

feelings of frustration and ambivalence in the field of contemporary art. He sprinkles just enough hints throughout his well-crafted animations to show his cards: Stray words and phrases such as *DON'T STOP UNTIL YOU'RE ALONE* seem to reveal his own misgivings as an artist. Robak operates like a dark-web Nam June Paik, attuned to and appreciative of the byways underneath the Internet Superhighway, an underworld framed by Cialis ads and Turing tests.

Robak's show also betrayed some concerns about the state of art—the messages that art sends and those that it encodes. In *Piggy*, 2019, one screen depicted Bitcoin tokens flying over a hypnotic video of abstract fractal imagery; a news ticker at the top of the installation streamed conflicting messages about status and anxiety, ranging from a list of cannabinoid products (CBD HAIRSPRAY, for instance) to hyped-up mantras (*BAD TO THE BONE*). *Neuron*, 2019, a four-channel installation of lava lamp-type abstractions, was framed by a menu of medical services (BONE MARROW TRANSPLANT, PROPHYLACTIC VACCINATION) and their corresponding fees, illuminated like a casino scoreboard. These pairings of abstractions with ailments suggested a disturbance in the bridge between mind and body—a dystopian divide that may be deepened by art.

The highlight of the show might have been *Guts*, 2019, a line drawing rendered in neon and affixed to an aluminum extrusion, mimicking the effect of an illuminated sign behind a shopwindow. Instead of reading *OPEN* or *BEER*, Robak's sign offers a doodle of a gastrointestinal tract in distress. This squiggle of alimentary organs, glowing in red, azure, and magenta, burns in green-neon flames inside a yellow-neon house. *Guts* suggests a state of euphoria paired with intense agitation. There's no subliminal message behind irritable bowel syndrome. It's the sign of our times.

—Kriston Capps

## Ursula von Rydingsvard

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF WOMEN IN THE ARTS

Monumental sculpture has a way of imposing its will. It rears up and *demand*s to be seen, often crowding out delicacy with bold gestures. Ursula von Rydingsvard's sculptures resist the heavy-handedness of monuments. The artist works in cedar, gluing together planks and stone-shaped chunks until the wood looks pixelated, like glitchy flotsam that's drifted onto a screen. The surfaces are coarse, scarred, and stained in places with the coal-colored sheen of graphite. Most of the sculptures are outsize indoors—the intimate galleries of the National Museum of Women in the Arts being far from the fields and parks where von Rydingsvard's sculptures are often shown—but, especially given their materials, the sculptures seem more naturally grown than monumentally conceived.

In the first room of the exhibition, there are five sculptures. Three reach from floor to ceiling and take on girth as they swell upward, recalling crumpled bedsheets or the folded walls of windswept canyons. One crawls off the gallery wall like mold or an elbow of rock; another is a wide, U-shaped relief that represents, according to the title, a collar with polka dots, abstracted but drooping in the same manner as cloth (*Collar with Dots*, 2008). Von Rydingsvard's sculptures tend to avoid figuration, but there are a handful here that describe mundane objects—the collar, an apron, a book. In almost all cases, figurative and not, von Rydingsvard uses wood to sensualize the material *and* to evoke feelings, textures, and things that seem impossibly remote from wood itself. By combining and rearranging fixed units of cedar to produce this range of evocations and effects, von Rydingsvard effectively turns the units into words and wood into language.

Von Rydingsvard was born in Germany in 1942. Her parents were Polish and Ukrainian farmers; her father worked as a woodcutter as a young man and toiled in a forced-labor camp under the Third Reich. After the war, the family passed through eight displaced-persons camps in Germany before leaving on a military ship for the United States and arriving in New York. They settled in Plainville, Connecticut, in 1950. Von Rydingsvard recalls the army barracks where her family was placed, one of which they lived in for two or three years: “The floors were wooden. The roof was wooden. The stairs going up to this barrack were wooden.” She remembers how “there was something about sleeping against the wood, having that familiarity with wooden planks.” She started working with cedar while she was an MFA student at Columbia University in New York in the 1970s, and has cleaved to the material ever since.

We can see von Rydingsvard's personal history rising into the wood, especially in two of the works on view here. *Zakopane*, 1987, a massive wooden rampart topped with menacing battlements and fitted with deep pouches at the bottom, is a wall that aggressively excludes and threatens, and seems equipped to gather any blood that might accumulate at its foot. *Thread terror*, 2016, resembles a grouping of floorboards pitted with screaming orifices, as if the wood has been warped by its store of past violence. When prompted to describe why she makes art, von Rydingsvard has said, “Because I constantly need to try to better understand the immense suffering and pain of my family that I never seem to be able to really understand.”

Among the most striking parts of the show is a small corner of a room devoted to *little nothings*, 2000–15, a collection of pictures and scraps: an aerial photograph, a portrait of the artist's grandmother, muslin, a cow stomach, stained pieces of paper. These textural inspirations and incidental aperçus have flitted in and out of von Rydingsvard's studio, mind, and work. Their delicacy illuminates the great mournful quietude spreading through her cedar monuments.

—Zachary Fine



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *SCRATCH II*, 2015, cedar and graphite, 10' 1" × 6' 3" × 4' 11".

CHICAGO

## Theaster Gates

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

Three neon signs punctuate Theaster Gates's powerful installation of new paintings and sculptures. *Progress Mill*, 2018, the only work occupying the spacious entrance gallery, takes the form of a single generic infographic. White and red neon tubes delineate the circular symmetry of a reductive pie chart outlined in black, seemingly bereft of any textual information but in fact adapted from W. E. B. Du Bois's visualizations of Black demographics in the United States in 1900—specifically Du Bois's black-and-red line drawing titled “Proportions