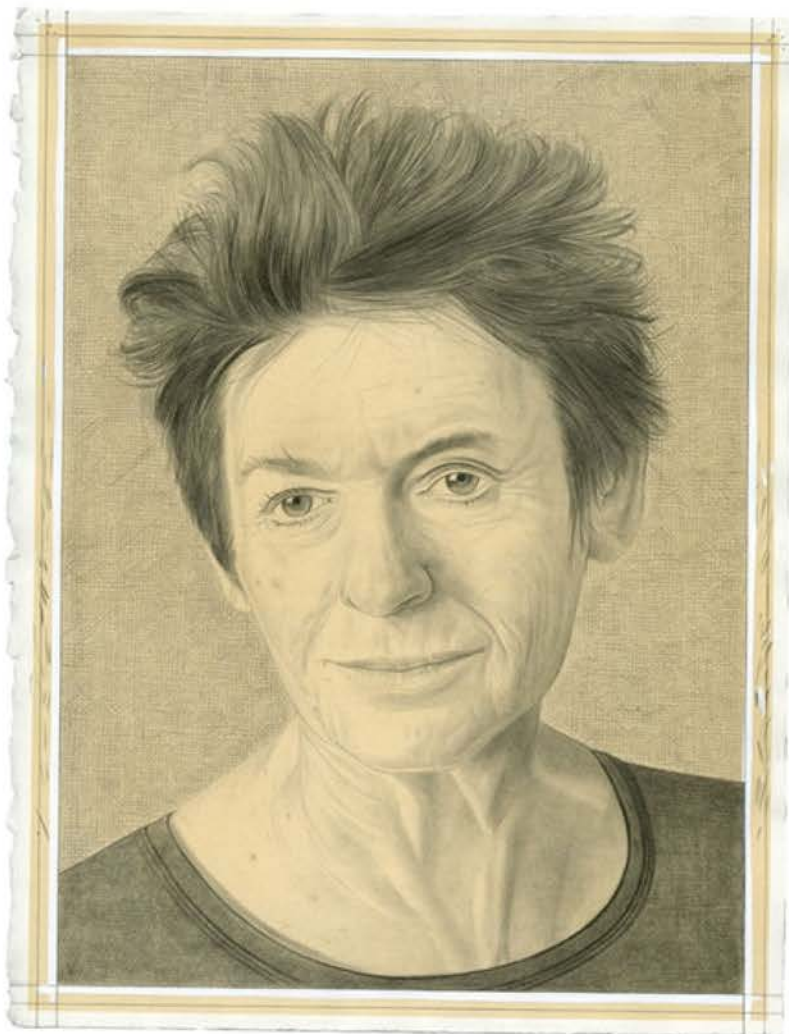


LABOR INTENSITY

URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD and CLAUDIA COMTE with Kara Rooney

At opposite ends of the career spectrum, newcomer Claudia Comte and art world veteran, Ursula von Rydingsvard, have much in common. Both are female sculptors of the monumental, conjoined by their love of wood as material medium and a stalwart addiction to process, the result of which is an affectively particular aesthetic that finds its roots within the history of Modernism and Minimalist seriality as much as that of popular culture. *No Melon No Lemon*, Comte's first solo exhibition in New York, on view at Gladstone Gallery through March 21, enacts this odd kinship through the lens of site-specific installation, while von Rydingsvard, whose self-titled retrospective survey just closed at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in England, begins from a more singular place of personal and formal historicity. Both sat down with managing art editor Kara Rooney to discuss these recent achievements, along with chainsaws, humor, and the many complexities ascribed to working within the field of sculpture today.



Portrait of Ursula Von Rydingsvard. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photograph by Zack Garlitos.



Portrait of Claudia Comte. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photograph by Zack Garlitos.

Kara Rooney (Rail): Ursula, since 2010 you have been on fire, with the Barclays Center and Storm King commissions, a solo exhibition at Galerie Lelong, and traveling retrospective shows organized by the Sculpture Center in New York and the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in Britain (through January 2015). Such marquee projects are a wonderful testament to your career but you have worked long and hard for such recognition, only earning prominent status in your late 40s. By contrast, Claudia, at 31 you have had numerous solo exhibitions in Europe and now your first in New York. How does this speak to the changing nature of the art market and do you attribute dissolving gender boundaries within the art world as a catalyst for this?

