jewel in the crown of those is *Bronze Bowl with Lace*, a 20ft high structure with 4ft of ‘lace’ at the top which greets visitors at the entrance to the park. “I like to call it the ‘Bronze Princess’,” says von Rydingsvard. “No-one has ever done anything like this. It is so detailed and so beautiful – it took a year and a half to make.”