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Museums

Sculpture as personal as it gets



The sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard, center, surrounded by studio assistants in front of "Bowl With Folds" (1998-99) in Detroit in 2017. (Kevin Silary/Galerie Lelong & Co.)

By **Sebastian Smee**

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Ursula von Rydingsvard is the daughter of a woodcutter from a long line of peasant farmers. And if that sounds like the beginning of a [Brothers Grimm](#) fairy tale, it isn't.

Von Rydingsvard, 76, sculpts in wood, creating objects that look unlike anything else in the medium. Her work — both violent and yielding, fiercely willed and oddly relaxed — is the subject of a commanding solo show, on view through July 28 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.



Von Rydingsvard was born in Deensen, Germany, in 1942. Her mother was Polish. Her Ukrainian father — “a [spectacular worker](#),” the artist has said — survived three years of forced labor in Nazi camps. After the war, her parents and five siblings lived in eight refugee camps before coming to New York by ship. The artist remembers wearing pants made from U.S. Army ration blankets.

Von Rydingsvard’s favored forms are massive. They slump on the floor like hollow, tuberous mounds into which it’s tempting to crawl; or jut out from the wall; or else rise up like inverted megaliths or weathered geological forms. They’re dramatic, sensuous, but at the same time almost accidental, as if shaped organically by wind and water.

In fact, they are hard-worked by the artist. And their crafting — a laborious process that involves stacking, gluing and cutting planks of cedar — is labor-intensive. Their softly aged presence (von Rydingsvard rubs graphite into their surfaces) can feel strange in the hygienic space of a museum. I prefer encountering them outside, where they can seem to want to unite with the weather, like acts of human atonement given physical form.

The NMWA show was organized by Mark Rosenthal and the [Fabric Workshop and Museum](#) in Philadelphia. It includes many of von Rydingsvard’s signature wooden works, as well as a giant jacket sourced from more than 90 deconstructed leather jackets (the product of her recent residency at the Fabric Workshop) and several figurative sculptures that read as rough-hewed pieces of clothing or vessels.

These have always felt less successful to me. The seductive intensity of the cedar — or the dried animal intestines the artist also likes to use — is subordinated to a symbolic schema, and the mystery simply drains from them.

More successful is a wall arrayed with various objects, which the artist has titled “little nothings.” Among them are drawings in ink, charcoal and graphite; a few scattered photographs; some hair from the head of her brother Stas when he was 3; sheep’s wool, shells, animal intestines and rope. There is a delicacy, lightness and sometimes translucency to the objects — a counterpoint to the opaque weight of all that wood. You feel drawn into the artist’s studio, and allowed a taste of the obliqueness of artistic inspiration, the half-buried, silly-yet-serious obscurities of creative motivation.

In that vein, I found a wall text at the beginning of the show very moving, and worth quoting from. The words are von Rydingsvard’s, and they are a refreshingly unguarded account of why she makes art:

Mostly, to survive.

To ease my high anxiety, to numb myself with the labor and the focus of building my work.

Because I invariably, especially with my monstrous pieces, run into intense anxiety moments from which I have to unravel myself.

Because there’s a pleasure in it.

Because there’s pain in it.

Because I endure a hefty load of self-doubt.

Because I have confidence in the possibility of seeing this work through.

Because I see life as being full of abominations.

Because life is full of marvels close to miracles.

Because I still don’t get who I am.

Because I will never get who I am.

It goes on a little longer. But how much more urgently truthful is this than the standard artist’s statement, which overflows with regurgitated clichés and pretentious, pseudointellectual guff?

For this show, for her remarkable body of work and for her courageous honesty, Ursula von Rydingsvard has earned our esteem.

Ursula von Rydingsvard: The Contour of Feeling Through July 28 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1250 New York Ave. NW. nmwa.org.