Claudia Comte: That's a difficult question. I think for young artists now you need to work instantly, to have shows directly out of school and be on the scene right after. Otherwise I think it's very difficult to gain momentum. Right now society moves so fast. From what I hear from other artists, or other older artists, people seem to say that it's more difficult for the new generation of artists out there. Maybe because there are more of us, I don't know. In terms of my career, however, I'm very happy with the progress I've made. I love to work all the time, so when I graduated from ECAL, the School of Art in Lausanne, it made sense for me to show as soon as possible, whether that was in very small spaces, or even flats of friends. It was normal for me to start with small shows and to do things all the time, so I managed to have lots of projects and from there, to show my work regularly.

Ursula von Rydingsvard: The point that you bring up about the whole feel, the whole sentiment, toward women being artists, to begin with, is much more generous now than it seemed years ago. I also think that given the scale in which I work, and in some ways the scale in which you work, Claudia, it's huge! I don't know if people were used to that 30 or 35 years ago, particularly in regards to female sculptors. For me, however, it's obvious that scale has nothing to do with being a male or a female and that good art is not related to either sex. That realization was important. I simply felt that I absolutely needed to do this. It was a part of my life that I could not do without. My evolution took a long time but that's how it is with me. I work equally intensively whether I have a show or not. I'm very grateful to the exhibition I had in 1988 at Exit Art with Jeanette Ingberman as I feel that, in a sense, it was a debut of my work. For this show I had four quiet years without any sort of representation from a gallery to focus on building my work. So I only can say that I am glad to get the opportunities I am getting now and have been getting for the past several years, while at the same time, that gestation and the constant making of my sculpture was also extremely important. It informed the way in which I work now.

Rail: Ursula, having worked with the pioneering sculptors George Sugarman and Ronald Bladen during your time at Columbia, how did the discussions surrounding material and abstraction resonate for you, and how have you attempted to transcend those early Minimalist (and largely masculine) influences?

von Rydingsvard: My time at Columbia University was a point at which I was evolving. I did drink a lot from the Minimalist artists teaching there. I was very close to Sol LeWitt. But there was a way in which they pissed me off! Their philosophies seemed to float in the purest of atmospheres, superior to almost any other way of thinking. I had friends who made work that was realistic, that was figurative, for example, and they didn't have a chance. Nobody else had a chance. This was a reaction to the Abstract Expressionists that had preceded them, so in a way, they were killing their fathers. The work was devoid of emotion or at least they tried as hard as they could to make it intellectually oriented, and all I could think was, "How can you cleanse emotion out of things? How can one do that?" Minimalism did become a very consequential base for me—I repeat a lot, like you do, Claudia, with your stripes—and that I got from them. In this sense I'm grateful. I used this Minimalist training as a jumping-off point, but ultimately, I think I ended up in a very different place.

Rail: So the cleansing and the purity of the work is something you are rejecting.

von Rydingsvard: Yes but more importantly, that kind of superiority, the idea that this is the way to do it. Art never demands a way. It doesn't. Just as when the waves of the ocean work their gorgeous magic, they don't make a decision that this is the way to do it. It's in the context that all of the ocean's complicated elements produce such an incredibly amazing surface. So there is no specific way art leads you. It gives you a sort of blank card to do with it as you like.

Comte: It's very nice of you to say that and I totally agree. There is something to be said for the abstract minimal geometric shape being reserved for men, but I don't say this from a feminist perspective. I don't want to be aligned with male or female, actually, because that's not the point. As you said, it's the person and the art that produces this person. Along those lines, I do really like to play with those geometric shapes; I try to give them a lot of humor and a lot of character. In doing so, something strong and even funny occurs between the paintings, the wall, and the sculptural forms of my installations. It makes them alive. I love to reactivate modern shapes but also to give my sculptures a kind of human character, like something or someone out of a cartoon.

Rail: This type of duality and contradiction are qualities I might ascribe to both of your outputs. Claudia, in your work there is a playful dissolving of the high and low—the influence of Brancusi, Jean Arp, and the Swiss Concretist Olivier Mosset, on the one hand, and the popular culture of modern cartoons and animated series like *The Simpsons* on the other. Ursula, the impression of opposed energies is more the dichotomy I read in your work—the extremes of sensuousness and violence, memory and wakefulness. How do you both contend with such duplexity as well as the history of painting and sculpture within that intermediary space?

