



Art

## For Ursula von Rydingsvard, Making Art Is a Way to Survive



**W**hen we meet in her Bushwick studio—a chilly, cavernous warehouse that is periodically filled with the whirring and rumbling of saws and machinery—Ursula von Rydingsvard is dressed head to toe in utilitarian black, with a perfect row of pencils lined up in the back pocket of her slim jeans. She uses these to render quick, decisive curves on four-by-four blocks of cedar that have arrived by the truckload from Vancouver Island. These marks form a language of lines and numbers that indicate to her assistants where to blast the cedar blocks with circular saws to create the nest-like pits and gouges in the surfaces of her sculptures.



Portrait of Ursula von Rydingsvard in her Bushwick studio by Alex John Beck for Artsy.



Detail of a work in progress by Ursula von Rydingsvard. Photo by Alex John Beck for Artsy.

Von Rydingsvard might have developed a private lexicon that informs her practice, but that doesn't mean she's always comfortable talking about what she does. As the Polish-American maker of towering wooden and bronze forms says, "words just don't do it."

The artist is fascinated instead with the expressive possibility of materials. She has spent her life pushing the limits of wood, primarily, but also using wood to cast bronze and resin—and experimenting with paper, lead, animal intestines, and other materials both hard and soft. She is the recipient of a lifetime achievement award from the International Sculpture Center; contemporary artists from Ann Hamilton to Sarah Sze all consider her to have had a profound influence on their own work.

Another artist might be slowing down at this point. But von Rydingsvard, who is 75 years old, will open three exhibitions in the coming weeks. A pair of sculptures will go on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art on April 27th, with a more extensive exhibition opening at Philadelphia's Fabric Workshop on the same date; and on May 3rd, she'll unveil a solo show at New York's Galerie Lelong. For the latter two shows, she will present oversized books, bound stacks of distressed cedar and linen. They are empty, "books with no words," she says. But they are also full of information. Visitors to the Fabric Workshop and Galerie Lelong, where the organic tomes will rest on specially made wooden tables, will be able to browse through these hefty codices (though you may need the help of a friend), exploring their textures and taking in what the artist describes as the "landscapes" that the excess linen forms along their edges.



View of Ursula von Rydingsvard's studio in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Photo by Alex John Beck for Artsy.

At the studio, she takes me on a tour of some of her more monumental new pieces, skirting direct explanations of her work and preferring to point out the visual idiosyncrasies. “Do you see how this piece makes a *lunge*?” she says, looking up at a massive wooden behemoth whose undulating, modulated surface rises up and leans over at the top, like a plant in search of light. “It just goes crazy, it goes nuts. It gets really ballsy.” The piece will eventually be cast in bronze, becoming her largest-ever sculpture in the material, and will travel to the home of Debra and Leon Black, collectors and Museum of Modern Art board members.

We move on to mutually admire the seam-like partition in the surface of a smaller bronze nearby, a fairytale tree trunk that opens up into delicate, perforated folds. “This is almost like what you do when you part your hair, you know?” she says, tenderly. “At night there’s a gentle amber light that goes through those openings. It’s very beautiful. I hate the word beautiful!” She similarly corrects herself when she introduces me to the knotty cedar wall piece *Nester* (2016), which is destined for her exhibition at Lelong. The sculpture began its life as one of von Rydingsvard’s many bowl-like forms before the artist followed her intuition to open it up, swivel it around, and apply it to a wall.



View of Ursula von Rydingsvard's Bushwick studio, featuring *ZBOKU*, 2017. Photo by Alex John Beck for Artsy.

“I have made so many bowls, but my bowl is never a bowl,” she says. “Even when I say that word, it’s a huge lie. I don’t even have a reason. If I say what the reason is it always sounds so stupid, but there are urges that I have that are very intuitive, that I need to answer. I have something that I yearn for that the previous piece didn’t satisfy.”

For von Rydingsvard, sculpture is personal. She often refers to her works in feminine familiars, calling them “she” or “princess.” But she rejects the notion that they represent human surrogates. “I don’t think of them as female figures,” she says. “I just think of them as ‘shes.’”

There is another wall piece, *Dwa* (2017) (Polish for “two”), that could be an older sibling to *Nester*. Its arched form emerges from an overturned bowl, but this time it bifurcates into two wings, giving it the appearance of a primordial forest creature about to take flight. “It’s loaded with an anxious energy,” she says. “This is one that sucks something out of the wall and spits it out.”



