

WASHINGTON

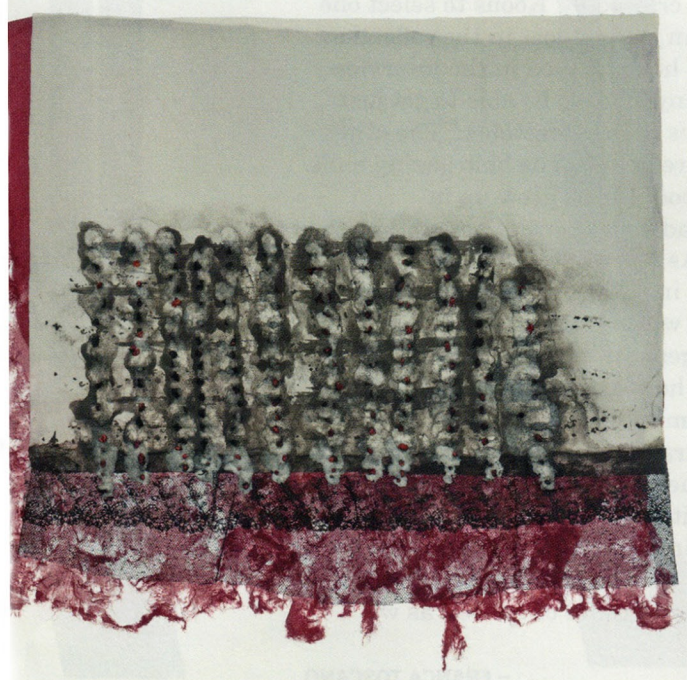
Outsize Sculptures and “Little Nothings” at National Museum of Women in the Arts

When Ursula von Rydingsvard, now one of America’s most celebrated sculptors, arrived in the United States in 1950, she had spent six of her eight years in Polish refugee camps. The little girl sporting pants fashioned from U.S. Army blankets had no idea that artists even existed. But her head was full of images and impressions that would later inform her oeuvre, along with a work ethic that still drives her to constantly surpass herself.

During her four-decade-long career, von Rydingsvard, now 76, has worked with materials ranging from bronze to linen to animal intestines, but she is best known for the massive sculptures she makes from stacked 4x4 cedar beams carved with circular saws. Following only her instinct, she coaxes the wood into astonishing, expressive forms that bear the mark of the human hand. These artful acrobatics have earned her numerous exhibitions at home and abroad, as well as pride of place in the permanent collections of more than 30 museums worldwide, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and MoMA.

Last year, the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia staged the most ambitious presentation of her work to date in the United States: “Ursula von Rydingsvard: The Contour of Feeling.” Now that show is traveling to the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington (March 22–July 28), giving the artist her first solo exhibition in the nation’s capital. “She is definitely having a moment,” said Orin Zahra, assistant curator at NMWA, noting that von Rydingsvard’s commissions, awards and accolades continue to pile up.

The NMWA edition features 30 sculptures — two from the museum’s permanent collection, the remainder on loan from the artist — and 10 works on paper. Many of von Rydingsvard’s sculptures are mammoth site-specific pieces with a strong connection to their outdoor environment; for this show, however, the veteran curator Mark Rosenthal wrote in the catalog that he elected to focus on “the interior



Ursula von Rydingsvard, “For Natasha,” 2015, cedar and graphite, 9 ft. 1 in. x 6 ft. 7 in. x 3 ft. 6 in.

Ursula von Rydingsvard, “Untitled,” 2017, fabric, string, lace, and pigment on linen handmade paper, 31 x 32 in., produced at Dieu Donn , New York.

Ursula von Rydingsvard,
 "Collar with Dots," 2008,
 cedar and pigment,
 9 ft. 7 in. x 11 ft. 5 in.
 x 7 ½ in.



Ursula." His exhibition approaches her art "from its starting point — both in her mind and in her studio," he wrote. He chose the title, a quote by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, for its resonance with the artist's struggle to give outward form to emotion.

NMWA's indoor galleries and the relatively modest scale of the pieces on view (the largest is less than 12 feet, or about 3 ½ meters, tall) promise visitors an intimate, visceral experience. "Seeing so many of the artist's works in such close proximity conveys a sense of her introspective, contemplative nature," Zahra said. "It also helps the viewer better grasp her process."

Another display presents some of von Rydingsvard's "little nothings," the hundreds of photos, doodlings, bits of lace, shells and other "humble objects" that she collects in her Bushwick, Brooklyn studio. "They inspire her," Zahra said. "When you see them, you understand that she is a visual poet." Rounding out the show are several of the paper works that the artist made during a residency at Dieu Donn e in New York. These ethereal creations delicately combine handmade paper with bits of silk, lace and other materials, offering vulnerable counterpoints to the imposing cedar sculptures.

Fascinating insights into all these works are found in the catalog, which is almost entirely devoted to Rosenthal's long interview with the artist, conducted in her studio over a two-day period. With candor and sensitivity, she touches on subjects ranging from instinct, humility and soulfulness to her determination to continue to push the artistic envelope as she ages. She talks frankly about her past in the camps and the influences it may have had on her art, consciously or not. She is equally forthright about her constant struggle to infuse her work with just the right dose of "hurt, anger and love," to break free of the



Ursula von Rydingsvard, "PODERWAC, 2017, leather, cotton, steel, and polyester batting, 10 ft 9 in. x 8 ft. 6 in. x 3 ft. 9 in., in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia.

"good girl" she was brought up to be in order to become "tougher, more raw."

These comments notwithstanding, she maintains that art doesn't really have a clear explanation. "People think it does, and what they're saying now to curators is, 'Explain that work to the people. Explain it, explain it.' Sometimes the history of it helps, and sometimes some of the things in the artist's life help, but really you have to let it flow in front of you."

— KAREN TAYLOR

Ursula von Rydingsvard,
 "Scratch II,"
 2015, cedar
 and graphite.

