

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

GALLERIES • WEEKEND

## Ursula von Rydingsvard and the Drill Bit's Caress

by Thomas Micchelli on November 22, 2014



Ursula von Rydingsvard, "Bent Lace" (2014), bronze; 112 x 69 x 40 inches. Edition of 3 (all images via [galerielelong.com](http://galerielelong.com))

In a [video](#) produced by Art 21, Ursula von Rydingsvard recalls her childhood in refugee camps after World War II, living in barracks made of “raw wooden floors, raw wooden walls, and raw wooden ceilings.” Her current show at Galerie Lelong, *Permeated Shield*, is the first solo of her long career with a title that alludes at least indirectly to warfare.

But it’s a strange term, unexplained by the exhibition’s [press release](#). It may allude to the first sculpture encountered in the gallery, a wall piece called “Five Plates” (2005-13), which is composed of five large, rough-hewn cedar disks with five overlapping wooden tongues connecting them into a ten-foot circular arrangement.

If these are meant to be shields, they are in fact permeated with graphite, which the artist characteristically uses inside the crevices of the protrusions that riddle the walls of her cedar sculptures. Here, it becomes a gray patina over the glued-and-screwed beams that make up the whole. The shields are not only permeated, but also perforated, with dozens of pits and gouges dotting the surface. They feel like ancient artifacts burned and scarred in battle.



*Ursula von Rydingsvard, “Five Plates” (2005-13),  
cedar, graphite, 124 x 124 x 12 inches*

“Five Plates,” however, can also refer to domesticity — a recurrent theme in von Rydingsvard’s work — as might “Braided Ladle” (2014), another of the show’s larger works, in which carved cedar planks form a pouch sprouting a vertical limb or handle. The latter piece, along with the similarly shaped “Rebirth” (2012), bears a resemblance to a tree trunk with an outsized knot that beckons you inside.

And yet these refuges are inhospitable, offering enough space for a baby, if that. The same is true for other works in the show, most of which are emblematic of the various formal motifs that von Rydingsvard has explored over the years — primarily vertical, abstracted

shapes that imply trees, rocks, water and wind: their sense of shelter minimal at best, hostile at worst.



*Ursula von Rydingsvard, "Untitled" (2014), cast abaca paper, 143 x 63 x 1.5 inches*

The duality of her work is most evident in the two sculptures in the show that do not use cedar as a material. "Untitled" (2014) is a twelve-foot-high trapezoid made out of cast abaca paper, but its dozens of quasi-rectangular sections, which are further divided into circular knobs, can be taken for a flattened roll of tree bark. The pillowy softness of the paper, however, complicates that correlation, as much in its evocation of a bed or blanket as in the metaphorical significance of its plant-based origin (Manila hemp, to be exact, which is more fibrous, durable and sustainable than the pulp paper made from trees).

"Bent Lace" (2014) goes in the opposite direction. A greenly patinated bronze, it is composed of a vertically striated trunk cast from the same cedar planks that make up the wood sculptures, and topped with a perforated overhang that could be an enormous wasp's nest or moss hanging from a tree — a Southern, swampy vibe that's undercut by the sculpture's armor-like metal plates. It isn't the largest sculpture in the room, but its material makes it the most unyielding and bellicose.

In the artist's cedar sculptures, the surface of the wood, which is shaped with both power tools and hand chisels, takes on a soft, rubbed luster that contrasts sharply with the gashes and splinters violating it. But with extended looking, that carving — at first glance aggressive, even savage, in its attack — turns subtle, layered and painterly.

Among the most gripping pieces in the exhibition, as well as the technically simplest, is "Quarter Moon Crazyies" (2014). The cedar beams are vertically assembled into a 108 x 59 x 7-inch laminated board. A grid of thirty deep, irregular holes are dug into the surface, five to a row, an inverse echo of the paper knobs jutting from the untitled abaca paper piece.

Many of the holes are roughly hollowed out, with jagged scarifications across the depressions, but after your eyes rest on them for a moment, you begin to notice the subtle color shifts from plank to plank, cool to warm, amber to gray. And then you turn your attention to the neighboring holes, which are pierced with hundreds, if not thousands, of small pits, drilled so many times that they could be termite damage. Strikingly, despite their number, the pits don't appear to be random but seem to form a honeycomb pattern, and once you step back, they coalesce into a large, off-center X that traverses the entire piece.



*Ursula von Rydingsvard. "Quarter Moon Crazyies" (2014), cedar, graphite, 108 x 59 x 7 inches*

“Quarter Moon Crazies,” like “Five Plates,” is a departure from the undulating natural forms that dominate much of von Rydingsvard’s work, as witnessed in “Ona” as well as the other sculptures in this show, which include the powerfully wrought “Dumna,” “Crossed Mirage II” and “rzeński” (all 2014). The allusions that can be inferred into “Quarter Moon Crazies” seem to arrive from all over: the Dogon granary doors of Mali; the artillery-pocked battlefields of the two world wars; Sumerian cuneiform tablets; and (in the giant X) the geometric abstraction and minimalism that blanketed critical discussion during von Rydingsvard’s formative period as an artist.

But what is most fascinating about this piece is how smoothly the violence of its making — the gouging of the holes and especially the drilling of the pits — transitions into a soft, almost downy sensuousness. The artist’s intervention on the wood doesn’t suggest an equivalence between aggression and eroticism, but rather a complexity in which prickliness is overwritten with pleasure, just as her art is a humanist overlaying of minimalist austerity.

It may also speak to her conflicted sense of home: the privations of war and exile — embodied in the sculpture’s partly decimated plank wall — compounded by a softness secreted within the severity; the elusive flicker of warmth beneath the splintered shadows of a recurring dream.

[Ursula von Rydingsvard: Permeated Shield](#) continues at *Galerie Lelong (528 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan)* through December 13.