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Standing tall

Ursula von Rydingsvard puts down roots with new sculpture at Stanford

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COVER STORY



A detail of Ursula von Rydingsvard's "Mocna" at night.

Henrik Kam Photography

Humble roots, strong works

Von Rydingsvard wants you to know her art is not tame

By Charles Desmarais

“I don’t think I have a lot of philosophy in my work,” says Ursula von Rydingsvard. At 76, riding high as one of the most celebrated sculptors at work today, she speaks quietly and deliberately. She bears comparison to her most famous works — both elegant and strong, warmly accessible yet unabashedly direct.

“But there are beliefs,” she says. “Philosophy just sounds high end. I sort of think of myself as not being so fancy. I like the word humble.”

With works in the collection of virtually every major American museum — her 2006 piece “Czara z Ba belkami” is prominent in the fifth-floor sculpture plaza at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art — her simple roots might not be readily apparent. Born of a Polish mother and Ukrainian father in Germany during World War II, she and her family were shunted from refugee camp to camp in Poland after the war, before they were finally allowed to come to the U.S.

After growing up the daughter of a factory worker in Connecticut, she spent an unhappy time in the Bay Area in the late 1960s. She left a failed marriage and went to New York to pursue a graduate degree in sculpture at Columbia University, where, she says, the faculty consisted of bitter men who “were so angry, because they didn’t have the notoriety that they wanted.”

“But I’m just so happy I came to New York City. It was my awakening,” she says. She lives there still with her second husband, the Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist Paul Greengard.

Von Rydingsvard is seated in a small conference room at Denning House, a lovely wooden ark of a new building set among hillside oak and olive trees on the campus of Stanford University.



Josie Lepe / Special to The Chronicle

Ursula von Rydingsvard with her sculpture “Mocna” (2018, bronze with patina) at the Denning House at Stanford.

Her latest commission, an unsteady 17-foot-tall pillar of bronze, marks the building entrance. It was unveiled Oct. 11.

The artist is known for works cut and assembled from cedar timbers, though for outdoor settings she often chooses to make bronze casts from the wooden forms. The difference, she says, is a life expectancy of “2,000 years, as opposed to maybe 50.”

Denning House, as it happens, is clad in fresh-cut cedar, powerfully aromatic in the morning sun. The sculpture’s red-gold patina harmonizes with the color of the wood, even as the metal is a hardness that shoulders into its softer host.

Cedar, as pleasantly astringent as it may smell to some, contains oils that can be toxic. Stacks and stacks of it, in 4-by-4-inch beams that the artist has forced to submit to her will over some four decades, have made her sick.

“I wish I didn’t have to use the wood for the bronze, but apparently I do. I’ve tried to figure out a way. It’s just that I can’t get the sculpture that I want from the bronze with clay or with other materials. I’ve wanted to quit cedar for the last 20 years, since I’m wearing this ‘zoot suit’ that’s like something they go off to space with. It just takes in filtered air from the back, and it weighs like 9 pounds, so I have to lug this thing around.”

The new work is titled “Mocna.” The word means “strong” in von Rydingsvard’s native Polish. “But it’s ‘strong,’” she says, “with feminine ending. *Mocna* is a woman, *mocne* is a man.”

The sculpture is capped by a lacy crown of sorts. “That happened in the last, maybe, five years or so, and it took me a long time to come to it,” she says. “As you probably saw in this piece, those patterns are not loosey-goosey patterns. Each one belongs to the next, belongs to the next, and so on, and then belongs to whatever it is — the wave or the protrusion that comes out. And she probably has a couple of thousand of the openings in herself. She is a she.”

Von Rydingsvard continues on page 14

COVER STORY

Where to see von Rydingsvard's work

By Charles Desmarais

Ursula von Rydingsvard's large-scale piece at Stanford University is only her most recent public sculpture in the Bay Area. Here are four, viewable with varying degrees of effort.