Comte: I have to say there is a lot of humor in my work but it's not intended to be ironic. It's very earnest actually. I genuinely enjoy playing with paint and classical themes, the image people have of sculpture, how it should be exhibited in the museum context. I mix all of this with references I love from modern art and then I impart my own voice upon these forms using tools like the chainsaw or placing kilometers and kilometers of tape on the wall to create site-specific wall paintings. These are very physical acts that connect me in a different way to the work's conceptual concerns.

von Rydingsvard: Your question is one that I want to dip my head more deeply into. I worry sometimes about my results and that to make the work better, I would need to find that in-between space, one that, of course, you never find. One possible way, however, might be to beckon more of the unconscious, or the stuff that stays in your belly rather than in your mind. People think that when I'm building my sculpture I know with accuracy just where I'm going, and I don't. What I'm focusing on is looking to see what I have done, you know, what is down there, or what is evolving as I'm working on it, and what else it needs. It's a process that even though I have some idea as to what I need to do, there's never a model, there's never a drawing. There's simply some idea, like an image in my head that I follow, but the process itself influences what comes after. I'm going to be seeking what you call the intermediary space that really has no answers, that really has no specific goal, yet no sooner do I say that than there is a goal, even though I don't know what that is and I wouldn't know how to describe it. I want to feel in a place that's more vulnerable, that's more volatile, you know? That isn't so certain.

Comte: Ursula, I'm noticing that a lot of your sculptures seem to be organized in a grid, no? Are they as large as they are because you do not have a precise plan or how does the grid allow the work to evolve as you're producing?



Claudia Comte, *No Melon No Lemon* (2015), installation view. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Photo: David Regen.



Ursula Von Rydingsvard, "Bronze Bowl with Lace" (2013–14). Bronze. 19'6" × 9'5" × 10'. Installed at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Yorkshire, England, UK. Photo: Jonty Wilde.

von Rydingsvard: That's right. "Blackened Word" (2008), to use one example, acquired its pattern and real beginning in that there was a very important woman in my life who didn't know how to read and write. She could sign her name but it was very effortful. It didn't contain the kind of smoothness, the kind of fluidity that we have in our handwriting, precisely because we're so used to it. This fascinated me, and so I had her write some words in Polish. I then made a huge profile of those words on the ground that I built upon. The letterforms were an excuse to build these organic, more sensual walls from her handwriting. It's not as though the content, the words themselves, were so important, it's that I used them as a sort of grounded root from which to grow, and then I made the rest up as I went along.

Rail: "Blackened Word" is one of the first works of yours I saw, Ursula. I was so moved by the way that language, something that is equally abstract and ephemeral, could be the driving force for this very monumental type of physicality. The way that you speak about your process, how it forms in the aggregate, developed out of previous decisions and past experiences, is this wonderful metaphor, in sculptural form, for the way that identity is formed within us.

In this regard, even though the significance of the hand is critical to both of your outputs, you appear to approach this quite differently. Claudia, the violence of working with a chainsaw is typically hidden behind a veneer of glossed and polished surfaces, while for you Ursula, it seems important to leave the marks of that engagement visible. Your monolithic pieces, in many ways, could be described as poetically quiet “monuments to labor.” Can you discuss your individual relationship with the hand?

von Rydingsvard: I need to exert myself physically. I can't stand sitting. Sculpting is part of what makes my heart beat faster, or makes the blood run in a way that's more intense. I'm not falling asleep, you know, I'm really focused—at least most of the time! There are many, many boring moments when I'm trying to get something that becomes more exciting or I'm leading up to that; but even then, since I'm physically engaged, I have to be aware of what I do with my body. I think I've spent one third of my life on scaffolding [*laughs*].

Comte: The chainsaw is my tool. It has nothing to do with feminism or any other political act, because many people ask me that. It's simply the tool I need to do what I need to do. I used five different types of chainsaws, and they create different lines, different speeds, and all that is good for the work.

von Rydingsvard: I can feel something from those lines. There's a kind of softness to them but at the same time, they know where they need to go. They've been kept in check by your hand. And in connection with that, I can also say that I think there were times when there were much heavier prejudices towards wood than there are now. Just as there was a heavy prejudice towards glass.