Portrait of Ursula von Rydingsvard by Alex John Beck for Artsy.



Portrait of Ursula von Rydingsvard by Alex John Beck for Artsy.

The success of a piece, in her mind, has something to do with how effectively the form reflects the shape of an emotional need or want. Often, that form is “impossible,” but she and her team nonetheless find a way to get there through force of will—coaxing delicate, nuanced surfaces from solid or intractable materials, with the help of Japanese saw blades that are custom-made for her studio.

Sculptures that don't achieve her desired form, ones that she considers to be failures, will sometimes go up in smoke, literally. "If the piece keeps making me uncomfortable, I know that's one that might be a burn candidate," she says, somewhat ominously. "I don't want them in my legacy. So they have to go."

Von Rydingsvard is at home with work that is physically demanding and often requires discomfort. She comes from a long line of Polish peasant farmers; during World War II, her father was drafted to farm for the Germans. She spent almost the first decade of her life with her parents and siblings in German refugee camps, living in severe conditions. The Karoliszyns emigrated to the United States when she was eight, settling into a home in Connecticut, where the family of nine struggled to make ends meet. Her parents went to work in factories, and her father took an additional weekend job as a landscape gardener. But it was her mother's need to leave the home in order to work that the children found difficult. "My mother's going to work tore us apart, because she stayed with us all the time when we were in the camps," says von Rydingsvard. "She was there, she was the thing that would never leave. So she left, she worked 12 hours a day."





Portrait of Ursula von Rydingsvard with an in-progress sculpture. Photo by Alex John Beck for Artsy.

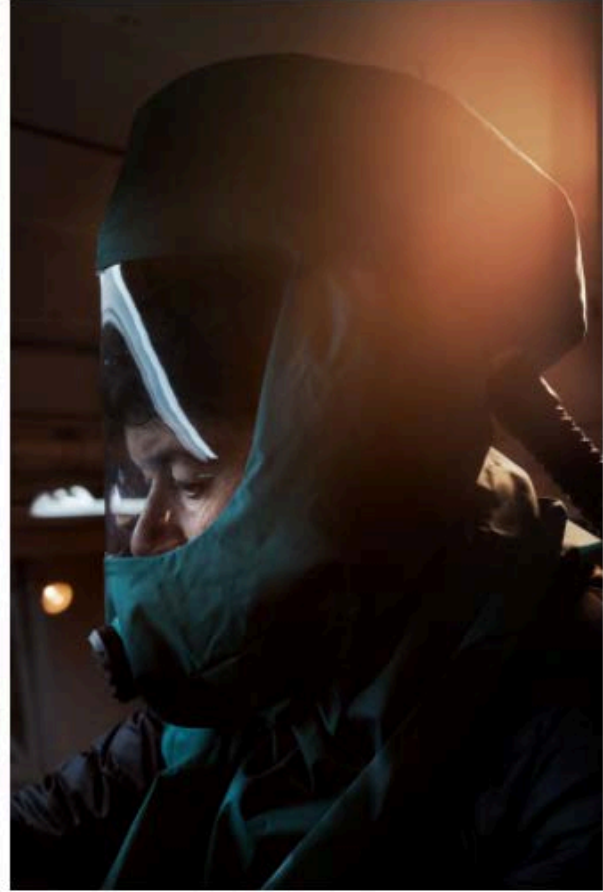
Von Rydingsvard may have been predisposed for the artist's life; from an early age, she relied intensely on what she could visually observe. "I knew that what I saw was the thing I could trust, or maybe it was the thing that I was curious about or made the greatest impression. But it was my eyes. My eyes were the most potent thing in my life." It was this search for stability, or solidity, perhaps—objects that are secure in their physical form—that led her to sculpture. "I used to paint, and when the paint got so thick on the surface of the canvas and fell onto the ground—that told me something," she says. "Sculpture gives a greater sense of reality. That's a ridiculous word to use, but they have a greater substance. You can grab a sculpture. You can't grab a painting. There's something about things that really exist in this world, which seems different to me than ideas that float."