"Ocean Voices II" (2013), San Francisco International Airport

Rushing through an airport to catch a plane may not be the best way to view a work of art. But arriving early for a flight from the San Francisco airport rewards the traveler with free access to an excellent art museum, tucked in among the security checkpoints, airline help desks and concessions. The SFO Museum, fully accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, claims more than 20 galleries for changing exhibitions and a large permanent collection, of which "Ocean Voices II" is a significant part.

San Francisco International Airport, Terminal 3, E Plaza, Level 2. www.flysfo.com/museum

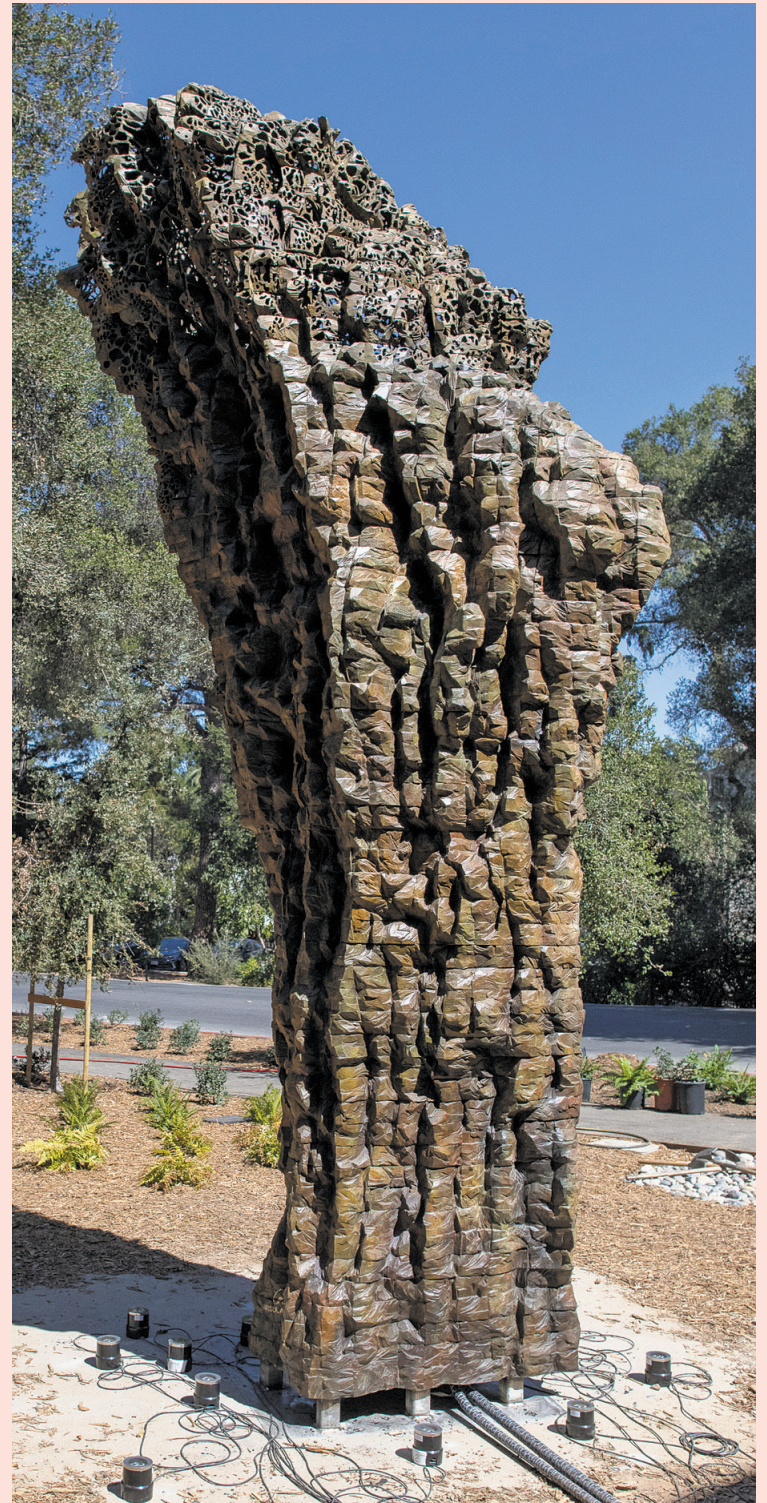
"Mocna" (2018), Stanford University

Easily seen from the public sidewalk, "Mocna" is titled with a word in Polish, the artist's first language, that means "strength." Notably, it is the feminine form of the word. Though best known for her work in sawn and chiseled cedar, von Rydingsvard sometimes casts a sculpture destined for outdoor display in a more durable