Rail: As it being a craft-based medium.

von Rydingsvard: As it being craft based no matter how you manipulated it. Regardless of whether it was close to art or not, the wood itself made “art” impossible in some people's minds.

Rail: You have spoken about your choice of using cedar in a very similar way to Claudia's description of her use of the chainsaw in that it's not so much about the wood itself as it is about its specific material properties. It is simply the one material that allows you to get what you want out of it.

von Rydingsvard: That's correct.

Rail: You're very utilitarian about this. Claudia, is it the same for you?

Comte: I first used a lot resin and plastic things, all kinds of materials, and I finally started using wood because it's so interesting to look at what happens inside—the colors, the structure—it's like it's still alive. My sculptures, for instance, are all cracking a bit. They continue to lose water. This is really fascinating to me. It gives me energy to work with this material because it's something that has been growing for many years. Some of the trees I've used to make the work in the Gladstone show are more than 80 years old. It's wonderful to be able to work with such a material.

von Rydingsvard: I'm different in the way that I work in that I use boards that are cut to an exact measurement, so that there is a neutrality. When I look at the trunk of the tree, all of its growth rings and all of the grain, it starts to look so beautiful. I can't deform it. In a way, Claudia, you don't deform it. You bring out the best things in that wood. You bring that out of that surface. I couldn't do this. I couldn't use anything that retained a significant echo as to where it came from. I feel that nature is such a grand plan in and of itself, that I could never, for example, make that branch better. I could never make the bark any more complex and any more breathtaking than it already is. I would be too shy. Whereas with the neutral boards, I can squeeze the hell out of them. I can force the material to go in directions that it never thought it could go. In my mind at least, there is more freedom.

Rail: The utilization of wood, it seems, also extends from the landscapes both of you grew up in. Ursula, much has been written about your Polish/Ukrainian heritage and the formative years spent in the forced-labor and refugee camps of Germany at the close of the Second World War. Claudia, you are from the rural countryside in Switzerland but currently live and work in Berlin, more than half a century after Ursula's experiences in that same country. Can you both speak about how the natural surroundings and in some cases, loaded history of these locations, informs the aesthetics of your work?

von Rydingsvard: I'm not sure that I can explain it very well. I do come, it's a fact, from a long line of Polish peasant farmers. For many generations that's what they did. But for me to say that I make the work that I do—and many people have said this—because I lived in the refugee camps, I don't know. This has been used as a key to understanding my work that I don't agree with, simply because the work is much more complicated than that.

Rail: So how do you work with this kind of emotionally freighted baggage, whether it's baggage that you've experienced or that's been imposed upon you through the critical lens?

von Rydingsvard: It's because I have this baggage that—and this might sound horrible—I'm so determined. In a way, I'm trying to figure out who I am, to figure out my place within the context of these experiences. In some ways, this was the most horrible thing that's happened in my life, but in other ways I am grateful for it. It sounds so odd, but I have this hunger to kind of work it out. I know I'll never work it out. I know I'll never figure it out. But I want to come closer; I want to think that I might be coming closer. In terms of the connection with wood, I remember one of the camps had an enormous brick building that was bombed, so that all that remained were little bits of the wall. There were a lot of bricks scattered about the ground. And I remember taking those bricks and playing with them, you know, making structures out of those bricks. And feeling something. I must've been only 6 or 7 years old, but I felt something almost erotic in being able to handle them in that way, to see the material grow. The way I work with wood is very similar. You're exactly right when you say it's a means through which I seem to be able to speak better than I can with clay, better than I can with a lot of other things. Even when I make pieces out of resin or out of bronze, I make them out of wood first because somehow I can manipulate it in a way where the results speak more closely to what I want to say.

Comte: Yes, I think you're right. For me, I grew up in a chalet next to the forest, so I tried lots of different materials but at some point I was compelled to try wood, because there were also possibilities with that. I met a lumberjack close to my parents' house—those people are just so easy, you know, so practical. If I needed three trunks to work with, they would place them in the forest the day after. In this sense wood was a very practical material to work with and something I could handle because of my origins. If I had grown up in a big city that would've been more abstract for me, to recreate this kind of thing, or to deal with this kind of person. This environment is simply familiar to me.

von Rydingsvard: I think the word "familiar" is very important. I also feel as if the wood is familiar. It's precisely because it's not foreign that I can dig into it and abuse it in the way I do.