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When von Rydingsvard was completing her MFA at Columbia—by which time she had been married and divorced, had a three-year-old in tow, and was severely poverty-stricken—she worked for a while with steel. She found it too resistant, too masculine somehow. She tried endlessly to bring delicacy and subtlety to the material. But after the artist Michael Mulhearn brought her some cedar four-by-four beams, she let steel go. “I remember when I started to cut [the wood] that it was kind of an explosive thing. Steel is so hard and so about *machismo*,” she recalls. “I couldn’t put tenderness or soft sweetness into it.” With cedar, she discovered something that was pliant to her tools, a material that she could charge with emotional force, but whose solid form would nonetheless endure. “It’s so soft to the blade,” von Rydingsvard says reverently. “The blade can really dance on it in magnificent, sensitive ways.”



Detail of Ursula von Rydingsvard drawing cut marks on a block of Cedar. Photo by Alex John Beck for Artsy.



Portrait of Ursula von Rydingsvard by Alex John Beck for Artsy.

Von Rydingsvard's parents couldn't relate to their daughter's choice to become an artist. When she worked as an art teacher in the early days of her career, they could comprehend that position as a legitimate profession. But spending time in a studio, laboring over forms that served no apparent purpose, was harder to fathom. "My mother's description of what I did was: '*Ona jest tak jak kura stale w błocie dtubie*'—'She's like a chicken that constantly digs in the mud,'" the artist remembers with a laugh. When she took her mother to her one-person exhibition at Storm King in 1992, her mother thought she must have rented the land. When her father saw her laboring in her studio, it saddened him: He saw her as more akin to a blue-collar worker.

But von Rydingsvard needs a challenging craft to consume her anxious energy. Does her arduous process feel like a ritual, I ask? No, not at all, she tells me. That would imply something religious. She grew up surrounded by devout Poles and endless dictates and orthodoxies. “I couldn’t take it,” she says. But at the same time, her practice creates a space where she can feel safe and sure; it answers a need for both control and emotional freedom. “It puts me in a world where I feel that I have more control than anywhere else in my life,” she says. “I can dig into things that are tender, that are hard to look at, that are hard to communicate, more in my studio than I can with any other thing, like words.”

A few days before my visit to the artist’s studio, a massive new supply of wood arrived at the space. “I keep thinking to myself, ‘Ursula, there’s another truckload of cedar coming, what are you *doing?*’” she says. “You’ve said the last one is the last.” But von Rydingsvard’s affinity with wood hasn’t stopped her from pursuing form in other materials. At the Fabric Workshop, she will show her first sculpture made of leather, alongside wooden objects and delicate paper works she made at the New York paper studio Dieu Donn . *PODERWAC* (2017), as the leather piece is called (the word translates to “tear up aggressively”), is a monumental patchwork of jackets her team gathered from thrift stores. It hangs over a metal ribcage in the space, a giant protective layer whose surface is strong, yet worn and battered.



Detail of cedar blocks in Ursula von Rydingsvard's Bushwick studio. Photo by Alex John Beck for Artsy.



Detail of Ursula von Rydingsvard, *NESTER*, 2016. Photo by Alex John Beck for Artsy.

The jacket is a tribute to Fabric Workshop founder and pharmaceutical heiress Marion “Kippy” Boulton Stroud, who tragically took her life in 2015. Boulton Stroud was a friend to von Rydingsvard and her husband, the Nobel Prize-winning scientist Paul Greengard. For 22 years, the couple spent summers at Boulton Stroud’s oceanside property in Maine, where she was endlessly generous in inviting artists to stay and work. It was in the weeks before she died that Boulton Stroud, von Rydingsvard, and the curator Mark Rosenthal began to bring this exhibition to life. (They imagined the show as providing a window into the “interior Ursula,” the quieter, more cerebral counterpart to the grand magnificence of her 2014 Yorkshire Sculpture Park retrospective, where her wooden and bronze giants were installed within the majestic moors of northern Britain.)

“She was very tortured,” says von Rydingsvard of Boulton Stroud. It’s clear that it pains the artist to talk about her friend. “Sometimes she took that out on the people to whom she was so good. Her definition of fabric had a huge, huge horizon—fabric could have to do with metals, it could be enormously wide. But many people did use fabrics, in a way that never had been done before. My show at the Fabric Workshop is dedicated to her.”