Ursula von Rydingsvard

"Ocean Voices II," just over 10 feet high, is one of the worthy destinations in the SFO Museum's permanent collection.



Linda A. Cicero / Stanford News

"Mocna," a 17-foot-tall bronze sculpture, sits outside Stanford's Denning House, home of the Knight-Hennessy Scholars.



Beth LaBerge / San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Above: “Czara z Babelkami,” standing over 16 feet high, has its genesis in a popcorn-stitch sweater worn by Ursula von Rydingsvard as a child. At right: Reservations and a light hike are required to see “Iggy’s Pride” at Oliver Ranch.



Ursula von Rydingsvard

material. That is the case with “Mocna,” a unique cast from the wooden model, and the only public example in bronze in the Bay Area. Its distinction from a paired cedar-clad academic building, which houses the innovative Knight-Hennessy program to encourage positive social change, might be read as staunchly emotive resistance to codified knowledge.

North entrance to Denning House, Stanford University, 580 Lomita Drive, Stanford. <https://knight-hennessy.stanford.edu>

“Czara z Babelkami” (2006), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Von Rydingsvard readily admits to the anthropomorphic qualities of her work. She told *Sculpture* magazine, “Czara is an ancient bowl associated with magic. Babelki are the popcorn stitches that get knit onto sweaters. ... I started with ... the grid of the unbleached wool sweater made from popcorn stitches that I wore as a child. That grid got stretched and worn. It was one of my only pieces of lovely clothing.

... I made portions of the cedar grid in a slow and deliberate way (as seemed respectful to this scale) to make room for something like a belly.”

Jean and James Douglas Family Sculpture Garden, Floor 5 outside of Cafe 5. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Fridays-Tuesdays, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays. \$19-\$25; ages 18 and younger free. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. 415-357-4000. www.sfmoma.org

“Iggy’s Pride” (1990-91), Oliver Ranch

The spectacular Oliver Ranch, 100 acres of rolling Sonoma hills, is not your standard sculpture park. Site-specific works by some of the leading sculptors of the past three decades have been commissioned over the years, with the artists given a far freer hand than in many such arrangements. Patron Steve Oliver told one artist regarding a proposal, “Go ahead and make a budget, but I don’t let artists run the budget. They

always skimp on the project.” For “Iggy’s Pride,” von Rydingsvard excavated a 77-foot shelf, where she installed a row of nine, 17-foot cedar forms. The ranch is not easy to visit — reservations are required, often long in advance, and a 2½-mile hike is part of the deal — but an extraordinary experience awaits those who make the effort.

Oliver Ranch, Geyserville. Admission by donation, reservations required. <http://oliver-ranchfoundation.org>

— Charles Desmarais

COVER STORY

Von Rydingsvard from page 11

Von Rydingsvard's hands are soft, not all scarred and callused. She has been asked about them before, and has a ready answer. "What I do is I draw on the wood, for my cutters to cut exactly what I draw. I have, like, 30 pencils in my back pocket. And then draw on all four sides, and they're not ever straight lines — they're very organic lines that meet. If I draw this here, that here, this last one meets with the first one that I started."

So, she is her own CNC router — she's the computer and the assistant is the cutter, is that it?

"Nooo!" she says, looking a bit shocked. "The only thing we do with a computer is our engineering. Any surface that I try to do with a computer, it just looks like a computer did it."

