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by Jonathan Goodman

Ursula von Rydingsvard at Galerie Lelong & Co.



Installation view, Ursula von Rydingsvard, Galerie Lelong, New York, NY

Ursula von Rydingsvard, one of our best sculptors working today, owes her remarkable career in America in part to the vagaries of history. Born in the early 1940s in Germany to a Polish mother and Ukrainian father, the artist moved with her family to Connecticut in 1950. Her education is notable in that she received an MFA degree from Columbia University in 1975. For decades now, von Rydingsvard has distinguished herself for her lyric and complex treatment of trees--cedar wood beams--which assume different visual forms--as reliefs and as three-dimensional works of art. The sculptor's surfaces are often

complex, gnarled, and rough nexuses of small, bulbous forms, shaped by a circular saw. The exterior of the works, achieved by long and patient effort, remains as active and interesting as the overall shape of the sculptures, which show considerable variety of form, much of it monumental in nature. Indeed, one piece, a major effort that stands out in the show, is made of urethane resin. Called *Elegantka II* (2013/14-2016), the piece is some 320 centimeters high (over ten feet). Shown in one of the smaller, darkened galleries, the blue-gray sculpture is lit from within; its quiet glow suggested a luminous interior emanating from within the natural form. As a mythically symbol, *Elegantka II* asks its audience to recognize its unearthly yet substantial presence, in which nature has been transformed by relatively direct mythology, based on antecedents taken from nature rather than literary culture--not to mention the innovative use of materials.

"TORN," the title of the show, feels both technical and thematic as a description. Are these pieces three-dimensional works suggestive of torn outlines or shapes? Have the works been torn apart, only to be brought together in the intricate process of addition von Rydingsvard makes use of? Is the emotional content of the show "torn"? Given that the artist's early life was turbulent, it is applicable to speculate along such line? Von Rydingsvard is an artist of genuine stature; she takes her place among a remarkable group of women sculptors, whose work will assuredly last: Eva Hesse (who is a bit older than those

mentioned here), Jackie Winsor, Mary Miss, Alice Aycock. It is becoming increasingly clear, at least to this writer, that the achievement of the women artists mentioned can stand, more than successfully, in comparison with the male minimalist sculptors working during the same time. At the same time, it is untrue to characterize the art of von Rydingsvard as specifically minimalist--the same is true for the other women sculptors mentioned--because it clear, at least in her own case, her sculptures are much more likely a response to, and a recognition of, the poetic cast of nature, its beauty mediated through the culture of her art.



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Z Boku (2017) is a tall bronze, just over ten and a half feet high. It has a massive trunk with a slightly forward-leaning frontal shape--a physical nod in direction of the audience. The bronze sculpture has a color not so different from the cedar the artist regularly uses. The overall composition is composed of narrow bands assembled together to form a gestalt of genuine power--a forcefulness bordering on menace. The exterior facing the viewer consists of several thin edges set next to each other in a fan-like manner. One has the sense here of a rock that is also plant-like in nature--a contraction in terms, albeit the kind of contradiction that can lead to sculpture of a very high order. This happens often in von Rydingsvard's art: the overall composition not only competes with the idiosyncratic surface of the work, it also presents shapes that are basically untoward, their awkwardness possibly serving as a metaphor for the jumbled, difficult times we live in.

Indeed, the offbeat awkwardness of the overall composition seen in much of this work can be understood as a signal meant to elucidate just how maladroit, physically and emotionally, our lives can be. This is speculation of course, but it is clear from von Rydingsvard's art that natural materials and organic shapes cannot eradicate the menace that does in fact appear in nature.

Because the artist is accomplished and looks to intellectual issues as well as formal ones, her work inevitably addresses fundamental dichotomies--between nature and culture, between technology (for example, the circular saw) and the humble material of wood. It makes sense to see the artist's work as something made, constructed by a person. Nature cannot be made responsible for cultural activities, although in the case of von Rydingsvard, the materials and composition of the wood (and even the

bronze and the resin) exist in a manner so close to nature, it is useful to see the show as a homage to the world outside as much as it is a group of sculptures taken up with innovative formal change.



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the wall supporting them, is more familiar to us if we consider von Rydingsvard's earlier art. The openings grow smaller as they climb the flat wood standing behind them. In abstract art, there is neither rhyme nor reason for the at-times-eccentric formal decisions made to shape the materials; this seems true of *Oziksien*. It is not that the work is strange, but rather that it behaves according to its own principles--something generally true of the artist's oeuvre. This means that von Rydingsvard listens closely to herself, creating a body of work that is exceptional in its independence and autonomy--qualities we may see more often today in sculpture than in painting.



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The *Book with No Words* (2018), an oversize volume with thin, pliable cedar pages somewhat resembles one of Anselm Kiefer's leaden tomes but lacks the heavy-handed materials and an overtly weighted sense of history (clearly, she is deeply involved in history!). The cedar pages are beautiful in their own right, creating an object that is light in spirit. Reduced to the state of an object without language, the sculpture makes it possible for viewers to appreciate the book as a Platonic item, given as it is to idealism.

Oziksien (2016), a piece mostly taken up with rounded openings presented in rows across

The artist's technical and imaginative strengths reach a high point in this show. Von Rydingsvard is very much her own person; it is very hard to connect her, in terms of form or theme, to anyone else's work. Even so, as independent an artist as she may be, the work enjoys a large audience, taken as people are by her rough surfaces, lyric manufacture, and exemplary overall gestalt. Perhaps her youth in Europe has enabled von Rydingsvard to maintain a self-sufficient, a perhaps unsettled outlook, one that addresses contemporary life through the abstract meaning of what she makes, as well as bringing to the surface a depth of emotion drawn from the inherent

qualities of wood. As a material, wood has an ancient association with sculpture, and some people might feel, wrongly, that so humble a material excludes the art from being accepted as fully contemporary. In

von Rydingsvard's case, this isn't true. Her work is very much of our time, even if the materials she uses are ancient beyond words. In the end, she presents nature as a monolithic component in art, but a component completed through art--a cultural endeavor. Her poetry is high. This is both unusual and moving.

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