The artist’s memorial to Boulton Stroud, whose troubled nature is represented in the jacket’s tortured surface, evidently won’t be the last time von Rydingsvard sculpts with leather. In the warm, light-filled upstairs room of her Bushwick studio, a couple of brown hides are stretched out on the floor. Around the walls of the space, pinned salon-style, are what the artist refers to as “little nothings”: small carved spoons, or ephemeral passages in fabric, thread, lace. There are blank spots on the wall—many of the “little nothings” have already been sent to the Fabric Workshop, where they will be exhibited alongside her sturdier work, but what remains here is a study in texture and frailty.

Lace has preoccupied von Rydingsvard for some years, to the extent that some of her bronze works miraculously stretch into lacey perforations at the top. She used to collect it, but stopped when it became difficult to find good quality examples of the material. “I like how vulnerable it is,” she says. At the same time, she’s fascinated by the creative, even eccentric ornamentation that she’s found on certain fragments—with balls of linen hanging dramatically from it, in some cases. “The lace I do have is really kind of nuts,” she says. “I can’t help but think that this was a way for women to express themselves or have some power that they create.”

Elsewhere in the room, perched on top of cabinets and shelves, is an array of figures, masks, and bowls, many of them African, vessel forms that inspire her. She is drawn to bowls because they are “familiar,” the artist says. Indeed, it’s difficult to avoid connecting the emergence of bowls, spoons, plates, and forks or shovels in von Rydingsvard’s largely abstract practice to her past. When her family ate in the camps, she later tells me, they were served from a single bowl at the center of the table, typically the Polish dish *kluski*, which is something like potato dumplings. Other critics have written about the place of wood in the artist’s consciousness as an expression of memory—of the wooden cabins she once lived in in Germany and the forests nearby.



Detail of work by Ursula von Rydingsvard. Photo by Alex John Beck for Artsy



Portrait of Ursula von Rydingsvard by Alex John Beck for Artsy.

This vocabulary of simple, rudimentary materials and implements may also have something to do with a principle of humility that Fabric Workshop curator Mark Rosenthal says the artist holds close to her. The word *humble* surfaced frequently in their conversations as the exhibition evolved. “She wants her work to have a kind of humbleness, notwithstanding the scale,” he says. “She expresses a wish to be humble in her life. The other word that comes up all the time is *soul*. She can’t bear the thought of making an object that is superficial in any sense.”

Bronze can last for thousands of years. Wood is more vulnerable, of course, and requires persistent maintenance. Von Rydingsvard and her team recommend a chemical called zinc naphthenate, which should be applied to the cedar annually. Some people neglect to follow these instructions, though. “They just leave them outside to do what they want to do,” she says. “It’s a problem. They rot. It’s no longer what you made, and it looks very, very sad. It looks abandoned and not cared for.”

According to Rosenthal, von Rydingsvard has begun to contemplate her legacy. “She’d hate me to say it, though she expresses it: She feels like her time is limited, and so she loves every one of these opportunities and seizes them,” he says of her upcoming three shows.

**“I can’t quite figure out how I would live without doing what I do with my sculpture.”**



She may have begun to ponder the mark that she will one day leave behind, and the lifespan of her sculptures, but retirement does not seem to be in sight. For von Rydingsvard, the endless search for form is inescapable. “I can’t quite figure out how I would live without doing what I do with my sculpture,” she says.

Standing in her studio and straining to describe a work that clings to the wall—a series of wooden burrows that begin “gently, and grow belligerent,” as von Rydingsvard says—we agree that words can be deeply frustrating. She is glad that I agree with her on this point. “But that’s what makes life good,” she says. “Figuring it out.”



**Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Book with no words II*, 2017-18.**



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Book with no words II*, 2017-18.



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Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Book with no words II*, 2017-18.



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *PODERWAĆ*, 2017.



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Untitled*, 2016. Made at Dieu Donn , New York.



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Untitled*, 2017. Made at Dieu Donn , New York.



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Untitled*, 2017. Made at Dieu Donn , New York.



**Detail of work by Ursula von Rydingsvard.**



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Z BOKU*, 2017.





Ursula von Rydingsvard, *NESTER*, 2016.



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *DWA*, 2017.



Ursula von Rydingsvard, Oziksien, 2016.



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Elegantka II*, 2013-14 / 2016.



**Portrait of Ursula von Rydingsvard with an in-progress sculpture.**



Detail of Ursula von Rydingsvard drawing cut marks on a block of Cedar.



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Detail of cedar blocks in Ursula von Rydingsvard's Bushwick studio.





Detail of Ursula von Rydingsvard, *NESTER*, 2016.