

ART

## How Form Follows Feeling for Sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard

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Zachary Small 6 hours ago



Ursula von Rydingsvard, "PODERWAC" (2017) (in collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum), leather, cotton, steel, polyester batting, 10 feet 9 inches x 8 feet 6 inches x 3 feet 9 inches (photo by Carlos Avendaño, image courtesy the Fabric Workshop and Museum)

PHILADELPHIA — [Ursula von Rydingsvard](#) had brains on her mind during the reveal of two works, "Bronze Bowl with Lace" (2013–14, cast 2017–18) and "Elegantka II" (2013–14, cast 2016), at the [Philadelphia Museum of Art's sculpture garden](#). In the midst of press previews and studio visits, she was thinking about her husband's own rigorous schedule. Even at 92, [Paul Greengard](#) (a Nobel Prize-winning scientist at Rockefeller University) continues his research into Alzheimer's disease and depression every day in his laboratory.

He'll never stop working, she said. And it's likely that neither will she.

That same week, Von Rydingsvard led a tour of her new retrospective at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, titled [Ursula von Rydingsvard: The Contour of Feeling](#). Curator Mark Rosenthal titled the exhibition in honor of Von Rydingsvard's favorite poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. "We don't know the contour of a feeling," Rilke once wrote in *Duino Elegies*, "we only know what molds it from without."



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Bronze Bowl with Lace* (2013–14, cast 2017–18), bronze, 19.6 x 9.4 x 10 feet, edition of three at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Likewise, Von Rydingsvard works backwards from the depths of human emotion to find sculptural form. The contours of her work ebb and flow with the warp of the wood she uses. And like the brains her husband studies, there is something neurologically thrilling about viewing Von Rydingsvard's work. Like a mental map, the gridlike etchings she carves into the surface of her sculptures reflect an artist's coming to terms with her own abilities in real time; for Rydingsvard, form often follows feeling.

"Zakopane" (1987) will draw your eye into the depths of the museum's space. It bears the resemblance to what I imagine a wall would look like after a firing squad had its way. The details here are unsettling: dozens of bullet-shaped holes in the upright cedar planks;

cantilevered beams one could hang a noose from; and more than a dozen gored cylindrical buckets below. What is haunting Von Rydingsvard's work? What is haunting Von Rydingsvard?

Much like [Louise Bourgeois](#), Von Rydingsvard has an affinity for the gory detritus of life. The skins of animals, their petrified organs — look closely and you'll find a variety of oddities strapped, stapled, and nailed to her sculptures. For example, "Ocean Floor" (1996) contains nearly 50 pairs of cow intestine sacks eerily hanging off the edges of its circumference. As is common with her work, the message here is extremely vague. Even the titles of her sculptures, Von Rydingsvard notes, are not especially indicative of the work's meaning.

Drafting her signature aesthetic in the 1970s, it's interesting to see how Von Rydingsvard wrestled with the dogma of Minimalism. On the second floor of the exhibition, we see the artist integrating Donald Judd's industrial idealism into her own practice. "Untitled (Nine Cones)" (1976) is one such example. Although Von Rydingsvard succeeds in presenting her own spin on the aesthetic, we should be thankful that she continued being a leader of her own aesthetic instead of following someone else's. Behind this installation is a far more impressive work, called "Droga" (2009). Von Rydingsvard's favorite piece in the show — and my own — this sculpture showcases the artist's dexterity and skill. "Droga" unspools across the gallery floor like a dying animal. Somehow, Von Rydingsvard has manipulated her cedar materials into the shape of a cavernous, deteriorating maw. On the other side of the creature, a giant gash in the animal's stomach releases a puddle of wooden innards.



Foreground: Ursula von Rydingsvard, "Untitled (nine cones)" (1976), cedar; background: "Untitled works on paper" (2016), thread, fabric and pigment linen handmade paper 32 1/2 x 22 in. (photo by Carlos Avendaño, courtesy the Fabric Workshop and Museum)



Pictured in foreground: Ursula von Rydingsvard, "Droga" (2009), cedar and graphite, 9 1/2 by 18 1/4 by 4 1/2 feet (photo by Carlos Avendaño, courtesy the Fabric Workshop and Museum)

Outright representation is virtually absent from the artist's work, except for a massive leather jacket. The result of a two-year residency, 900 hours of sewing, and 90 deconstructed leather jackets, "PODERWAĆ" (2017) dangles from an enormous wooden hanger. Viewers who come through the show might find this sculpture out of place, and for good reason. Unlike the other works in the show, "PODERWAĆ" is an absolute experiment. With some prodding from the Fabric Workshop's staff, Von Rydingsvard began playing with new, unfamiliar materials. "PODERWAĆ" may also be the artist's most explicitly personal sculpture. It memorializes her dear friend and Fabric Workshop founder, Marion "Kippy" Boulton Stroud, who died in 2015. "PODERWAĆ" is less haunting than Von Rydingsvard's other sculptures, and has a certain sense of humor. There is something so Claes Oldenburg about an enormous jack hanging askew in a gallery.

*The Contour of Feeling* knows where Van Rydingsvard's strengths are, focusing mostly on her articulation of torment and violence. This can make "PODERWAC" seem like a blip, but maybe it signifies a shift in the artist's tone. After so many years plumbing the well of anguish, maybe it's time for something lighter?

Ursula von Rydingsvard: The Contour of Feeling continues at *the Fabric Workshop and Museum* (1214 Arch Street, Philadelphia) through August 26.