Asked about the challenges that she must have faced being a woman in a "man's world" of sculpture, she says, "I feel like I have such a strong will to do what I need to do that I don't even try to assess who's doing it, what the styles are. Because there is a need, and this need brings me through a lot of trials, but also a lot of wonderful explorations, a lot of evolution. I don't think about politics. I don't think about men or women, or the difference."

Have men stood in her way as she tried to move forward?

"I'm sure that might have been the case, or must have been the case. I just didn't really notice."

There are two kinds of success. One is that you feel internally that you're being successful at what you're trying to achieve. And the other is when the rest of the world recognizes your genius. Has she achieved that recognition?

"I'm just on the cover of Art in America," she says proudly, "and you go to work the next day. Like, I leave my home at 7 a.m. And you don't think about it. I think if the world anoints you as being successful, I don't really believe it."

"That's kind of stupid, and I know it. I keep thinking that the more I flagellate myself, the more I'm going to come up with the better thing. The more I'm going to get that which I'm going after, which isn't even that clear in my head."

She speaks about her early upbringing



© Ursula von Rydingsvard / Galerie Lelong & Co., New York images



Above: Detail of a work in cedar, "Oziksien" (2016), by Ursula von Rydingsvard. Left: Von Rydingsvard's "DWA (detail)" (2017).

ing in the camps for war-displaced persons, and her immigrant parents. "My parents never understood what I was doing. My mother would say, if somebody asked her about my art (here, von Rydingsvard speaks in Polish, then translates), 'She's like the chicken that forever goes into the mud and looks for a seed.'

"When I stopped being an art teacher, I fell on a lower level — I was a blue-collar worker to my father. Because there was nothing for him to

respect," she says. "We had Christmas where we gave one another *oplatek*. *Oplatek* is the holy wafer — we would get these wafers from Poland. They were part of our family, so it was meaningful. So all of us got a piece of the wafer, and then we gave it to one another. And my father gave it to me, and he said (she speaks Polish again, then English), 'May you suffer.'"

Asked about a memory she recalled in another interview, about being in a bombardment during the war, when her father protected her with wooden boards, she says, "We had six kids at the time, and he dug a trench. And he lined us up in this trench and then put boards over us, which of course wouldn't help at all. But he tried."

She remembers wood stacked high for fuel in the refugee camps, and the place of wood in her father's struggle with Alzheimer's. "To almost the day that he died he had an ax," she recalls, "and he had wood that he would cut. And he still did that, no matter how much the disease started taking over. He was cutting it with an ax in order to cut the circular wood out and put it into the furnace."

"There is nothing like putting a circular saw in your hand when you're angry. It is such a healer."

Ursula von Rydingsvard

And those remembrances of wood — bound, as they are, to her childhood and her father — she's talked about them enough that, clearly, they're a big part of her emotional memory. "That's true," she says.

And is that what the work is partly about?

"I don't know," she says, her voice lowering. "I think the work is partly — I don't even want to say this — about how much I hate him, and the damage that he has done to everyone in our family. Real damage. This is a part of the strength of my will, in terms of doing that work."

So, as much as people find these works beautiful or attractive or compelling to look at, there's a fair amount of anger in them.

"Yes, there is," she says. "And there is nothing like putting a circular saw in your hand when you're angry. It is such a healer — it so does the trick."

The idea of the anger that is embodied in some of these sculptures — does she think people get that from the sculpture when they see it?

"I hope not," she says. "Or I hope yes. In other words, I think these pieces are not so tame, really." As she speaks, she is pressing with her hands against her own chest and stomach. Many of her forms are torso-like. The one that's out in front is a whirlwind, it's a tornado. But it's also a human, almost dancing form, a figure pushing against the wind.

She tentatively agrees, ever polite, but she makes clear that she does not want people to dwell on such allusions. "I don't want them to get any of the specifics," she says.

"How I believe that one should look at art is to have a kind of trust in that work, and submit yourself to it. And if it works, you'll know it, and if it doesn't, that's fine, too."

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfgchronicle.com Free weekly newsletter: <http://bit.ly/ArtguyReviews>