Rail: While you have so much in common, color is one of the more interesting areas where your two practices appear to diverge. Claudia, with this exhibition and many of the others you have completed recently, color seems to be something you're utilizing in a very calculated way. Conversely for you, Ursula, it's something you almost don't contend with at all. Can each of you comment on the importance of color and its utilization within your work?



Ursula Von Rydingsvard, "Bent Lace" (2014). Bronze. 9'4" x 5'9" x 3'4".



Claudia Comte, No Melon No Lemon (2015), installation view. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Photo: David Regen.

Comte: For certain projects, a very colorful palette is important for the works because of the specific criteria I employ. I use a lot of primary and secondary colors, playing with them to create a third color, and so on. For example, during the art fair in Basel, I made prints where I carved a bowl of food and then passed the board through a machine to create a woodcut print. Every day I used a different color and a different pattern, always inscribed inside the same grid. These I gave to the visitors as well as mixed some of them together to create new pieces. So, for example, if on Monday you received the red zigzag and on Tuesday, a blue grid, weeks later, if mixed, you'd have both colors and patterns working together to create another image. I use the prints as a process through which to think about how to manipulate color for my paintings and larger installations.

Rail: I guess my question is more *why* color? Why not allow the wood to simply exist as wood, or the burned boards to exist as just that? Why this juxtaposition?

Comte: I think I like to mix the identification of the natural that's inferred by wood with something more pop, like a videogame, or a cartoon. This show, for example, I've said is a mix between a wood cabin and a videogame. I like to create immersive environments where people can experience the color in these precise paintings in contrast to my rough work with the chainsaw. It's as if the color is something unnatural in this regard.

Rail: So it's also a way of dissolving the high and low distinctions between painting and sculpture, color and craft. And Ursula, for you, this sense of color trepidation—

von Rydingsvard: I open my closet and there isn't one thing in it that's not black! [*Everyone laughs.*] I lived in Miami for about four or five years, and the colors in Miami too, used to have this piercing effect on my eyes. I used to run underneath trees, stand in the shadows whenever I went outside. So I don't use color even though I tremendously admire painters, I drink from them, like the last show of Matisse's cut-outs. I am not sure that the cut-outs were as profound as his paintings, but the colors were marvelous. For me, color is just such a complicated world. I don't want to touch it because I don't really know how to use it. I actually used to paint in my younger days, but my painting was not so great. The canvases finally became more and more three-dimensional until the paint finally fell down on the floor from the canvas. That, I knew, was my cue to start working in three-dimensional forms.

Rail: What's next for each of you?

von Rydingsvard: We're coming onto the third year of pounding copper for a commission for Princeton University, the dedication of which is tentatively scheduled for spring of 2016. It is the first time that I have used this material. Copper is a metal I have been eyeing for a good part of my life. This material looks really good when it's flat as one sees in architecture, but copper in a voluptuous, rounded, organic form looks divine. My copper sculpture will be about 19 feet high and placed at the entrance of the Andlinger Center, a brand new addition to Princeton's campus, along with several laboratory buildings devoted to research on environmental sustainability, designed by Tod Williams and Billie Tsien.

This is an extraordinarily labor-intensive process, with all the cutting, pounding and bending of the copper done by hand, as well as the bending of the bronze rods which receive close to 4,000 4 × 4-inch pounded copper forms that get mounted onto a central steel base.

Comte: When back in Berlin, I have three films to edit and complete. The first will be screened at the Swiss Institute in early March and is based on a large installation I did in Gstaad last winter, where I turned an ice rink into a large board game in which hockey players moved my polystyrene sculptures around the rink's surface to the tune of different commands. The second video is about a horse-riding trip I undertook for three weeks in Kyrgyzstan's breathless countryside, and the third is a film in which I burn my biggest sculpture to date, during nightfall, to the sound of a double piano concerto. After these, I am working on a solo show to be mounted in France; it's a collaboration of 40mcube, a wonderful not-for-profit space, together with Université Rennes 2's own space, Galerie Art et Essai. They have been

doing great shows there for the last 30 years with many of my countrymen from John Armleder to Ugo Rondinone, but also with prominent artists such as Martha Rosler. Later in the year, I have the pleasure of working with Olivier Mosset on a two-person show in a recently opened Parisian gallery. In short, there are many exciting and challenging things ahead.