

March 21, 2019

Most ambitious U.S. exhibition of Ursula von Rydingsvard's influential recent work opens in Washington



WASHINGTON, DC.- [The National Museum of Women in the Arts](#) presents Ursula von Rydingsvard: The Contour of Feeling, a major exhibition celebrating one of the most influential sculptors working today. On view March 22–July 28, 2019, The Contour of Feeling marks the most ambitious von Rydingsvard exhibition to date in the United States and her first solo exhibition in Washington, D.C. Featuring approximately 30 sculptures and 10 works on paper, the exhibition focuses on the artist's signature works—monumental, organic-shaped sculptures made from carved cedar wood—as well as other pieces that are on view in this project for the first time. This exhibition is guest-curated by Mark Rosenthal, formerly curator of 20th-century art at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and organized by the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, where it was on view from April 27 to August 26, 2018.

"Ursula von Rydingsvard has made an enormous contribution to contemporary sculpture," said NMWA Director Susan Fisher Sterling, "We are honored to bring this exhibition to Washington, where a new audience will discover the physicality of her works, from modest to monumental, and discover how she imbues common materials with evocative and powerful meanings."

The daughter of a woodcutter from a long line of peasant farmers, von Rydingsvard (b. 1942, Deensen, Germany) spent her early years, from the age of 2 to 6, in the wooden barracks of refugee camps at the end of World War II. While the artist resists straightforward biographical readings of her works, she speaks of those critical years of her youth as woven into her subconscious or instinct, which in turn leaves an imprint on her art. She often uses variations of Polish words for titles, which she prefers to leave untranslated to preserve the enigmatic nature of her work.

While von Rydingsvard's art is often presented in the context of large-scale public art, this exhibition illuminates the "interior Ursula," as evidenced by the exhibition's title, which was inspired by a line from Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "Fourth Duino Elegy": "We don't know the contour of our feeling; only the thing that molds it from without."

Like Rilke's poem, von Rydingsvard's art expresses a persistent search for deeper truths. In their shallow and cavernous grooves and curvilinear forms, von Rydingsvard's sculptures are poetic and expressive, revealing the process by which she gives outward visual form to her thoughts, feelings and emotions. In her relentless quest to visually render her emotions and

feelings, von Rydingsvard states that she makes art to “get answers to questions for which I know there are no answers” and “mostly, to survive.”

The Contour of Feeling centers on the creative flourishing of the artist's recent career, anchored by a number of her early masterpieces. Among these highlights is *Untitled (Nine Cones)* (1976), comprising nine hollowed conical forms. It is von Rydingsvard's first major work in cedar and the earliest work on view in this exhibition. Subtle references to her family history are seen in *Zakopane* (1987), a wall installation of 22 fused vertical units with hollow vessels at the base. The sculpture commands the viewer's attention with an altar-like presence that simultaneously recalls the tools used for labor by Polish peasants.

As her sculpture practice evolved, von Rydingsvard continually experimented with the possibilities of cedar. *Droga* (2009), a horizontal floor-based work, conjures an image of a heavy, slumped creature collapsed on the ground and bound by earth's gravity. In the vertical *Krypta I* (2014), she used shallow, staccato relief-like cuts on four-by-four planks to create overlapping sections around the entire sculpture that, for the first time in her cedar works, produced diagonal wing-like appendages. The sprawling wall work *Thread Terror* (2016) features a succession of varied-sized cavities and burrows that evoke rolled thread or reams of fabric through deep perforated cuts made on cedar beams. Von Rydingsvard has also worked on a smaller scale, as seen in her *Plates* (2008–11), multiple rough-hewn wooden disks painted with plaster or pigment, each displaying its own distinct character.

NMWA's presentation of the exhibition includes the addition of two works from the museum's collection. As with her wooden bowls, vessels and plates, *Apron* (1997) expands on the artist's preoccupation with utilitarian forms such as common household objects and clothing. While the references are largely suggestive and metaphorical, the artist grounds her work in the realm of human experience. *Tak* (2015) is approximately five feet tall and has a powerful and direct connection with the viewer through its human-sized scale. As von Rydingsvard says, her art “embraces your entire body.”

BEYOND CEDAR

While von Rydingsvard's signature medium is cedar wood, her oeuvre includes continued exploration and experimentation with unusual materials. Her works often suggest corporeal or beast-like forms and even incorporate animal entrails and other organic materials. In *Ocean Floor* (1996), the perimeter of the large wooden vessel-like structure is encircled by pouches made of sewn cow intestines and filled with peat moss. Large sheets of intestinal membrane in *Untitled (stacked blankets)* (2014) reveal veins branching across the translucent, fragile surface, eliciting a visceral response from the viewer.

In contrast, von Rydingsvard's abstract works on handmade linen paper invite more contemplative inspection. In these wallmounted works, she incorporates surprising materials—such as knotted silk from a red scarf, tangles of thread, paper pulp, hair, lace, graphite and pigment—into the paper medium itself, yielding graceful, whimsical compositions. The collaged materials extend the boundaries of the paper, giving the delicate two-dimensional works a sculptural presence.

The more intimate side of von Rydingsvard's art is also evident in a wall installation that features small objects collected and created by the artist, including strands of her brother's hair, fragments of cedar, knitting and linen, and personal photographs. These little nothings (2000–15), which she refers to as “experiments,” help to establish her visual vocabulary and serve as sources of inspiration.